**Partnership for Public Education**

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE**

# CENTERING TEACHER EMOTIONS AND WELL-BEING IN EDUCATION POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

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Teachers are one of the most influential school-based figures when it comes to impacting student development. Every teacher has the potential to influence thousands of children across their career: each U.S. teacher will, on average, impact about 3,000 students during their time in the classroom.[1] Yet teaching is one of the most stressful occupations, and teachers leave the field at higher rates than many other professions. With a current estimated 3.8 million teachers in the U.S. (see Footnote[1]), the benefits of supporting teacher well-being are abundantly clear.

## What challenges do teachers face?

For many teachers, the demands of the career can outweigh the resources available to meet those demands, and this may be even more true in the context of COVID-19. Stressors impacting teachers exist at every level of the education system, from daily challenges including unrealistic workloads to larger, systemic challenges including low pay and professional prestige. Moreover, the unprecedented challenges introduced into the education system by COVID-19 have increased occupational stress and burnout among teachers, which has not abated despite returns to in-person instruction and the widespread availability of vaccines. These factors likely contribute to high rates of attrition among teachers and to the challenges faced by under-resourced areas in recruiting and retaining effective teachers.

## Why do teachers' emotions and well-being matter?

Teachers' emotions and well-being have far-reaching implications for teachers themselves, for their students, and for the education system at large. Barriers to positive emotions and well-being such as burnout and chronic stress have been linked to decreases in professional performance, lower job satisfaction, and increased intentions to quit among teachers[2]. For students, teachers' emotions are associated with student engagement and academic achievement, as well as with students' own emotions[3]. Teachers' well-being also surfaces in multiple important classroom processes including teacher/student interactions, instructional decisions, classroom quality, and behavior management[4].

1. McCain, 2023
2. Ferguson et al., 2012; Fernet et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; 2010
3. Ruzek et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2008; Frenzel et al., 2009; Tam et al., 2020
4. Hamre & Pianta, 2004; McLean & Connor, 2018; McLean et al., 2018; McLean & Connor, 2015; Sandilos et al., 2015; Aloe et al., 2014; Li-Grining et al., 2010

# What can we do to support teachers' emotions and well-being?

Support for teachers must come from multiple levels of the education system for impacts to reach their full potential. Emotion- and well-being interventions for teachers, if done independently of any other supports, place the burden on teachers themselves to learn about and support their own well-being, and may actually increase teachers' stress. Instead, a teacher-level intervention paired with efforts to improve school climate and policies that increase teacher pay and health benefits would likely be a more promising approach.

## Education administrators

First, education leaders can maximize teachers' time in experiences they find most meaningful. Teachers experience the most positive emotions when engaging in direct instruction with their students[5]. School and district leaders can use this information to guide their decision-making about how teachers' time is spent. For example, if a new opportunity or initiative might take away from teachers' instruction and increase their time on administrative tasks, education leaders might decline that opportunity in favor of one that poses less burden.

Second, education leaders can prioritize strengthening elements of their school's climate that are most relevant to teachers' well-being, namely strong communication among school colleagues, high-quality training and continuing education opportunities, reasonable expectations, and authentic recognition[6]. Efforts to this end might range from formally and regularly recognizing their teachers' efforts and accomplishments to tailoring teacher performance evaluations and expectations to individual teachers while also considering the contexts and challenges those teachers are operating within.

Third, education leaders can reduce feelings of isolation among teachers by promoting positive school relationships, a strategy that would likely support teacher retention[7]. Education leaders could adopt mentorship and co-teaching models, structure time for teachers to connect and collaborate in and out of the classroom and offer teachers ample time to connect with school leadership. Districts could also prioritize the provision of continuing education opportunities to principals that focus on supporting positive school relationships.

## Teacher preparation programs

It is also important to prepare new teachers for these challenges before they enter the classroom. Teacher preparation programs are uniquely poised to do this: they could intentionally track and support the development of the personal attributes that have been found to promote positive career experiences among teachers, namely resilience, adaptability, and self-efficacy. Specifically, integrating explicit training on mindfulness and emotion regulation, including how to incorporate these skills into daily teaching practices, could help new teachers appraise and respond to the challenges they experience once in the career in positive ways. As well, given the importance of high-quality relationships to teachers' career success, teacher preparation programs could provide training on professional communication and relationship building so that new teachers are poised to build strong professional networks.

