

Addressing Barriers

to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link

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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.

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School Staff Burnout

*I*t is easy to overlook the psychological needs of staff. Yet, when school staff don't feel good about themselves, it is unlikely they will be effective in making students feel good about themselves.

In recent months, the resource packet most often downloaded from our Center website is the one entitled: "Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout." These data suggest the need for greater attention to the problem. And, the end of a school year is the right time to think about how to make things better in the coming year. After reading this article, take a good look at next year's school improvement and staff development plans. If these plans don't reflect a concern for preventing burnout, now is the time to redress this oversight.

An Intrinsic Motivational Perspective of Burnout

The behavior referred to as burnout is a psychological phenomenon. 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 can be viewed as among the negative outcomes that result when these needs are threatened and thwarted. And, such needs are regularly threatened and thwarted by the prevailing culture of schools.

"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. These 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 services 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

Inside

? *Need resources? technical assistance?*

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> *resolving staff conflicts*

> *anticipating 9/11 anniversary*

? See page 10: *Transition interventions for newcomers at a school*

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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.

Do youngsters who are “turned off” reflect instances of student burnout?

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.

What Needs to Change

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. While stress-reduction activities often are prescribed, they 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 the undermining and maximize the enhancement of intrinsic motivation. This involves policies and practices that ensure a daily focus on (1) promoting staff and student well-being and (2) addressing barriers to teaching and learning.

Promoting Well-Being

From an intrinsic motivational perspective, a school that wants to prevent burnout needs to be experienced by staff and students as a caring, learning environment in which there is a strong collegial and social support structure and meaningful ways to participate in decision making.

Four key elements here are 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.

Mother to 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.

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 goes 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 also can benefit students in significant ways.

Opening the classroom door. New staff need 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 essential for enhancing the learning of teachers, other staff, and students.

The crux of the matter is to ensure that effective mentoring, support, teaming, and other collegial

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approaches are used. This includes having specialist personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, special education resource teachers) mentor and demonstrate rather than play traditional consultant roles. Instead of *telling* teachers how to address student learning, behavior, and emotional 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.

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.

Personalized staff development and support 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. It involves mentors in modeling and guiding change (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. All of this can productively counter alienation and burnout.

Shared governance. In any organization, who is empowered to make decisions can be a contentious issue. Putting aside the politics of this for the moment, we stress the motivational impact of not feeling empowered. There is a potent and negative impact on motivation 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.

Addressing Barriers to Teaching and Learning

At some time or another, most students bring problems with them to school that affect their learning and perhaps interfere with the teacher's efforts to teach. In some geographic areas, many youngsters bring 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. Teachers must learn many ways to enable the learning of such students. Schools must develop school-wide approaches that enable teacher effectiveness.

Too many teachers know too little about how best to support and guide 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 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. Undoubtedly, this contributes in major ways to staff burnout.

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High stakes expectations, low-powered staff development. In keeping with prevailing demands for higher standards and achievement test scores, the focus of school reform and pre-service teacher training is mainly on curriculum content and instruction. Analyses indicate that implicit in most instructional reforms 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 classroom management and some extra instruction.

There is a major disconnect between what teachers need to learn and what they are taught about addressing student problems – and too little is being done about it.

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 training 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.

Reculturing Classrooms

Think in terms of strategies to engage student interest and attention, one-to-one or small group instruction (e.g., tutoring, cooperative learning groups), enhancing protective factors, and assets building (including use of curriculum-based approaches to promote social emotional development), as well as varied forms of special assistance. All this expands definitions of good teaching to encompass practices that enable teachers to be effective with a wide range of students. From this perspective, good teaching involves fostering a caring context for learning; it encompasses development of a classroom infrastructure that transforms a big classroom into a set of smaller units; it encompasses many strategies for preventing and addressing problems as soon as they arise.

Burnout is a school-wide concern. School-wide the focus must be on ensuring development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching. A widely advocated framework for appreciating the necessary range of interventions outlines a continuum consisting of

- ? systems for promoting healthy development and preventing problems
- ? systems for intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible
- ? systems for assisting those with chronic and severe problems.

This continuum encompasses approaches for enabling academic, social, emotional, and physical development and addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Most schools and communities have some programs and services that fit along the entire continuum.

A second framework helps to further organize fragmented approaches into a cohesive component to guide policy and program development. Such a component has been called an enabling component, a learning support component, a supportive learning

support system. Within the component intervention is categorized into six arenas of activity. These are intended to capture the essence of the multifaceted ways schools work with communities to address barriers.

The six categories encompass efforts to effectively

- ? enhance regular classroom strategies to improve instruction for students with mild-moderate behavior and learning problems (reculturing the classroom)
- ? assist students and families as they negotiate the many school-related transitions
- ? increase home involvement with schools
- ? respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises
- ? increase community involvement and support (including enhanced use of volunteers)
- ? facilitate student and family access to specialized services when necessary.

Each arena for intervention is described in detail elsewhere (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 1997; Adelman, Taylor, & Schnieder, 1999; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2001).

All school staff need to learn an array of strategies for accommodating and helping students learn to compensate for differences, vulnerabilities, and disabilities. Teachers can learn how to use paid assistants, peer tutors, and volunteers to enhance social and academic support and work in targeted ways with youngsters who manifest problems. Strategies must be developed for using resource and itinerant teachers and other student support professionals to work closely with teachers and students *in the classroom* and on regular activities. Support staff also must play a major role in creating an infrastructure for teaming together *to develop programs* in each of an enabling component's six areas.

Concluding Comments

Anyone who works in school knows about burnout. Staggering workloads, major problems, and endless hassles are the name of the game. The many frustrations, large and small, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health. As with so many other problems, if ignored, burnout takes a

severe toll. Rather than suffer through it all, staff who bring a mental health and motivational perspective to schools can take a leadership role to address the problem. In doing so, they need to focus on both promoting well-being and addressing barriers to teaching and learning. Most of all, they need to imbue school improvement strategies with an intrinsic motivational perspective.

A Few References

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A Few Resources on the Internet

Reducing Occupational Stress
<http://www.workhealth.org/prevention/prred.html>

Stress Topics
<http://www.apa.org/topics/topicstress.html>

About.com (search "Burnout")

<http://www.nea.org/index.html> (search "Burnout")

*I don't suffer from stress.
I'm a carrier.*

Dilbert

