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Social and Emotional Supports for Educators During and After the Pandemic

By Megan Ferren   July 20, 2021

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 educators have faced unique challenges and tremendous pressure. From quickly adapting to remote learning to balancing the impacts of the pandemic on their personal lives, the past year has seen educators particularly overwhelmed with stress, trauma, and burnout.[1] Although those in the education sphere have engaged in a great deal of discussion about the best way to provide social and emotional supports to students during and after the pandemic, it is essential that the social and emotional needs of educators are also part of the conversation, especially since educators are often the individuals most likely to provide initial supports to students.

In spring and summer of 2020, organizations including the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence published resources[2] and recommendations[3] to help educators process the stress of remote learning and adjust to the "new normal." Now that the transition back to the classroom has begun and federal relief funds from the American Rescue Plan are flowing to public K-12 districts,[4] schools and districts must renew their focus on how to prioritize social and emotional supports for educators.

SEL training would help teachers balance the stressors of their jobs

While the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for educators, they have long been familiar with high levels of stress and dissatisfaction in their jobs. According to a report from the Learning Policy Institute, about two-thirds of teachers who leave their position each year do so for reasons other than retirement, including dissatisfaction with testing and accountability pressures, lack of administrative support, and dissatisfaction with the teaching career and working conditions.[6] A 2017 survey on teachers' emotions by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that the top five emotions teachers reported were "frustrated, overwhelmed, stressed, tired, and happy."[7] In a 2018 study, 85 percent of teachers said that a lack of work-life balance was affecting their ability to teach.[8]

Defining SEL

CASEL defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as:
the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.[5]

Furthermore, data from the 2012-13 school year found that turnover rates are 50 percent higher for teachers in Title I schools—where children from low-income families comprise at least 40 percent of total enrollment—and 70 percent higher for teachers in schools serving the largest concentrations of students of color.[9] Teachers who are BIPOC also had higher turnover rates than white teachers and were more likely to work in communities with lower socioeconomic statuses.[10] These educators are also more likely to work in schools with weaker professional supports and leadership.[11] Black teachers in particular have almost twice the turnover rate as non-Black teachers.[12] According to the Learning Policy Institute report, Black educators who left the profession were more likely to cite dissatisfaction with their salaries, lack of resources, and worries about job security and accountability measures than they were to cite personal or family reasons.[13] In addition to addressing the lack of funding and structural disparities in schools that disproportionately affect educators who are BIPOC, making comprehensive adult SEL training available would provide all educators with opportunities to learn to balance the common social and emotional stressors they face in their profession.

Yet comprehensive SEL training for educators is currently not widely available. All states include some SEL competency training for teachers in their certification requirements.[14] But while most required courses in colleges of education include information on social awareness and responsible decision-making competencies, fewer than 10 percent include training on other key aspects of SEL such as self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills.[15] Training in the learning context—which includes training on classroom management, schoolwide coordination, and supportive school-family-community partnerships—often focuses on a negative approach, such as how to discipline student misbehavior, rather than a positive approach, such as how to create supportive teacher-student relationships.[16]

Moreover, educators need continued training once they enter the classroom, but such opportunities are often not comprehensive—or even available. Research from 2016 found that although 87 percent of educators recognized the importance of SEL, fewer than half reported being given resources, training, or professional development in adult SEL.[17] An EdWeek Research Center survey found that only 29 percent of teachers said they received ongoing training in SEL throughout the school year, and one-fifth said they never receive opportunities in their job to "reflect upon and improve their own social-emotional skills."[18]

Despite not having sufficient professional opportunities to develop their own SEL skills, however, teachers are often called upon to help their students develop SEL. Learning SEL skills is a critical part of students' K-12 education; it not only improves student behavior but also improves student outcomes and school climate.[19] This is especially important given the fact that school psychologists, who are more likely to be prepared to provide social and emotional support to students, are overwhelmed: While roughly 30

percent of students who receive mental health services do so through school,[20] school psychologists are responsible for an average of 1,200 students each—nearly double the recommended number.[21] In a 2017 CASEL survey, 70 percent of school principals said they expect all teachers in their school to teach social and emotional skills to students.[22] A 2019 Education Week survey found that 78 percent of teachers felt that part of their job was to help students develop strong SEL skills, but only 40 percent felt they had adequate solutions and strategies to do so.[23] And while fewer than half of elementary and secondary school teachers in a RAND Corporation survey agreed with the statement "professionals other than myself have primary responsibility for my students' social and emotional needs,"[24] in a different RAND survey, educators cited a lack of time, lack of strategies to incorporate SEL into curriculum, and lack of engagement from parents and families as barriers to providing SEL to their students effectively.[25]