## Policymakers

Policymakers, education stakeholders, and political figures can attend to teachers' emotions and well-being as they work to (re)structure an education system that can support a thriving teacher workforce. One strategy many jump to is increasing teacher salaries: economic evaluations have estimated that teachers earn between 20-45% less than workers in other fields with similar education levels and job demands[8], and compensation rates for teachers have declined steadily over the past 30 years while wages in most other professions have risen. Increasing teacher salaries would likely result in teachers entering and remaining in the workforce at higher rates[9], but again it is important to pair such policies with additional supports.

Second, schools in underserved communities experience more challenges in the recruitment and retention of effective teachers, likely reflecting that teachers in these contexts experience more stressors[10]. As such, compensation-based incentive programs that motivate high-quality teachers to seek out and remain in teaching positions in underserved communities, paired with targeted well-being supports for these individuals, would likely see meaningful impact.

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5. Jones et al 2022

6. Kraft et al., 2021

7. Allensworth et al., 2009; Kardos & Johnson, 2007

8. Allegretto & Mishel, 2018; OECD, 2017

9. Clotfelter et al., 2008; Guarino et al., 2006

10. Goldhaber et al., 2015; Ingersoll, 2003; Richards, 2012

Third, evaluations of teacher workloads and accounts of teachers' roles as primary responders to students' trauma illustrate that teachers do much more than teach, frequently assuming emotionally challenging roles they were not formally trained for. This, paired with the fact that U.S. schools are chronically understaffed with individuals (school psychologists, counselors, paraprofessionals) who are trained to provide psychological supports to students, means that teachers today are at higher risk of experiencing secondary trauma. Thus, strengthening systems that recruit, train, and retain school mental health professionals and paraprofessionals, coupled with policy changes that provide funding for more of these positions, would lessen the emotional burden currently taken up by teachers.

Last, a current barrier to retaining practicing teachers and recruiting new teachers into the profession may be the low social prestige associated with teaching, which is largely fueled by policies that fail to support teachers and media messaging that portrays the career in negative ways. Messages that "anybody can do this" and "we just need bodies in classrooms" have likely contributed to the reduced morale observed among teachers as the field has navigated the pandemic. Policymakers can raise the social prestige of the profession by providing large-scale and impactful messaging, backed by teacher-focused policy changes that illustrate the critical importance of teachers to society, the challenges and rewards inherent in the career, the fact that teachers are professionals who undergo extensive training, and the steps the field is taking to make teaching an attractive and sustainable career.

## What we still need to know.

While the knowledge base on teacher emotions and well-being has grown, there are still some issues we don't have enough information about to inform changes in policy or practice. First, there is a need for more nuanced and context-specific measures to help us understand and support teacher well-being, particularly that help us understand these issues among groups of teachers (e.g. special education teachers, paraprofessionals, teachers of color). Relatedly, more work needs to consider teachers' strengths and the conditions in which teachers thrive may yield farther-reaching impacts.

## DON'T

→ require stand-alone interventions for teachers that place the responsibility on them to support their own well-being.

→ introduce additional programming that takes teachers away from instructional time

## DO

→ protect teachers' time in the classroom and with their students

→ integrate emotion- and well-being supports with other initiatives that address teacher needs at multiple levels.

→ focus on promoting a positive school environments characterized by effective communication, positive relationships, and recognition.

→ send positive messages about the teaching career through public messaging about the importance of teachers' work

→ raise the prestige of the teaching career through reforms to teacher pay, benefits, etc.

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The *mission* of PPE is to bring-together members of the University of Delaware and the broader Delaware educational community—including educators, families, and community leaders —to *identify* shared needs and opportunities and to *facilitate* the exchange of knowledge.

**Together, we can strengthen public education through collaboration and partnership.**