

TEACHER

COACH

# Live Well. Teach Well.

*A Mental Wellness & SEL Newsletter*

Issue 2: Mental Health



## Message from the CEO

By Dr. Jared Scherz

The ongoing risk to our physical health has not abated in months. As a result, we are now facing a new and more insidious threat: our psychological resiliency. How long can people be expected to avoid physical contact with others before feeling alone? How long can we sacrifice our freedom and control, without becoming hopeless?

As classroom, school, and district leaders, you also have the added complexity of worrying for those you serve. Each decision is fraught with the anticipation of backlash or remorse. To maintain our stability and not plunge into survival mode where anxiety, depression, and trauma are possible, we need to prioritize our self-care. This means utilizing our internal resources more than ever before. Breathing to stay in the moment and relax our muscles; eating healthy food to improve our resiliency; ensuring reciprocity in our relationships to stay engaged.

Resiliency is a product of our innate fortitude, skill building, opportunities and available resources. When we are solid in all these areas, are aware of our protective mechanisms and actively working to evolve, we can overcome both chronic and acute stress. When we remain in a protective posture for too long, attempting to ride out the storm, lacking the personal growth to gain ground, we run the risk of breakdown.

When internal resources don't seem like enough, it's important to utilize your external supports. TeacherCoach is here to grow your resiliency and reduce the threat of anxiety, depression and other dis-eases that are preventable and treatable with quality support. When psychosocial emotional learning is used to improve educator wellbeing, your resiliency will grow. We honor the trust bestowed upon us by our clients, and continuously work to expand our support to new districts nationwide.



## Educator Wellbeing and Mental Health: Making Sure Teachers Are Well Keeps Children Well

By Kayla LeLeux-LaBarge, Psy.D.

"Teachers have three loves: love of learning, love of learners, and the love of bringing the first two loves together." –Scott Hayden

The classroom has been changing over the course of 2020. And as a result, a generation of children who were already experiencing increasing mental health issues are struggling more than ever to cope with rapid changes brought on by the pandemic and rising expectations.

### **Children Mental Health and SEL**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a compounded negative impact on children's social and emotional well-being. First, it has stripped children of their social routines with friends and classmates. Second, it has created major stressors in the home ranging from job loss/job insecurity, overwork/burnout, economic pressures, and mental, social and emotional wellness struggles for caregivers and parents. Finally, the global grief over the loss of life and the loss of the way life used to be is felt by children and often not understood by children but manifested in social and emotional behaviors that can serve as mental health indicators.

One key indicator that teachers can be quered into is a decrease in academic performance and attendance of their students. Other indicators that may point to social, emotional and mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, in children are:

- Changes in mood and personality (i.e. irritability, acting out, expression of a range of worries and fears, struggling to focus, fidgeting, and withdrawing from social activities)
- Changes in eating and sleeping (i.e. decreased appetite, stomachaches and headaches, expression of a difficulty falling asleep and/or having nightmares, fatigue, and restlessness)

We do not understand the full scope of impact of COVID-19 yet. But we do know that countless studies have shown that building and fortifying social-emotional skills in children can serve as a strong protective factor and can have lifelong positive consequences.

### **SEL and Educator Wellbeing**

But what about the educators responsible for making sure that daily SEL continues to happen for this generation of young people? How can we expect them to show up and teach healthy social, emotional, and coping skills when we know they are feeling burnt out like never before?

Educators are feeling pressure to perform and to maintain the sense of normalcy and routine that school once provided for children. They are wearing more hats than ever before, technology experts being one of them, given the swift change to the virtual classroom in many areas. Virtual learning brings about challenges in observing and managing individual students in the classroom. It requires teachers to turn up their observation and listening skills and tune into the potential mental health indicators so that they address them when they arise. Teachers can be the bridge to a child getting the parental and/or professional support they need during this time.

All of this is having an impact on educators' (and everyone's) brains. The brain is good at handling short-term stress but long-term stress erodes mental functioning, and long-term stress surrounds us on all sides right now. Our economy, the health of friends, family, coworkers, and the world at large are uncertain and at risk. Ambiguity, change, and long-term stress is a kryptonite trifecta for the brain making everything harder, which can feel like wading through quicksand at times.

### **Focus On Educator Wellbeing**

We know that children are experiencing heightened mental health risk factors, and so are the teachers who are trying to make sure they have all the social-emotional skills they need to make it through and succeed. Throughout this school year, it will be important to focus on educator mental health and wellbeing so our teachers can continue showing up and shaping the next generation of young people. Below are some suggestions that can help educators establish a strong wellness routine.

