GovernanceBrief

Understanding Teacher Burnout and its Negative Effects

Every year, 200,000 new teachers are hired in the United States.[1] Of those, 10% leave the profession by the end of the first year, nearly 30% leave teaching within three years and nearly 50% within five years.[2] The annual turnover rate for all teachers is 20%, which is higher than many other professions (Table 1).

In addition to damaging the health of the profession, high turnover rates take a financial toll. The average expense, in administrative and other costs, of each individual teacher who leaves a school district is more than $13,000. This does not include funds spent on a teacher's professional development and/or induction activities.[3]

Table 1: 2012 Occupational Turnover Rates (National Rates)[4]	
Utilities Services	7%
Manufacturing & Distribution	13%
Non-profit Organizations	15%
Banking & Finance	17%
Insurance Services	11%
Healthcare	16%
Hospitality	33%

Causes and implications of teacher dissatisfaction

Highly motivated teachers are essential to student success. Students need and depend on healthy, energized and attentive teachers to educate them effectively and parents trust that teachers have the expertise and will to do this.[5] Yet, too many teachers lack the motivation and professional interest that is essential to delivering the kind of effective instruction necessary for student success.

Of the many teachers who leave the profession, more than 40% cite reasons of "inadequate support from administrators or supervisors." Another 30% report a variety of other reasons for abandoning teaching. These factors include a lack of school direction, limited professional autonomy and respect, few leadership opportunities and little or no chance to participate in professional decisions and strategic planning.[6]

Teachers indicate that a lack of administrative support combined with some or all of the above-noted factors and conditions leave them feeling stressed and overwhelmed. These feelings can ultimately lead to what is described as "teacher burnout." Some teachers who experience burnout leave the field and contribute to the problem of high turnover. Those who continue teaching despite these feelings pose a different problem. They remain in classrooms having lost the health, energy, attention, creativity and motivation necessary to provide a high quality education for their students.[7]

A high school example of teacher burnout

In a 2012 study conducted at a Sacramento area high school, nearly 30% of teachers (24 of 81) indicated having burnout symptoms.[8] Teachers cited a range of contributors to their extreme stress including a lack of structured support, negative relationships with administrators, large class sizes, unbalanced funding, student behavior, student discipline, formal evaluations, and standardized testing.

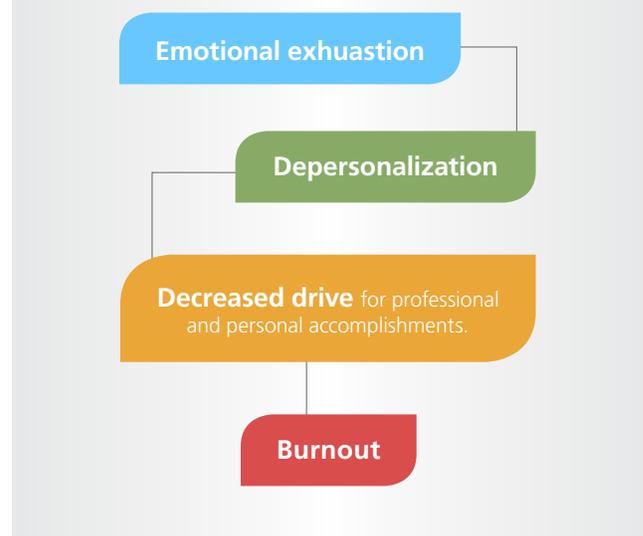## A deeper look at the symptoms and results of teacher stress and burnout

Research identifies three fundamental conditions experienced by teachers who are stressed and overwhelmed. These conditions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased professional and personal accomplishment are stages in a trajectory toward teacher burnout (Figure 1).

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of psychic energy or the draining of emotional resources.[9] Emotional stress causes both mental and physical damage that occurs when individuals experience unalleviated anxiety, tension, frustration and anger over extended periods of time. Emotional exhaustion is caused in part when individuals become overwhelmed by excessive demands that they feel they cannot meet.[10] Once emotional exhaustion sets in, individuals no longer value involvement in professional and personal events. This means that teachers lose their professional passion, drive, motivation and dedication—resulting in poor teaching practices and the consequent poor student performance and low achievement.

Depersonalization. Depersonalization refers to a reaction to stress resulting in a desire to be left alone and to have no personal interaction. Individuals suffering from depersonalization grow unresponsive to other people's needs—sometimes in the extreme—becoming negative, detached, callous and dehumanizing toward others.[11] Depersonalization can also result in decreased self-worth, which in turn leads to reduced desire and ability to accomplish job-related tasks and assignments. Teachers suffering from depersonalization lose the desire and faith in their ability to do well in their jobs. They tend to develop cynical attitudes toward students that can result in negative behaviors and attitudes including sarcasm, making derogatory comments, ignoring students' needs, and an overall breakdown in communication.[12]

Decreased drive for professional and personal accomplishments. Another response to prolonged and frequent stress is a loss of ambition to succeed. It results in decreased job performance, satisfaction, morale and commitment, and leads to increased absenteeism and greater turnover.[13]

Figure 1: Trajectory toward teacher burnout

Emotional exhuastion

Depersonalization

Decreased drive for professional and personal accomplishments.

