

2015-2016 WTU Teacher Leaders Program

A Poisoned Profession?

Is the Stress of Working in DC Public Schools Killing Educators from the Inside Out?

-Sarah Elwell, School Librarian, McKinley Technology High School

RATIONALE

Nationally, 1 in 5 educators leave the profession in the first year; 3 in 5 leave during the first five years. In DC Public Schools, we lose 25% of our educators every year. With the high turnover rate in DC Public Schools and with the anecdotal data that abounds regarding high stress levels and low levels of support, I sought to explore the undercurrent issue of educator wellness in DC Public Schools by surveying an anonymous cross-section that represents different wards, levels, subjects and number of years as an educator. Being an educator was once a sustainable, lifelong career, but recent studies have shown that educators are leaving the field in droves. New and more taxing demands have made it increasingly difficult for educators to achieve work-life balance and it is my goal that this action research project will open an honest dialogue about educator mental and physical health as well as lead to a focus on interventions, wraparound services and pilot programs to help educators be the best they can be by creating a healthy balance among individual, family and professional responsibilities.

LITERATURE

The literature designates several root causes of the high stress of educators as: incongruence between educators' expectations for teaching and the actual daily work, standardized testing, working conditions (violence, dilapidated buildings, environmental hazards), unrealistic expectations, fewer resources, bureaucracy, lack of adequate respect and compensation, poor student behavior, lack of administrative support, unrealistic demands of parents, lack of teacher voice in policy-making, lack of trust, high levels of emotional work, and inadequate training or PD for new initiatives. There is a fiscal cost to the high level of stress and burnout that often leads to educators leaving the profession: the national estimate is between \$5-7 billion. But beyond this fiduciary impact, there is the larger issue of how stress impacts school climate and student achievement. "Chronic stress can interfere with teachers' ability to create the supportive, challenging, and well-managed classrooms that students need in order to learn" (Skinner & Beers 2014).

RESEARCH DESIGN & PROCESS

I created a 26 item electronic survey and emailed it to educators throughout DC Public Schools. The educators to whom I sent the survey were people with whom I had interacted in a class, PD or program to produce what is close to a randomized sample. I assured potential respondents that their answers would be anonymous and removed most items that would infringe on anonymity but may have been helpful in data analysis such as school name, race, and age. I avoided whole school lists so that one school was not predominantly represented in the data set. The questions asked pertained to nutrition, sleep and exercise habits as well as relationships and levels of stress and support. I received 58 completed surveys from 50 teachers, 6 librarians, and 2 other educators representing all wards, subjects, grade levels and 1-30 years of experience.

DATA

On the survey, educators indicated an average stress level of 3.7 out of 5. There is a correlation between the perceived level of stress and how supported/respected educators feel. The main source of support for those who responded is at the school-level (76%) and by the WTU (45%). Of those who feel supported, 24% feel supported by DCPS and 18% feel supported by OSSE. The vast majority of educators get 5-6 hours of sleep each night, 17% skip lunch more than 9 times each month and 41% of educators

often forego using the bathroom because they are too busy. 50% of those surveyed have lost friends or other important relationships since beginning teaching. 71% of those surveyed have given up an activity they loved since beginning teaching. 41% of respondents have sought medical treatment for one or more job-related conditions: stress, high blood pressure, weight gain, depression, hair loss, mental illness and insomnia. 31% of respondents plan to stay in their current position for 20+ years.

ANALYSIS

Factors such as marital status, number of children, gender, number of years teaching, and being in a 40/40 school did not substantially impact the overall stress level. Despite an average stress level of 3.7 out of 5, 41.4% of educators surveyed go into work each day happy and optimistic. Only 31.1% characterize their mood as anxiety or dread. Most educators are not getting the 7-9 hours of sleep recommended by the Mayo Clinic for adults to operate at their full potential. Workplace demands influence whether educators take care of essential needs such as bathroom breaks, meals, doctor and dental checkups; educators often do not take off even when sick. The percentage of educators who have given up important relationships and activities they love since they began teaching is startling and must be addressed. Teachers overwhelmingly do not feel supported by neither DC Public Schools nor the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. In order to address educator health and wellness as well increase longevity of effective educators, we must address the direct correlation between perceived levels of both respect and support and overall stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School Level: Innovative scheduling to create more planning and collaborative grading time, hospitality committee and staff events/celebrations, smaller class sizes, educator-only meditation/yoga/exercise sessions, 1-2 substitutes on site everyday, re-envision, revitalize and revamp educators' lounge concept, setting limits, Wellness Resource Collection in School Library

System Level: Mindfulness Professional Development, Wraparound services for students and educators, Educator Meet-Ups, Health and Wellness Challenges, Free gym access (with child care), organized and easy to implement curriculum, more opportunities for growth and development as teacher leaders, monthly afternoon release time, semester or full year sabbaticals, Wellness Ambassador Programs

National Policy: Mandatory Mentoring Program, Health/Wellness Check Up Incentives, Home Purchase/Renters Assistance for educators to be closer to the schools in which they work, Free or Reduced Price Child Care, national media campaign showing respect of educators, establish a health and wellness standard for the school building environment

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