

About Teacher Mental Health

The 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey found more than 75 percent of teachers reporting frequent job-related stress, compared to 40 percent of other working adults.

One effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is an increasing focus on mental health in schools. This reflects concern for the rising numbers of students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems. It also encompasses concerns about the mental health of school staff, especially because of the rise in how many teachers are dropping out. While multiple factors are related to teachers leaving the profession, the impact on their mental health and the impact of increasing numbers of students with problems certainly plays a role.

In the wake of the pandemic, schools are seen as confronted with crises related to student mental health, discipline problems, and learning loss. In reviewing 35 survey studies with 65,508 participants, ranging from 4 to 19 years of age, Chon and colleagues (2022) found that Anxiety (28%), depression (23%), loneliness (5%), stress (5%), fear (5%), tension (3%), anger (3%), fatigue (3%), confusion (3%), and worry (3%) were the most common mental health problems reported. Relatedly, Varghese and Natsuaki (2021) reported that the number of students scoring high for feelings of well-being fell from 51.3% prior to the pandemic to 26.9%.

By the time the pandemic took hold, the CDC Foundation (2021) reported that teachers indicating symptoms of depression increased from 15% of teachers to 37%, and those indicating symptoms of anxiety rose from 12% to 31%. Harding and colleagues (2019) found that when teachers suffered from mental health issues, they felt less capable of maintaining relationships with their students and students experienced higher levels of psychological distress. Before the pandemic, Greenburg and colleagues (2016) had stressed that poor teacher mental health and high teacher turnover in fourth and fifth-grade classrooms in New York was correlated with lower math and language arts scores for their students.

Few folks doubt that teachers' mental health impacts students, and students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems impact teacher effectiveness and well-being. Schooling is, after all, a reciprocal process. Turning problems related to teaching and learning around ultimately involves making the situation at schools better for *everyone* at a school. *However, our focus here is on teachers' MH.*

Factors Related to Teachers' Mental Health

From a system perspective, it is well to remember that, as with others working in organizations, a teachers mental health is affected by job-related factors such as

- >preparation for their current job
- >their salary
- >the characteristics and conditions of their workplace (e.g., How personalized is on-the-job continuing education? Are there sufficient resources? Are there effective in- and out of the classroom supports for students and staff? Are teachers empowered to provide input into school decision making?)

(For more on these concerns, see the Center's report on

[Improving Teacher Retention, Performance, and Student Outcomes.](#))

*The material in this document builds on work done by Asha Agarwal as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2023.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

On average, teachers make about 20 percent less than other college-educated workers and make even less than that average in 25 states. In 38 states, the average teacher salary is so low that mid-career teachers who are the head of household for a family of four qualify for two or more government benefits based on income. From ASCD SmartBrief

As with salaries, other system factors vary by locale. Addressing them is a constant challenge, and major improvements are institutionalized slowly.

Despite these realities, schools can make improvements related to some workplace conditions that affect the mental health of staff and students. Doing so involves adopting a psychological perspective. From such a perspective, schools need to pay greater attention to a teacher's feelings of competence, self-determination, and connection with colleagues, students, and families. Indications that such feelings are being undermined can be heard in frequent teacher complaints about being overworked, underpaid, overstressed, continuously anxious, frustrated, lacking sufficient supports to do their job, and left out of decision making that affects them.

What Can be Done at a School Level?

From the moment a teacher is hired at a school, the staff needs to provide a welcoming and supportive induction and ongoing nurturing collegial and administrative support. Feelings of competence can be enhanced through improving continuing education (e.g., personalizing on-the-job learning) and assuring every day access to effective student and learning supports in- as well as out-of- the classroom. Feelings of self-determination can be heightened by empowered participation at decision making tables.

And ending teachers isolation in their classrooms is essential.

Teachers Tend to Be Isolated in Their Classrooms

Teachers, and especially novice teachers, cannot and should not be expected to work alone in classrooms. Successful classrooms require teacher collaboration with others to effectively personalize instruction, overcome barriers to teaching and learning, and reengage disconnected students.

Efforts to end teacher isolation require reversing the norm of teachers working alone in the classroom. This can be done by regularizing ways to bring others in to help improve instruction and provide special student assistance to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Expanding human capital in classrooms involves establishing ways for daily in-classroom collaboration with other teachers and student/learning support staff, as well as recruiting professionals-in-training, parents, and volunteers.

School-wide, the mental health of teachers and all staff and students is affected by how safe and supportive the school climate feels. Of particular concern are efforts that enhance a psychological sense of community at a school. A key facet of this is how a school addresses the wide range of factors that pose pervasive and entrenched challenges to schools, particularly chronically low performing schools. Failure to directly address such barriers ensures that (a) too many students will continue to struggle in school and (b) too many teachers will suffer the effects of having to deal with problems that stress them and the system.

From our perspective, efforts to establish a safe and supportive school climate require transforming how schools support teachers, staff, and students. We suggest that a critical facet of this involves expanding the current school improvement policy framework and developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2018, 2020). Such changes can enable fully embedding concerns about mental health into daily life at schools.

Concluding Comments

In facilitating the learning and development of children and adolescents, teachers and others working in schools play a critical role related to meeting society's needs (e.g., socializing the young, maintaining a healthy economy, preserving the prevailing political system). Doing so, however, has proven to be costly to the mental health and general well-being of many. In turn, this has had a negative impact on students.

Obviously, teachers' emotional suffering can stem from factors other than their on-the-job experiences. Equally evident is the reality that conditions experienced at school often lead to mental health problems and can exacerbate existing emotional distress. No one is immune.

When the topic of mental health comes up, it is reasonable to focus on how individuals should take care of themselves. For example, teacher associations are pushing for such personal supports as mental health days and access to counseling. Administrators are being called upon to ensure that teachers know they have their "backs" and to do more morale building.

Unfortunately, too little emphasis is placed on developing better working conditions.

For schools to play a *major* role in ameliorating mental health problems, there must be an emphasis on improving working conditions for everyone at a school. And, of course, individual staff who are experiencing problems must be supported in accessing help.

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Center Resources Related to Teacher Mental Health

- >*Improving Teacher Retention, Performance, and Student Outcomes.*
- >*Retaining New Teachers*
- >*Promoting Staff Well-being and Preventing Burnout as Schools Re-open*
- >*The Importance of Teacher Intrinsic Motivation*
- >*Trauma: a Barrier to Learning and Teaching*
- >*Addressing Student Burnout*

Other resources:

- >50 Resources to Support the Mental Health of Teachers and School Staff
- >Teacher Compensation Initiative
- >Addressing Working Conditions to Improve Teacher Retention