Pandemic-related stressors have taken a toll on educators

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated stressful working conditions and made the need to address shortcomings in SEL training more pressing. For most educators, the transition to virtual instruction was a completely new experience and one that caused a lot of stress. They had no advance notice, no or hastily prepared training, and little support from unprepared schools and districts as they attempted to reinvent their profession in spring of 2020.[26] One survey of teachers found that prior to the pandemic, 1 in 7 had not used digital media services to teach.[27] Another survey found that out of 106 districts analyzed, just over half provided professional development over the summer of 2020 to prepare teachers for remote learning in the new school year,[28] even though 74 percent of the country's 100 largest districts started the school year in a remote learning-only model.[29]

While navigating the stress of relearning how to teach, educators were also facing threats of layoffs and budget cuts. Early in the pandemic, researchers predicted widespread teacher layoffs like those that occurred after the Great Recession in 2008.[30] As of now, it seems that the influx of federal relief funds has prevented mass layoffs, but educators faced uncertainty for months before those dollars were delivered.[31] As the 2020-21 school year began, that stress was compounded by pressure to return to the classroom before many educators felt it was safe to do so.[32] Educators were thrust into conflicts with their schools, school districts, students, and communities over reopening and other safety measures,[33] and those who did have to return to in-person instruction faced the threat of contracting COVID-19.

These new pandemic-related stressors took their toll. Nearly half of public school teachers who quit their jobs after February 2020 did so because of the pandemic, citing longer hours and working an average of 52 hours per week, having to navigate the remote environment, and experiencing technical problems.[34] The majority of those who left their position took other jobs with less or about equal pay, and 3 in 10 took jobs with no health insurance or retirement benefits.[35] A March 2020 survey conducted by Phi Delta Kappa found that only 3 percent of teachers felt that administrators were addressing their social and emotional needs during remote learning.[36]

By October 2020, one-quarter of teachers said they were likely to leave the profession before the end of the school year, a majority of whom had not planned on leaving prior to the pandemic.[37] It is not yet clear if this came to pass.

The effects of the pandemic on educators' professional lives have been exacerbated by the stress and trauma they experience in their personal lives. Educators have not been exempt from losing loved ones and colleagues to COVID-19, and members of BIPOC communities have been disproportionately affected, as they are more likely to be exposed to, contract, and die from the virus.[38] As of June 2021, American Indian or Alaska Native individuals were 2.4 times more likely than white individuals to die from the virus, and Black individuals and Hispanic or Latino individuals were 2 and 2.3 times more likely to die, respectively.[39] Yet having the space and time to grieve and process loss was a luxury that many people were not afforded this past year. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted, "Grieving the loss of a loved one while coping with the fear and anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be especially overwhelming."[40]

In the midst of the pandemic, Black people in the United States were also experiencing trauma from the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others.[41] Black educators faced unique pressures: While processing these events on a personal level, they were often put on the spot to develop lesson plans around police violence and share their feelings about race with colleagues from different backgrounds, forcing them to relive the events.[42] This has resulted in educators experiencing "racial battle fatigue," defined as "a systemic, race-related, repetitive stress injury."[43] Put more plainly, persistent microaggressions and discrimination against Black people and other marginalized groups can cause them "stress, anxiety, frustration, anger and even physical symptoms."[44] Black educators need SEL training and supports to process the effects of these events and respond to future developments in the fight for racial justice.

Similarly, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) educators have confronted a rise in anti-AAPI hate crimes throughout the pandemic. A report analyzing hate crime data from the first quarter of 2021 across 15 major U.S. cities found that hate crimes rose by 169 percent in the first quarter of 2021 compared with the same time period in 2020.[45] This tragically manifested in the Atlanta spa shootings in March 2021, in which eight people, including six women of Asian descent, were murdered.[46] Like their Black co-workers, AAPI educators must process these events not only in their personal lives but also in their professional ones.