**Attend to your own personal health and wellbeing.** This is a priority so you can continue to meet any challenges and hurdles that may come your way. Take a few minutes at the beginning of each day to check in on how you're feeling. Also, find a relaxing or enjoyable activity to do for a few minutes to get yourself in a good frame of mind to begin the day (e.g. going for a brisk walk, eating a good breakfast, doing something creative, or meditating).

**Reflect, non-judgmentally.** At the end of the day reflect on how the day went, non-judgmentally. Focus on things that went poorly for as long as it takes to learn a lesson from those things, and then allow yourself to let them go. A creative way to do this is to take a piece of scrap paper, write down what went wrong in one corner of the paper, and then write the lesson from it on the other. Then rip the piece of paper, separating the two pieces of information, and throw the piece with what went wrong away, letting go of it. Keep the lesson as a reminder of what you have learned.

**Release some feel-good neurochemicals.** Take time to be grateful and reflect on positive aspects of the day, because it increases the "feel good" chemicals in your brain that motivate you to show up and be the best educator you can be! Keep a daily gratitude journal, if you enjoy writing, that helps you keep track of the things you are most grateful for.

# Sponsor Spotlight



TEACHER'S PENSION

This year has certainly been fraught with an unprecedented number of stress and anxiety triggers. Additionally, the number of unemployed or furloughed workers in this country has affected peoples' state of mental health more than usual. Many of these triggers have directly or indirectly contributed to a large number of people facing an extraordinary financial crisis that most Americans haven't seen in their lifetime.

While a company like Teacher's Pension is used to dealing with clients' financial planning issues and concerns, the current climate has found them dealing with amplified client worries as never before. Even without a pandemic and mass unemployment and uncertainty, financial issues and woes play a huge role in one's mental health. Clayton Fillian, retirement specialist and regional director of Teacher's Pension, has been doing everything in his power to ease his clients' concerns. "Retirement planning is just a piece of financial planning, so overall financial planning seems to take a very large role on the 'middle-to-lower' class' mind. Financial struggles and burdens are a large source of where suicide, mental, verbal and physical abuse related issues stem from.

Retirement planning specifically plays a role in this overall, but I feel like the general topic of personal finance is delicate and the trigger for many. I find that with many clients that I meet, if they are in a financial struggle, retirement is not in the forefront of their minds; it's paying the bills for today that consumes their energy. If I were to gauge my conversations with middle class folks who are not struggling and getting by, retirement goals are a worry, but still so many don't find the inertia to take action. Action means education. Finding out more about what they need to do to begin squaring up for today and steps for planning their futures. Many people I've met have told me they lose so much sleep at night from worrying over their finances. Operating on lack of sleep is cyclical; you don't perform well tired and worry even more. Financial and retirement planning play heavy tolls on my clients' mental health, in my opinion.

Fillian goes a step further and explains, "We are taking unprecedented steps to ease our client's minds, like partnering with firms like TeacherCoach. When the masses are clearly socially, emotionally and mentally distressed, finance worries and concerns are just a part of our clients overall wellbeing. Being topic experts in the financial wellness field, we looked for partnerships to cover the bases we are not well versed in, and that is where TeacherCoach came in to play. Through networking, I was introduced to Dr. Scherz and his amazing team at TeacherCoach. The level of support that they provide our clients and the nation's most valuable 'essential' employees is nothing short of a miracle in this dyer time of

need. With the terrific ecosystem covering Social, Emotional, Mental & Financial wellbeing that Dr. Scherz and CEO of Teacher's Pension Erik NeVille have developed is the all-encompassing package our clients need right now. Partnering with TeacherCoach has been the biggest step we've taken towards helping our clients overall wellbeing, but we also have taken small measures within our practice to gear the education around the pandemic and fill the clients in on the necessary knowledge as it relates to finance, with such topics as the C.A.R.E.S Act and Secure Act.”

Additionally, the controversial school opening/virtual learning climate in this country has triggered a crisis in education that has never been seen before. Older teachers with years left in their career are opting for early retirements rather than potentially risking their physical health teaching in the classroom at schools that have opted to open or their mental health dealing with the stresses and frustrations of virtual teaching. Fillian explains, “Many teachers, whether qualified to retire or not, are looking to leave their industry due to some of the wild working conditions of our current times.

