Promoting Staff Well-being and Preventing Burnout as Schools Re-open

*Needed: a caring environment, effective mentoring, teaming,
and other collegial supports*

No one needs to tell school staff how stressful it is to come to work each day. Stress is a commonplace phenomenon for almost everyone who works in school settings. Some of the 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 frustrations, large and small, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health. In the short run, this contributes to the high rate of teacher dropout in their first years on the job. Over time, such stressors can lead to widespread staff demoralization, exhaustion, and burnout.

It is easy to overlook the psychological needs of staff (see references at the end of this resource). That's a serious mistake because, when school staff don't feel good about themselves, it is unlikely they will be effective in making students feel good about themselves.

> *The person-environment fit model of job stress holds that two kinds of fit exist between the individual and the work environment. The first involves the extent to which the person's skills and abilities match the demands and requirements of the job. The second type of fit involves the extent to which the environment provides for individual's needs. If a mismatch occurs involving either kind, the individual's well-being is threatened, and various health strains may result.*
>
> Bruce & West

From an intrinsic motivational perspective, one way to understand promoting staff well-being and preventing burn-out is in terms of three psychological needs that Ed Deci and Richard Ryan have articulated 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, well-being is engendered by conditions that foster such feelings and burnout is among the negative outcomes that result when these needs are threatened and thwarted.

As schools re-open, promoting staff well-being and preventing burnout call for ensuring a school climate that is experienced by staff and students as a caring environment in which there is a strong collegial and social support structure, personalized opportunities for growth, and meaningful ways to participate in decision making. Some workplace processes that contribute to such a climate are well-designed and implemented interventions for

- inducting newcomers into the school culture in a welcoming and socially supportive way

- transforming working conditions by ensuring a safe environment and opening classroom doors to enhance collaboration, caring, and nurturing support to facilitate staff and student learning each 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.

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About 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. Time goes better when all participants care about each other. To these ends, school's must establish a schoolwide 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.

About opening the classroom door. Opening the classroom door is essential for enhancing the learning of teachers, other staff, and students. All staff need support and on-the-job opportunities to learn and grow. A particular need is learning more about mobilizing and enabling learning in the classroom.

The crux of the matter is to ensure use of effective mentoring, teaming, and other collegial supports. This includes having specialist personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, special education resource teachers, social workers, nurses) mentor and demonstrate rather than play traditional consultant roles. Instead of *telling* teachers how to address student learning, behavior, emotional, and physical health problems, specialists need to be trained 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.

About 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:

- inservice programs that account for interests, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations

- approaches that overcome avoidance motivation

- structure that provides personalized support and guidance

- instruction designed to enhance and expand intrinsic motivation for learning and problem solving.

Some staff also require additional, specialized support, guidance, and accommodations.

In keeping with the primary accountability focus on academic achievement, the emphasis of school improvement and teacher training is mainly on curriculum content and instruction. Analyses indicate that implicit in this emphasis is a presumption that students are motivationally ready and able to absorb the lesson being taught. Recognition that the teacher must deal with some misbehavior and learning problems generally is treated as a separate matter calling for training in classroom management.

For the most part, pre-service teacher preparation provides little or no discussion of what to do when students are not motivationally ready and able to respond appropriately to a lesson as taught. This lapse in training is less a problem for teachers in classrooms where few students are doing poorly. In settings where large proportions are not doing well, however, and especially where many are "acting out," teachers decry the gap in their training. In such settings, one of the overriding inservice concerns is to enhance whatever a teacher has previously been taught.

Typically, schools offer a few, relatively brief sessions on various social control techniques. Examples include eye contact, physical proximity, being alert and responding

quickly before a behavior escalates, using rewards as a preventive strategy, assertive discipline, and threats and other forms of punishment. All this, of course, skirts right by the matter of what is causing student misbehavior and ignores the reality that social control practices can be incompatible with enhancing student engagement with learning at school. Indeed, such practices can lead to greater student disengagement.

We hasten to stress that, in highlighting the above matters, we do not mean to minimize the importance of thorough and ongoing preparation related to curriculum and instruction. Every teacher must have the ability and resources to bring a sound curriculum to life and apply strategies that make learning meaningful. At the same time, however, teachers and student support staff must learn how to "enable" learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching – especially factors leading to low or negative motivation for schooling.

Personalized staff development and support promotes feelings of competence. Enhanced feelings of competence promote feeling of self-determination. Personalized mentoring promotes feelings of relatedness between staff and mentors. All this promotes well-being and can productively counter alienation and burnout.

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). Personalized contacts increase opportunities for providing support and guidance, enhancing competence, ensuring involvement in meaningful decision-making, and attaining positive social status.

> For teachers, depending on practicalities, mentor 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.

About Shared governance. Who is empowered to make decisions in an organization can be a contentious issue. Putting aside the politics of this 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 staff 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.

Mother to her son: *Time to get up and go to school.*

Son: *I don't want to go. It's too hard and the kids don't like me.*

Mother: *But you have to go – you're their teacher.*

Addressing Barriers to Teaching and Learning

With schools re-opening, an increasing number of students will bring problems with them that affect their learning and perhaps frustrate the teacher's efforts to teach. In some geographic areas, many youngsters always have brought a wide range of problems stemming from restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult and diverse family circumstances, high rates of mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, problems related to substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities.