Educators from the Latinx, American Indian and Alaska Native, and other communities likewise have faced their own unique challenges during the pandemic, such as the disproportionate impacts of the digital divide,[47] pandemic-induced economic recession,[48] and health outcomes of the virus.[49] For example, Latina workers experienced an unemployment rate of 20.1 percent in April 2020—the highest unemployment rate of any racial and ethnic and gender group during the pandemic-induced recession.[50] Therefore,

a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting educators who are BIPOC is not sufficient. Educators from different racial and ethnic backgrounds have been affected by the pandemic and racial justice events in different ways, so they will need specialized supports.

SEL supports for educators benefit school communities

Providing SEL supports for educators has also been shown to benefit students and school communities. Research by Pennsylvania State University found that teachers who developed their SEL skills improved both their own well-being and the social, emotional, and academic development of their students.[51] On the other hand, research from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that teachers who were required to teach SEL without being provided professional opportunities to develop their own SEL skills worsened the skills of their students.[52] This is especially important given that research has shown that SEL improves students' academic achievement by an average of 11 percentile points;[53] helps students develop skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making;[54] and decreases the likelihood that students will live in public housing and receive public assistance after graduating, have interactions with police before adulthood, or ever spend time in a detention facility.[55] In July 2020, the Center for American Progress published its recommendations for providing social and emotional supports to students who are Black, Indigenous, and other non-Black people of color (BIPOC).[56]

Similarly, schools with leaders who have strong personal SEL skills and who invest in those of their educators have better climates. Research has found that school leaders who have strong social and emotional competencies positively affect teacher effectiveness and school climate.[57] Providing educators with SEL supports results in lower levels of stress among the workforce, improved employee attendance, increased ability to model positive emotions for students, and lower levels of turnover.[58] As school districts look to recover from the pandemic, investing in the SEL skills of their workforces will be essential.

Recommendations

School districts and individual schools should invest some of the federal relief funds they receive from the American Rescue Plan in efforts to establish norms, practices, and resources that support educators' social and emotional needs. These should both address immediate concerns and be sustainable in the long term. The U.S. Department of Education has affirmed that funds can and should be used to support educators' social and emotional needs in the "Supporting Educator and Staff Stability and Well-Being" section of Volume 2 of its COVID-19 handbook.[59] Districts should employ multiple strategies and targeted supports to ensure that all educators' unique needs are being met.

Building- and school-level supports

- School staff should be included in any discussions and plans that school districts have around reopening. Giving staff the latest information will help reduce their anxiety and uncertainty and give them a chance to address outstanding concerns from the 2020-21 school year.

- Districts and schools should survey their educators at the start of the school year to identify what SEL supports and programs they would find most helpful. Districts and schools should conduct regular check-ins and surveys on these measures throughout the school year to gauge what is and is not working. Schools should also build time into staff meetings and professional development days, or establish other regular check points throughout the year, to discuss best practices for mental health, school norms, and new SEL opportunities and resources.

- Furthermore, educators should be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities to develop their SEL skills and learn how to best use those skills to provide SEL supports to their students. Districts could work with external partners to provide opportunities to staff from marginalized backgrounds who may benefit from more individualized trainings, as well as offer training on trauma-informed practices to benefit themselves and their students. Central office staff and district leadership should also be included in these trainings.

- Finally, districts should use American Rescue Plan funds to prevent layoffs, raise teacher pay, and hire additional support staff. This will help relieve educators' stress and reduce their workloads.

Individual and opt-In supports

- Schools should help organize peer mentorship programs or similar opportunities that allow educators to establish support networks at school. They may want to consider affinity groups where educators who are BIPOC can choose to share their unique experiences with peers.[60]

- School districts should also offer self-care and wellness programs for staff and make sure they are aware of current and upcoming offerings. They should provide staff with resources to assess their self-care and well-being,[61] as well as offer on-site counseling. They may even choose to develop staff well-being toolkits.[62] Schools should also assist educators in establishing a set of norms and expectations that prioritize their social and emotional needs. This may include policies such as limiting school communications outside of school hours or establishing a schoolwide "emotional intelligence charter."[63]

Conclusion

Educators have gone above and beyond during the pandemic, leaving many burnt out and with little time to process the events of the past year. The influx of federal relief funds presents a unique opportunity to transform how educators are supported in their profession, not just during the recovery but also in the long term. In order to ensure that the education system is able to fully recover from the impacts of the pandemic, it is critical that schools and districts invest in their educators, especially in their social and emotional health.

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