Burnout

Promising strategies to alleviate and prevent teacher burnout

Research strongly supports the importance of establishing positive relationships as a means to avoid and alleviate teacher burnout. More than ten years of research from the Chicago school reform movement reveals that good education is inextricably related to developing and sustaining relationships of trust at all levels of the education endeavor. Anthony Bryk, a principal researcher of the Chicago reform concluded that:

> *Good schools depend heavily on cooperative endeavors. Relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students. Improving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong.*[14]

A fundamental key to keeping the connective tissue of trusting relationships healthy and strong is providing teachers the support they need to do the critical and demanding job of teaching students well. A number of best practices based on this principle are summarized below.

Mutual obligation among stakeholders and strong teacher administrator relations. Critical to providing teachers with the support they need is creating a structured system that is based on and reinforces several key principles: mutual trust, mutual respect, personal regard for others and

their work, respect for others' responsibilities, personal integrity and an understanding that all stakeholders must have a mutual obligation to each other. This includes a particular focus on structures and systems that foster personal and professional relationships between teachers and administrators that are based on trust, values, morals as well as mutual validation, affirmation and respect.[15]

Professional learning communities. Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer teachers the opportunity to support each other in the development of best practices and pedagogy. A PLC offers teachers the supportive structure of weekly professional development meetings that are focused on student achievement and best practices and provide group accountability.[16]

Helpful, informative, and effective evaluations. Teachers are more effectively supported when formal evaluations use specific protocols, pre-planning, and constructive meetings, as well as a coaching rather than punitive approach.[17]

Positive behavior intervention support (PBIS). Professional development on PBIS provides teachers with support for dealing effectively and positively with classroom management through lessons and best practices using a tiered system of academic and behavior interventions.[18]

Related legislation

For two decades, the beginning teacher support and assessment system or BTSA (SB 1422, 1992 and SB 2042, 1997) existed as a categorical program in California.[19] The intent of the program was:

"…that cost-effective induction programs would help "transform academic preparation into practical success in the classroom," and "retain greater numbers of capable beginning teachers." Each BTSA program offers ongoing support from experienced colleagues at the school and includes formative assessments—such as classroom observations, journals, and portfolios—that help program participants learn how to improve their own teaching.[20]

BTSA funds were folded into the Local Control Funding Formula and are now allocated to districts to use for teacher support according to local need. Nonetheless, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing continues to require that beginning teachers complete two years of induction within the first five years of teaching in order to receive a clear credential. Moreover, BTSA evaluations indicate that BTSA participation

increases teacher retention: 93% of teachers who participated in BTSA stayed in the field.[21]

District policy implications

Research clearly identifies the need for strong systems of teacher support and the research-supported strategies outlined in this brief can contribute to such systems. Professional learning communities provide teacher support through peer mentorship and by building professional capacity and relationships. Positive behavior intervention systems can help teachers work with students on behaviors that are expected, appropriate and within the boundaries of school rules and education code, thus resulting in more instructional time and less time lost on managerial redirection of students. Taking steps to build strong relationships between teachers and administrators contributes to teachers who feel more motivated about their daily duties, knowing the principal will support their individual needs. Finally, used correctly, the formal evaluation process can be an opportunity to provide cognitive coaching and mentorship between administrators and teachers. Such coaching, support, and growth are the aim of any truly effective evaluation process.

District profile: Several secondary schools in the Elk Grove Unified School District incorporate PLCs into their strategic plans. Each of the departments of the four core subjects (English language arts, math, science, social sciences) has a PLC which meets for one hour every Wednesday when students have a late start time. The PLCs are based on the following important tenants: (1) a focus is on student learning, collaboration and the use of data to support decisions; (2) a high level of accountability for all members of the PLC; and (3) learning by doing: constructive criticism is welcomed and encouraged.

Questions for school boards

» What teacher support programs does your district currently have in place?

» What are the retention and turnover rates in your district and how does this vary across schools and grade levels?

» How many probationary teachers are "non-elected" after their second year?

- » Does your district currently have professional learning communities in place?

- » What positive behavior intervention strategies is your district currently employing?

- » Does your district and each respective school have a defined mission and vision statement?

- » Are teachers in your district provided the opportunity to give feedback on the performance of supervisors and support mentors?

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Additional resources

- » CSBA has sample policies related to providing teacher support. Search for the phrase "teacher support policies" at www.csba.org.

- » Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI): www.mindgarden.com/products/mbi.htm

- » Mental Health: "What is Your Stress Index": http://bit.ly/1hgdFZd

- » National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/health/index.shtml

- » PLC's Blog Page: www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/

Endnotes

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