

A Sample of What Teachers/Researchers Say about Teacher Burnout

A recent Gallup poll reported that 44% of K-12 workers in the U.S. say they "always" or "very often" feel burned out at work; this is more than all other industries across the nation. Marken & Agrawal, 2022

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. Joyce & Weil, 1996

Teacher turnover is a major concern, and "burnout" is seen as a major factor. While commonly used, the term is controversial, and there is no consensus about definition. In a 2001 article, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter suggest burnout is "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy." In a 2024 review article, Hanju and Shiquan indicate that although no uniform definition exists, the concept of teacher burnout generally involves an adverse reaction to work pressures over a period of time that lead to a series of negative physiological and psychological reactions in teachers.

Over the last decades, many studies have focused on teacher burnout (see discussions in Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2015; Hanju & Shiquan, 2024; Saloviita & Pakarinen. 2021). A variety of factors have been indicated in discussing cause, consequences, and corrective steps. The many factors have been grouped into personal, job, and systemic factors.

Our Center's intent here is to highlight what teachers and researchers say about what's wrong and what to do about it.

Teacher Attributions about What's Wrong

Interpreting from research reports, teachers attributions about the biggest reasons for teacher burnout are (a) being overworked and understaffed, (b) problems with students (e.g., dealing with discipline, lack of motivation, accommodating individual differences and learning problems), (c) dealing with parents, (d) insufficient support and resources, (e) too limited input into school decision-making, and (f) low salaries.

Related to these matters, teachers tend to blame administrators for unsatisfactory working conditions, such as large classes and having to deal with too many difficult students and parents, assigning too many responsibilities necessitating bring too much work home, having to work at a too-rapid a pace, and not including them in school decision making, and more.

As two teachers put it:

"Being a teacher is like being in an abusive relationship that you just can't leave for various reasons. The kids, the money. Sometimes it's wonderful and other times it's the most difficult thing you have to get through. And all the while people outside of teaching either overly praise you or think teachers are the only problem. There is no in between. I want to clarify that the majority of the stress that I have felt does not come from the actual teaching and working with kids, it's all the other stuff."

Teachers end up fighting the students, parents, administrators and the school district. All of these groups prefer to put the blame and solutions on teachers to fix our broken system.

*The material in this document builds on work done by Madeline Sholly as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2024.

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Researchers Point to Systemic Problems

Analyses of problems related to teacher retention have produced consensus about the need to improve (1) salaries, (2) recruitment, (3) preservice professional preparation, (4) induction into the profession, (5) personalized on-the-job (inservice) learning, (6) student and learning supports, and (7) the career ladder (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2012).

A case study by Fantili & McDougall (2009) underscores problems experienced by new teachers. In addition to self-doubt and anxiety, the researchers noted (a) problems related to hiring practices such as late placement and split grade assignments, (b) lack of effective job preparation, (c) absence of effective leadership and qualified mentors, (d) difficulty in planning, organizing, and differentiating instruction, assessing student progress, and communicating with parents, (e) managing student behavior, and more.

In a study by Richards, Hemphill, and Templin (2018), teachers were asked: "What are the biggest drawbacks to teaching?" Nearly half responded that they were expected to do more work than they had time for in their contractual hours and that forced them to do work when they were supposed to be off of work. One factor differentiating low- from high-burnout teachers was their perception of their environment. High-burnout teachers felt that their environments were "combative and constraining." They felt demoralized and marginalized by their administrators. Specifically mentioning, "We have no voice... we were trained at universities to do this job, but when it comes time for decisions to be made, [administrators] cut us out of the process." Low-burnout teachers felt empowered and supported, and they indicated involvement in decisions regarding school policy and conduct was nurturing and made them more effective.

Ansley, Houchins, and Varjas (2019) explored ways teachers maintained positivity when working in high-need schools. High-need schools were defined as serving "disproportionate numbers of students with disabilities, economic disadvantages or other obstacles to their education." Such schools experience high turnover. However, turnover is less in high-need schools where teachers indicate there is "consistent enforcement of school policies, support for student behavior management, regular communication and constructive feedback, flexibility for teacher autonomy, teacher inclusion in school wide decision making, allocation of necessary resources, [and] mentorships for new teachers." Inadequate support was associated with "lower job satisfaction, higher occupational stress, lower teacher efficacy, less job commitment." In addition, teachers reported higher job satisfaction when interactions and relationship on-the-job were positive.

Santoro and Price (2021) note that the pandemic tested teachers to their limits. "They were charged with a multitude of extra tasks" and reported working more hours. They also complained that "as primary contact for parents, teachers serve a conduit for explaining controversial decisions and often receive the brunt of criticism which can be emotionally draining."

What Stakeholders Say Would Help

As with so many problems, the easy answer is to view burnout as a personal condition. But most researchers see this as the least effective way to understand what must be done over the long-run. Burnout and teacher retention are multifaceted and complex problems. As Santoro and Price note: "Although often portrayed as the capacity for individual resilience, burnout can also be the result of unusually demanding school environments that lack appropriate organizational supports or limits."

So while stress-reduction activities and various coping strategies often are prescribed, they are an insufficient remedy. Reducing environmental stressors and enhancing job supports are more to the point, but again, alone these are insufficient. Ultimately, the problem of minimizing burnout resolves down to (a) reducing environmental stressors, (b) increasing personal capabilities, and (c) enhancing job supports. (*Easy to say, hard to do.*)

Here is a sample of the type of system changes widely suggested.

In their discussion of ways to improve working conditions for teachers, Adelman and Taylor (2002) focus on (1) inducting newcomers into the school culture in a welcoming and socially supportive way, (2) 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, (3) transforming inservice training into personalized staff development and support from first induction into a school through ongoing capacity building, and (4) restructuring school governance for shared decision making.

About 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 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 2022, Browning, Chait, and Wendling put forth the following five strategies to help support teaching staff: (1) making community care a visible part of a school's vision and culture (e.g., giving staff opportunities to discuss their well-being), (2) establishing structural components that can support teachers and build those supports into the master calendar (e.g., giving teachers more time for prep and meeting other responsibilities during the school day), (3) removing non-core responsibilities where possible, (4) providing dedicated mentorships and peer-to-peer growth opportunities for teachers, and (5) supporting teacher agency (e.g., enable teacher participation in decision making).

The **Teachers' Salary Project** argues that legislators at federal, state, and local levels need to strengthen teacher career pathways and ensure competitive, livable wages as essential to recruiting and retaining good teachers.

Concluding Comments

Anyone who works in schools knows about burnout. For the most part, teachers are expected to work alone in classrooms, and this contributes to many difficulties that interfere with teaching. There are more responsibilities than can be carried out effectively. Salaries are a constant grievance.

The many frustrations, large and small, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health. With little guidance and support and poor working conditions, many teachers start to feel unhappy, distressed, and "burned out." And too many leave the field. This certainly is not good for schools and students. And society suffers because of the loss of time, money, and effort spent training these teachers.

While more research on the burnout problem is desirable, enough already is known about what is wrong and what can be done to improve schools in ways that make for good working conditions. We have mentioned some, and others can be found in our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on ***Burnout***.

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