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A Behavioral Health, Wellness & (P)SEL Newsletter

Issue 6: Burnout & (P)SEL

Message from the CEO

By Dr. Jared Scherz

SEL & Burnout



Burnout has been a top threat to education, well before the crisis of this past year. Rural and urban districts in particular were having difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified educators, leaving dangerous shortages in our nation's most important profession. Now that schools have become centers of community controversy, due to the fears of educator health, the problem is amplified.

When we consider our most basic needs, few incentives will motivate an educator to compromise safety and security, meaning the traditional benefits of teaching may lose their value. A sense of meaning, autonomy or creativity may not help overcome the fear of illness or death, so we need to approach our faculty differently.

Prioritizing the well-being of our country's most valuable human resource is the logical evolution from this pandemic. While opening schools presents a critical blow to their already fragile sense of feeling valued, installing meaningful wellness and PSEL programs that prevent trauma and promote resilience can make a difference.

Educators need help in understanding, expressing, and creatively meeting their needs, the definition of PSEL. When needs aren't able to be met, tolerating the distress that comes with this fear is critical, preventing the decline into mental health problems. The alternative is a body of educators employing self-protective mechanisms, unable or unwilling to engage fully with students.

A School Counselor Discusses Burnout: How She Deals With Her Own and Helps Educators and Students Cope With Theirs

By Christy Anana, MA



In the newly published book, Whole School Health and Psychosocial Emotional Learning by Dr. Jared Scherz, I was selected as one of 15 educators across the country to describe my experience with a psychosocial emotional learning (PSEL). The PSEL skill I wrote about was the capacity to hold feelings in abeyance. As an elementary school counselor, I create safe space for people to express complex feelings and be acknowledged. This is a skill that helps build relationships and contributes to relationship attunement. The feelings we have can be very unpleasant. Sometimes, educators rush to “fix it”. By exploring our feelings as a window into our needs, we can build capacity for coping.

There have been difficult moments, especially within this pandemic, when students and families experience grief and anxiety. Sometimes, the only words that I can muster that have any meaning at all comes from Thich Nhat Hanh, “I am here for you.” I have come to realize that my job with children is simply to help them know that they are safe. People build capacity to heal themselves by feeling safety within. I offered space to feel. We slow the pace of the day. We give opportunities to find gratitude for each other in welcoming rituals. There is no guidebook to this work during a pandemic. My job is to be present, to breathe, to be with the person who needs me. Then, my job is to explore my own self-care. One day, I realized I had only eaten two Oreos for dinner. I knew if I continued this way not attending to my own well-being, I would surely get sick. I went to acupuncture weekly, got more exercise, and eventually made my way to therapy myself. There is no shame in healing emotional wounds so that I am empowered to continue to do this work.

The visual that I share with students is a winding road going up a mountain. We called it the “Path to Feeling Better.” When you think about driving in the mountains, the road doesn’t go straight up. There are S-shaped curves that almost seem like you are going backwards, but if you stay on the road you end up finding your way to the summit of the mountain. So it goes with healing. There are days that make you feel like it will never end. As long as you stick to the path, you’ll be ok.

My professional goal right now is to help develop pathways for teacher well-being. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) now lists burnout as a medical diagnosis. I have sat with far too many gifted educators feeling demoralized and disenchanted by the educational system they entered into with such passion. I have created mindfulness support groups to offer space for educators to commune and gain new skills to reconnect with their passions. I have created video engagements on the TeacherCoach platform for educators to gain new skills. It is clear to me that if we support educators’ well-being, then their embodiment of this teaching will translate to student well-being. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Happy teachers change the world.”

We have to now do something to raise up and honor our educators. With each new challenge of the pandemic: technology, synchronous, asynchronous, teaching hybrid, and in-person with no vaccine; teachers have done their very best with very little. I hope that you will find a moment to reach out a thank an educator. Your words of appreciation mean so much.

