

Educator Stress Is a Leadership Challenge. Here's What Leaders Can Do About It

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Education is an undeniably stressful profession, exacting a price in terms of job satisfaction and burnout. Though there are practices that educators can follow to reduce their own stress levels, there are also system-level actions that school and district leaders can take to make the work less of a grind—and those actions are also good for district health as a whole. None of them has any significant financial cost, time commitment, or specialized training.

Be supportive. The Gallup Organization [measures workplace culture](#) through surveys. Many of the questions are about leadership behaviors, particularly around support: "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person," or "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work." Notably, every indicator of high engagement is also an indicator of low stress—an outcome of the same underlying causes. This may be the most powerful argument that lowering employee stress connects to school or district health.

In education, we have largely made the shift to seeing student engagement as an outcome of instruction rather than as a function of student personality. But I am not so sure that educational leaders have taken the same amount of responsibility for their teachers' engagement as they expect teachers to take for their students'. Administrators should be aware of the power they have in both increasing engagement and reducing stress.

Stop trying to do so much. Humans are highly motivated to feel competent; knowing that you are good at your job or believing you can meet any challenge is a source of pride and motivation and leads to continued growth. But trying to do too much threatens our sense of feeling competent, which makes us less willing to take risks, which means that we learn less, which further challenges our feelings of competence, and so on. It becomes a vicious circle.

Beyond individual burnout, an organization that is too busy to learn does not improve. Education leaders often talk about a sense of urgency, but if the rate of change outpaces the learning curve, there's a danger of inhibiting growth.

So, what can leaders do, especially when the organizational to-do list is long?

Instead of *prioritizing* to-do's, which makes it seem as though some things are less important than others, think about sequencing: Be realistic about everything that needs to be done and arrange in a temporal order. Though a school or district may have multiple initiatives, each person should only have to think about one or two. This means that an elementary school implementing a new grading policy affecting all teachers should not expect to take on much more than that, but a high school could implement new math and new language arts curriculums in the same year because subject-area teachers can focus on their individual efforts.

Build collaboration and trust across the system. Collaboration is a powerful tool for organizational health and improvement. People learn through experience and experimentation, and when they do this collaboratively, more data generated from experience means more learning. Trust should also be in place when educators collaborate. People who work in a high-trust environment are less stressed, and

people who are less stressed are more trusting (Zak, 2008). Trust happens when people have personal integrity and believe that everyone has each other's backs.

To increase collaboration, provide time in the schedule not just for teachers to meet, but to work on a common instructional goal together, such as ensuring that students receive high-quality feedback or teaching reading comprehension strategies. Redefine coaches' role to work with teams in addition to individual teachers and make that work about trying new instructional techniques rather than only looking at data. Or, ask teachers to invite other teachers to watch them try something new. It doesn't have to be about observation protocols or giving feedback—just about making it clear that the school's leaders value collaboration.

Communicate. Leaders are constantly talking to people in person or over email, but it's important to step back and ensure these words add up to clear messages. One superintendent I know does that by making short videos for Twitter and the local public access channel about the district's instructional offerings. Another principal created a visual, which appears at the top of every agenda and PowerPoint presentation, of her school's high-quality instruction concept.

Leaders should also regularly communicate

- **Clarity** about organizational focus and what this means for educators' daily work;
- **Specific appreciation** not just for the "heroes" who go above and beyond, but for staff members who are doing their jobs conscientiously and with care and concern for students; and
- **Information** about what is going on behind the scenes and why, transparency around decision-making, and opportunities for growth and development to ground everyone in a sense of shared understanding.

At the same time, leader communication should involve as much reception as transmission. Listening is an underrated (or perhaps underperformed) skill. We all want to know that we have a voice and that those in power will listen; what educators want their leaders to know will also help leaders make better decisions. Leaders can get input through climate surveys and 360 evaluations, but the simplest way is to get into the habit of asking for feedback in every conversation—and to receive it gratefully.

Reducing stress for educators is a worthy goal in itself; education leaders have an ethical obligation to do so. That reducing stress also improves organizational productivity makes doing so a fundamental leadership responsibility well within the grasp of all leaders.

References

Zak, P. J. (2008). The neurobiology of trust. *Scientific American*, 298(6), 88-95.

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