Too many teachers have not had effective preparation for supporting and guiding students who manifest commonplace behavioral, learning, and emotional problems. In saying this, we are not teacher-bashing. We have the highest respect and empathy for anyone who pursues the call to work with young people. The problem is that teachers and student/learning support staff are not being taught the fundamentals of how to help those youngsters who do not come to school each day motivationally ready and able to learn. The evidence is clear from analyses of school improvement planning. A major disconnect exists between what teachers need to learn and what they are taught about addressing student problems – and too little is being done about it. In addition, there are not well-designed systems of student/learning support to address factors interfering with teacher effectiveness.

Schools must be able to play a significant role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Teachers must be empowered to work collaboratively with other teachers and student/learning support staff for mutual support in enabling the learning of such students. Effective *schoolwide* student/learning supports also must be developed.

About School Staff Burnout

> *Burnout is used to describe a syndrome that goes beyond physical fatigue from overwork. Stress and emotional exhaustion are part of it, but the hallmark of burnout is the distancing that goes on in response to the overload.* Christina Maslach

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.

Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter (2001) define burnout as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job [that] is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy." They go on to state:

> "The past 25 years of research has established the complexity of the construct, and places the individual stress experience within a larger organizational context of people's relation to their work. Recently, the work on burnout has expanded internationally and has led to new conceptual models. The focus on engagement, the positive antithesis of burnout, promises to yield new perspectives on interventions to alleviate burnout. The social focus of burnout, the solid research basis concerning the syndrome, and its specific ties to the work domain make a distinct and valuable contribution to people's health and well-being."

Corey (2008) notes that:

> "Burnout manifests itself in many ways. Those who experience this syndrome typically find that they are tired, drained, and without enthusiasm. They talk of feeling pulled by their many projects, most of which seem to have lost meaning. They feel that what they do have to offer is either not wanted or not received; they feel unappreciated, unrecognized, and unimportant, and they go about their jobs in a mechanical and routine way. They tend not to see any concrete results of the fruits of the efforts . Often they feel oppressed by the "system" and by institutional demands, which, they contend, stifle any sense of personal initiative. A real danger is that burnout syndrome can feed off itself, so that practitioners feel more and more isolated. They may fail to

reach out to one another and to develop a support system. Because burnout can rob us of the vitality we need personally and professionally, it is important to look at some of its causes, possible remedies, and ways of preventing it."

Anyone who works in schools knows about burnout. And, as with so many problems, if ignored, burnout takes a severe toll. Over the years, sporadic attention has been paid to enhancing staff well-being. However, the problem still is talked about more often than systematic action is taken (Centers for Law and the Public's Health, 2008). It is, therefore, a matter where staff who bring a mental health and motivational perspective to schools can and should take a leadership role.

Any focus on minimizing burnout at a school site begins with an appreciation of the causes of burnout. This leads to an understanding that some of the problem arises from environmental stressors and some of the problem stems from characteristics and capabilities individuals bring to the situation. (And, of course, the way the environment and individual mesh is not to be ignored.)

Causes play out differently with diverse roles and functions at a school. While everyone at a school site shares some common stressors, those who work directly and intensively with students and those who administer underperforming schools often are overwhelmed by what the relatively intractable problems they experience during a school year. It should surprise no one that school personnel dealing with the behavior, learning, and emotional problems of many students over an extended period of time become fatigued.

Ultimately, the problem of minimizing burnout resolves down to promoting well-being by

- reducing environmental stressors

- increasing personal capabilities

- enhancing job supports

Easy to say, hard to do.

As we indicated at the outset of this resource, from a psychological perspective burnout is associated with negative feelings related to one's competence, self-determination, and interpersonal connections. *It's too hard; it's unfair; You can't win; No one seems to care* – all are common comments made by school staff. They are symptoms of a culture that demands a great deal and too often fails to do enough to compensate for the problems it creates. It is a culture that too often undermines motivation for too many.

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. And, in some classrooms, many students have become 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 can be provided only to a small percentage. 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, it is not surprising how many staff (and students) find themselves in situations where they chronically feel over-controlled and less than competent. They also come to believe they have little control over long-range outcomes, and this affects their hopes for the future. And, all too common is a sense of alienation from other staff, students, families, and the surrounding neighborhood. Thus, not only don't they experience feelings of competence, self-determination, and positive connection with others, such feelings tend to be undermined.

And it should surprise no one that school staff might find it difficult to attend effectively to the needs of students when their own needs are ignored. Addressing staff well-being through promoting a caring, supportive, learning community at a school is basic to helping all of the school's stakeholders maintain a sense of balance, perspective, and hope.

> Do youngsters who are "turned off" reflect instances of student burnout?

Concluding Comments

As with so many problems, it is easiest to view burnout as a personal condition. And, as in many other instances, this would be the least effective way to understand what must be done over the long-run to address the matter. The problem is multifaceted and complex. Wellness and health promotion programs and stress-reduction activities often are advocated and sometimes pursued in meaningful ways. However, these approaches are unlikely to be a sufficient remedy for the widespread draining of motivation. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, alone these are insufficient strategies.

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

A cost of ignoring staff well-being is that the programs and services they offer suffer, and there is considerable personnel turnover. And turnover incurs tremendous personal and financial costs. (One financial estimate from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) was that the national cost of public school teacher turnover was over $7 billion a year.)

While there are many reasons for teachers and other staff dropping out, it has long been acknowledged that isolation from colleagues and alienation from students and their families compound deficits in personnel development, unrealistic demands, and relatively low salaries. Promoting well-being at school clearly is an essential agenda item for schools.

School staff deserve a lot of credit.

Well, if we paid them more, they wouldn't need it!

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