It is a rather big decision for these folks to have to give up their careers because the alternative is to put their lives on the line entering those schools. It has dramatically affected our business as we operate directly within this niche market of retirement planning, the 403b space. Now that we are no longer allowed to enter the schools and in most cases neither are the faculty, our working model has had to directly change with it. Going from agents/advisors working in the field to now only operating virtually has had its challenges, but beyond just the technology. There are many other levels or facets to the delivery of our education and how it's received that also had to be altered. Meaning, if I'm in front of you, teaching you about financial planning, perhaps you the client pick up on my gestures, or laugh along with me during some of my corny jokes; that has all now changed while operating 'like a robot' behind these screens. I've definitely had to really alter my presentation model and performance with the advisor mind at heart, rather than be myself in person where folks can pick up the organic connection we might have between us. We teach financial literacy to teachers (and staff), so just like teachers have had to alter their curriculum and change their delivery methods and strategies, we have to also. Only good news with this pandemic, is that people are definitely more hyper-sensitive to their surroundings and worried about their futures, whether financial futures, mental, physical and their overall wellbeing heading into this unpredictable future, so that has pushed many clients over-the-edge to come speak with us as advisors, where in the past these particular clients may not have felt the urgency to come see us.”

While it may not be what first comes to mind, companies like Teacher's Pension are playing a growing and paramount role in educators' financial and mental wellbeing during these unprecedented times. Planning ahead may well be just what people need to ease the struggles being dealt with during these present times.

# Star District



While many may think of the beach and sea air as relaxing and stress relieving on their own, the Ocean City School District takes the health and wellness of its educational community to the next level. The district's website, has its own Health and Wellness page with resources for teachers, parents and students to deal with the daily stresses of life, as well as specific issues such as grief, bullying, mental health, substance abuse, suicide prevention and a wellness center.

The current situation regarding Covid-19 and schools has put an added burden on school districts throughout the country regarding the mental health impact it is taking on educators, students and parents. Matthew Carey, director of student services for OCS D discusses the innovative measures their district is taking to help their community. "Ocean City has taken our wellness initiative to the virtual platform. We now offer the same type of care and services through our virtual wellness room. This is an extension of the wellness rooms at each of our schools. The virtual wellness center offers students the opportunity to connect with a social worker, school nurse or SAC while they are home as either part of their hybrid schedule or if they have chosen to participate in the 100% virtual academy."

So often, addressing mental health issues within a school district is focused on the students, which of course is very important. But during these unprecedented times, where teachers are being thrown into new and untested teaching environments, often fraught with technological issues, the mental health of teachers has had to take a more central focus as well. Carey explains, "It is important not to overlook the mental health needs of the teachers/staff. We have made staff health and wellness a priority as well this year. We are focusing on both the mental and physical health of our staff."

Carey confirms that technological obstacles are one of the greatest challenges that teachers are facing in this new educational and mostly virtual model. "There are a lot of challenges, but I would say the most challenging is the technology gap some of our families are experiencing. There is definitely an equity gap when it comes to the ability to connect. There is also a gap in educator's abilities to use the virtual teaching platform. Our district has made this a professional development priority. Another challenge is understanding the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on families. This is an on-going challenge, but one that has presented a new set of social and emotional challenges for our students and their families."

One of the most controversial topics of conversation in this country is whether or not to open schools fully despite an inevitable increase in Covid-19 cases. Arguments about whether the mental, physical and academic consequences of

remaining virtual outweigh the health consequences of the virus itself have been fueling some heated discussions nationwide. Certainly the Ocean City School District has considered all of its options and their consequences carefully, and including the community in the process. “We have done multiple surveys of our students, families and staff throughout the pandemic. We have also had parents and community members on our focus groups as part of our return to school plan for the district. There is so much residual impact from the Pandemic and each family has their own unique set of circumstances to deal with as a result. Additionally, we have not seen the full impact as the economic fallout continues as a result of our shore economy being shut down for so long.

Regarding the mental health aspect, Carey adds, “We are focusing on mental health and wellness, suicide prevention and physical health. We are also taking proactive steps to address drug and alcohol abuse as those numbers in our society are rising as a result of the Pandemic.”

It is everyone’s hope that a sense of normalcy returns sooner than later before the economic, academic and emotional damage becomes irreversible. Districts like Ocean City are setting an example for making the best of a bad situation.