Burnout: A Teacher's Perspective

By S. Simmons



Editor's note: This is the perspective of one teacher and his/her experience. It is not reflective of all teachers, districts or administrators, nor is it the position of TeacherCoach, but we offer this to both administrators and teachers as possible insight for learning purposes.

The topic of burnout amongst educators has been plaguing the profession for some time now, causing the shelf life of a teaching career to dramatically drop to historic lows. While bureaucracies, budget cuts and standardized testing have all contributed to this, the pandemic situation has sent many teachers over the edge and often into early retirement. We spoke with a teacher with 15 years in (on the condition of anonymity) about the subject of burnout and what many teachers, including her, are feeling right now.

“There was always some feeling of burnout, especially towards the end of the year where you felt like you needed a break, but this is totally different. We were burned out months ago and many of us feel like we’re hanging on by a thread. I hear many teachers talking about whether teaching is right for them and do they want to go back to this. But a lot of people don’t have a choice. They don’t have anything else they can do.”

As a first grade teacher, as with many elementary school teachers, this teacher feels the added of stress of having a student population that requires a lot of help under normal circumstances, let alone trying to figure things out on a Zoom call from home. “We are working on a hybrid model, so I have some kids at home learning virtually and some are in the classroom. I feel like I can’t give proper attention to either group. The kids who are completely remote often don’t feel like they are a part of something, like they are disconnected, so we send packages to them and try to make them feel included. And even in the classroom we are unable to abide by the state guidelines, but no one seems to care. I have 12 students in a room that isn’t large enough to allow for social distancing. They eat breakfast and lunch in the classroom so they take their masks off. With special services teachers on certain days, there are times when there are 15 people in the room and we just have to deal with it.”

Teachers are feeling an array of emotions during this time, many of which can have an adverse affect on their mental health as well as how engaged they feel in their jobs. “Certainly we feel

angry at some of the things going on and disappointed when administrators say they will do something and they don't. We feel upset and frustrated because we don't feel like administrators realize how much is put on us. It's hard for them to see it because they're not doing it day to day. We often feel alone."

This teacher acknowledges that things can vary from school to school depending on how their administrator deals with things. As with anything, some are more proactive and engaged than others. The same can be said about parents. The support, and lack thereof, can make a huge difference in the experience that a teacher has during this time. "My parents are great, but I know a lot of teachers that I talk to who don't have parent support and that just makes things even worse. A lot of parents don't understand how much work goes into teaching online. Our lesson plans have to be made to be effective both in class and through a screen. One of the main problems is there's no standard, and parents get frustrated with that as well. Some kids might get 20 minutes of online teaching and some are getting four hours. There's no oversight or standard to it."

Administrator/principal support will vary by district across the country, and this account is representative of this specific district, although parts of this teacher's experience may resonate with others as well. "Mostly what we get is a 'let me know if you need anything,' without specifically stating ways in which they can or will help. And then we won't hear from them for days. We really have no support from our principal. We once asked for a piece of equipment to help us with online teaching. Another school principal ordered them for their teachers, but our principal never did."

This teacher notes that she is encouraged by the superintendent's hands on approach and interest in how teachers are feeling and what they need, holding Zoom meetings with each grade level, and hopes more support from that level will continue.

"We basically need our principal to have some follow through and get us what we need. And maybe do some things for morale once in a while, like have a raffle or let us wear jeans for a week or acknowledge that we are doing well under these difficult circumstances. That would go a long way. Right now it seems like we do all this stuff and work harder than we've ever had to work and no one cares. It's nice to hear that we are doing a good job once in a while."

This teacher also acknowledged that some wellness activities like meditation were offered during the last PD session and having more things like that would be helpful, "even if it's just on Zoom and we can sit in our classrooms and participate."

"Right now we are very dependent on our direct administrator, the principal. But even with a supportive superintendent, there's a sense of 'what can I even ask for? Nothing is going to change the immediate situation.' But it would be nice to feel supported and at least have someone get us the minimal things we need."

As for the kids, and again, this can widely vary from classroom to classroom and district to district, this teacher notes, "the kids in my class are saving me. Getting to see their faces everyday is what gets me through."

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