

Preventing Burnout Part I

Identifying the Problem

Even newly enrolling parents who knew very little about the school fought to have their child in her class, so when the news came that she was retiring ‘early’, reverberations through the community were felt. The wave of disappointment and concern blanketed the town like a tropical island storm, dissipating quickly after its arrival. Mrs. D., who taught Kindergarten in our suburban south Jersey school in three different decades would no longer shape the experience of first time students and while that sadness passed, a larger storm cell was moving in.

In spite of her age, Mrs. D. had as much energy as any first-year teacher, showing no outward signs of distress. People joked that the six year olds needed a nap at the end of the day more than she did. So why did this veteran teacher with more combined accolades retire prematurely and could something have been done to prevent it?

Whether you are a veteran educator like Mrs. D., plagued with continuous thoughts about leaving the profession or one of the nearly 20% of new teachers who don’t make it to year five, there are some important questions we need to answer about the profession as a whole, which is why teacher burnout is so prominent (Reference #1).

What impact does it have that approximately 92.4% of teachers spend their own money on their students or classrooms (Reference #2)? How are teachers impacted by the fact they work on average, 10 hours per day and 52 hours per week (Reference #3)? Is it a coincidence that teachers are one of the unhealthiest professions, second in the professional category of the nearly 70% of overweight Americans (Reference #4)? Does mental health play a role in the problem of burnout, with more than more than two out of five (43.9%) teachers having suffered from stress related illnesses (Reference #5)?

With fewer teachers entering the profession and over half of teachers (55.7%) having considered leaving the profession because of the stress of teaching, up by 5% since 2006, we have more questions than answers which may not be solved at the systems level, although this insight too may be valuable (Reference #6). Our counterparts in Finland and Singapore, for instance get more prep time, fewer classroom hours, and more collaboration opportunities than here in the U.S.. Until these deeper institutional issues are addressed, we need to take wellness into our own hands to preserve our country’s most precious natural resource?

While lobbyists fight for better wages, reduced testing, and less burdens on our teachers, it’s imperative we do our part in alleviating the insipid despair that turns into burnout. While not ignoring the systems level issues that impact job satisfaction, we must turn our attention to increasing volition about our day to day wellness. This series takes us through a range of self-care insights to prevent stress from dissipating our passion.

In part two of this series, we will look at one of the least understood causes of burnout, which is how we deal with distress. Using a continuum of avoiding pain versus seeking pleasure, we will explore what we can do to 'restore our well'. In part three, we will examine the way we adapt to change. The greater our adaptability the more likely we will become resilient. In part four, we will introduce the concept of mindfulness and how it applies to teaching. In the final part five, we explore the power of authenticity. Most people don't recognize how much stress is caused by how we protect others more than ourselves. As natural caregivers, we limit our own needs getting met in the service of others.

Note: This paper created for Plymouth Rock Teacher's Insurance: <http://nj-teachers.com/>

References

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