Be Concerned About Staff Mental Health and Well-Being
(http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/staffmh.pdf)

S tress is a commonplace phenomenon for almost everyone who works in school settings. Some stress comes from working with troubled and troubling youngsters. Some stems from difficult working conditions and staggering workloads. Some is the result of the frustration that arises when everyone works so hard and the results are not good enough. The many stressors, large and small, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health. In the short run, this contributes to the high rate of teacher dropout during the first 3-5 years on the job. Over time, stress can lead to widespread staff demoralization, exhaustion, and burnout.

Ignoring the psychological needs of staff is commonplace and a mistake. When school personnel don't feel good about themselves, they are less likely to make students feel good about themselves.

Over the years, one of the resource packets most often downloaded from our Center website is: *Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout*. This underscores both the need for and interest in paying greater attention to the problem. Another indicator of need comes from analyses of school improvement and staff development plans which rarely focus sufficiently on this matter.

While everyone at a school site shares common stressors, those who work in underperforming schools often are overwhelmed by what they experience during a school year. Almost everyone dealing with student behavior, learning, and emotional problems over an extended period becomes fatigued.

Each day elementary school teachers enter a classroom to work with about 30 students. Secondary teachers multiply that by a factor of at least five. Their students bring with them a wide variety of needs. In some classrooms, many students are disengaged from the learning process. Upon entering the classroom, the teacher closes the door, and all present try to cope with each other and with the designated work. The day seldom goes smoothly, and many days are filled with conflict and failure.

For student support staff, the list of students referred for special assistance is so long that the reality is that appropriate assistance is available for only a few. Many support personnel find it virtually impossible to live up to their professional standards.

Others who work at a school, such as front office staff, are overworked, underpaid, often unappreciated, and seldom provided with inservice training. Their dissatisfaction frequently adds another layer of negativity to the school climate.

Accountability demands and daily problems produce a sense of urgency and sometimes crisis that makes the culture of schools more reactive than proactive and more remedial than preventive. The result is a structure oriented more to enhancing external control and safety than providing caring support and guidance. This translates into authoritarian demands and social control (rules, regulations, and punishment), rather than promotion of self-direction, personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation, and well-being.

Given all this, staff support is critical. Support to minimize stress and burnout resolves down to

- reducing environmental stressors
- increasing personal capabilities
- enhancing job supports

An Intrinsic Motivational Perspective

Anyone who works in schools knows about burnout. As with so many problems, if ignored, burnout takes a severe toll. The problem is talked about more often than systematic action is taken. Personnel who bring a mental health and motivational perspective to schools can help change the situation by enhancing understanding of causes and promoting action.

One way to understand the problem is in terms of three psychological needs that theorists posit as major intrinsic motivational determinants of behavior. These are the need to feel competent, the need to feel self-determining, and the need to feel interpersonally connected. From this perspective, burnout is one negative outcome that results when these needs are threatened and thwarted. And, such needs are regularly threatened and thwarted by the prevailing culture in most schools.

Staff (and students) chronically find themselves in situations where they feel over-controlled and less than competent. They also come to believe they have little control over long-range outcomes, and this affects hope for the future. A sense of alienation from other staff, students, families, and the surrounding neighborhood is all too common. Thus, not only don't they experience feelings of competence, self-determination, and positive connection with others, such feelings are undermined.

What Needs to Change?

Minimizing burnout at a school site begins with an appreciation that causes are multifaceted and complex. Some of the problem stems from environmental stressors, and some stems from characteristics and capabilities individuals bring to the situation. Moreover, the way the environment and individual mesh is a further complication.

As with student problems, personal conditions often are the presumed cause of staff stress and burnout. This can lead to inadequate understanding of what must be done over the long-run to address the matter. For example, personal 'wellness' and health promotion programs and stress-reduction activities often are advocated. However, these individual-oriented approaches usually are an insufficient remedy. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, by themselves these strategies are insufficient.

The solution requires reculturing schools to minimize undermining and maximize enhancement of intrinsic motivation. This requires policies and practices that ensure a regular, often a daily, emphasis on school supports that (1) promote staff and student well-being and (2) enhance how schools address barriers to teaching and learning.

Reculturing Schools to Promote Well-being

Needed: a caring environment, effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial supports. From an intrinsic motivational perspective, a strong collegial and social support structure and meaningful ways to participate in decision making are critical on promoting feelings of well-being at a school. Key elements include well-designed and implemented programs for

- inducting newcomers into the school culture in a welcoming and socially supportive way
- transforming working conditions by opening classroom doors and creating appropriate teams of staff and students who support, nurture, and learn from each other every day
- transforming inservice training into personalized staff development and support from first induction into a school through ongoing capacity building
- restructuring school governance to enable shared decision-making.

Welcoming and social support. From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching at school are experienced most positively when the learner wants to learn and the teacher enjoys facilitating student learning. Each day works best when all participants care about each other. To these ends, staff must establish a school-wide and classroom atmosphere that is welcoming, encourages mutual support and caring, and contributes to a sense of community. A caring school develops and institutionalizes welcoming and ongoing social support programs for new staff, students, and

families. Such efforts can play a key role in reducing staff burnout and benefit students in significant ways.

Opening the classroom door. New staff require a considerable amount of support and on-the-job training. All staff need to learn more about mobilizing and enabling learning in the classroom. Opening the classroom door is a key step in enhancing the learning of teachers, other staff, and students.

The crux of the matter is to ensure use of effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial supports. This includes specialist personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, special education resource teachers) who mentor and demonstrate rather than play traditional consultant roles. Specialists should be prepared to go into classrooms to model and guide teachers in the use of practices for engaging and re-engaging students in learning.

In addition, teachers can do their jobs better when they integrate community resources. Anyone in the community who wants to help might make a contribution. In general, the array of people who can end the isolation of teachers in classrooms includes: (a) aides and volunteers, (b) other regular/specialist teachers, (c) family members, (d) students, (e) student support staff, (f) school administrators, (g) classified staff, (h) teachers- and other professionals-in-training, (i) school and community librarians, and more.

Personalized staff development and support. As with any learner, staff need instruction and support that is a good match for both their motivation and capabilities. This includes (a) inservice programs that account for interests, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations, (b) approaches that overcome avoidance motivation, (c) structure that provides personalized support and guidance, and (d) instruction designed to enhance and expand intrinsic motivation for learning and problem solving. Some staff also require additional, specialized support, guidance, and accommodations.

Personalized staff development and support can counter alienation and burnout. The work may encompass programs for cooperative learning, mentoring, advocacy, counseling and mediation, human relations, and conflict resolution. Regular mentoring is essential. However, learning from colleagues is not just a talking game. Good mentors model and then actively participate in making changes (e.g., demonstrating and discussing new approaches; guiding initial practice and implementation; and following-up to improve and refine). Depending on practicalities, such modeling could take place in a teacher=s own classroom or be carried out in colleagues= classrooms. Some of it may take the form of team teaching. Personalized contacts increase opportunities for providing support and guidance, enhancing competence, ensuring involvement in meaningful decision-making, and attaining positive social status.

Shared governance. Who is empowered to make decisions in an organization can be a contentious issue. Putting aside politics for the moment, we stress the motivational impact of not feeling empowered. A potent and negative impact on motivation occurs when staff (and students and all other stakeholders) are not involved in making major decisions that affect the quality of their lives. This argues for ensuring that personnel are provided with a variety of meaningful opportunities to shape such decisions. Participation on planning committees and teams that end up having little or no impact can contribute to burnout. Alternatively, feelings of self-determination that help counter burnout are more likely when governance structures share power across stakeholders and make room for their representatives around the decision-making table.