



## WORKING WELL BRIEF

# Organizational Initiatives and Policies to Support Educator Well-Being

With the K–12 teacher pipeline stalling, we are at a consequential juncture to attend to educators’<sup>a</sup> stress and well-being.<sup>1</sup> Teachers leave the profession for a variety of reasons, including workload, student behavior, unpreparedness for new job responsibilities, and personal stress, all factors impacting educator well-being.<sup>2</sup> Educator well-being is associated with child and student wellness and contributes to healthy school climates, lower rates of absenteeism for students and staff, and greater workplace satisfaction.<sup>3,4</sup> Recent calls by the U.S. Department of Education encourage assessment of staff well-being with attention to individual and organizational elements that inform wellness.<sup>5</sup> Drawing upon an ecological systems framework, along with the 5Essentials Framework that informs student and teachers’ perceptions of schools’ organizational conditions, this brief highlights how staff stress and well-being is situated within school-based systems and how current national, state, and local partnerships and tools can support educator and organizational well-being.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Setting the Stage

Despite an increased concern for educator well-being after the pandemic, stress and burden has long been associated with the teaching profession.<sup>8</sup> Lever and colleagues highlight a multitude of factors contributing to the high rates of stress and burnout in the education field, including, but not limited to, high-stakes testing, large class sizes, student behavioral challenges, increased responsibility for others, limited autonomy, perceived devaluing of and lack of recognition for work, inadequate resources, competing demands in workload, poor physical space, heightened administrative tasks, and a gap between preservice training expectations and in-service work experiences.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>a</sup> We use the term “educators” in this brief to be more inclusive of the adults who work with students; however, most research on well-being focuses on classroom teachers.

Although these stressors also affected our schools before the pandemic, the U.S. educational system continues to face unprecedented challenges in recovery from the pandemic, resulting in extensions to teachers' workload, responsibilities and tasks for which they are often unprepared, and a highly novice workforce. Related stressors, such as testing pressures, poor compensation, declining enrollment, unfilled job openings, increased student behavioral issues, and instructional tensions regarding beliefs about appropriate course content, also continue to challenge our educational systems.<sup>10,11</sup>

Given these working conditions, it is not surprising that Gallup found that 44% of K–12 teachers report feeling burned out “very often” or “always”—one of the highest rates across United States workforces.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) highlights that 27% of educators report symptoms of clinical depression and 37% report symptoms of anxiety.<sup>13</sup> Twice as many educators, in comparison to other working professions, report job-related stress, burnout, and perceived inadequacy to cope with job-related stress.<sup>14</sup> Along with teachers, principals also are more likely than other adult workers to report burnout and symptoms of depression, and are also less likely to say that they feel resilient (that they can “bounce back” when bad things happen).<sup>15</sup> These negative impacts on well-being are even more profound for educators of color, who report higher levels of depression than their White educator colleagues, and specifically for Hispanic or Latine teachers, who are more likely to report poor well-being overall.<sup>16,17</sup> Reasons for this added burden and stress for our teachers of color potentially align with unique asks of the job, such as being asked to translate, functioning as a disciplinarian, or partaking in additional roles when racial incidents occur. Among teachers of color, 41% indicated they were likely to leave their job before the end of the 2021–22 school year, compared with 31% of White teachers.<sup>18</sup>

The growing teacher shortage and exacerbated youth mental health crisis increase the burden on current educators.<sup>19,20,21</sup> Specifically, in the United States, K–12 educators have become frontline workers in supporting the academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs of students, despite reports of feeling underprepared in evidence-based knowledge and skills to effectively intervene with students in distress, resulting in heightened feelings of stress and burnout due to added job demands.<sup>22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29</sup> Research documents that while supportive school climates are linked to better educator well-being and a decreased likelihood of intentions to leave, school-based wellness resources are inadequate. Specifically, the 2024 State of the Teacher Project found that three-quarters of teachers reported access to at least one type of well-being or mental health support in 2023, but only slightly more than half said these supports were adequate.<sup>30</sup>

As stress continues to take a formidable toll on teachers, leaders, and school staff, affecting student learning, educators' physical and mental health, engagement, and intention to stay in their jobs, we need to address working conditions linked to poor well-being, as they could influence staff retention. When working conditions were considered, most teachers and principals reported coping well with their job-related stress and reported intending to stay in their current job.<sup>31</sup>

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# Operationalizing Educator Well-Being

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Educator well-being can be defined as including three core areas:

1. **Individual (or personal) well-being** is a state of feeling satisfied and fulfilled, and having a sense of meaning or purpose.
2. **Organizational well-being** is an organization's efforts to promote and maintain physical, psychological, and social health for all employees.<sup>32</sup> More than self-care, organizational well-being considers the physical and emotional environment, school climate, daily experiences, and alignment of preferences and values.
3. **Professional quality of life** is what one feels in relation to their work. One's professional quality of life is measured across three aspects—compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress.
  - **Compassion satisfaction** is the pleasure one derives from being able to do one's work well.
  - **Burnout** refers to the slow onset of feelings of hopelessness, frustration, anger, and exhaustion related to work.<sup>33</sup> While burnout reflects the toll of high workloads, compassion fatigue reflects the emotional and psychological toll of taking care of others.<sup>34</sup>
  - **Secondary traumatic stress** references feelings of fear in association to work-related primary or secondary trauma.

Educator well-being supports often focus on actions the individual can take, but supporting well-being at an organizational level is critical for positive, sustained change.

## Organizational Initiatives and Policies to Support Educator Well-Being

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Although there is extensive research on the importance of educator well-being, research is limited on how to effectively make improvements. Despite these limits, since educator well-being is so important and because educators are not solely responsible for their well-being given the breadth of factors that affect well-being, as the field builds an evidence base, federal agencies, states, districts, and schools are actively working to implement organizational initiatives and policies to support educator well-being. Each plays a different role aligned with the same goal.

### National Initiatives to Support Educator Well-Being

The U.S. Department of Education has been funding research, connecting with researchers and practitioners to better understand the issues, hosting webinars, and developing supportive products for states, districts, and schools, including this brief. The CDC also introduced the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, a framework for addressing health in schools globally, with particular emphasis on the ecological interplay of "the role of the community in supporting the school, the connections between health and academic achievement and the importance of evidence-based school policies and practices."<sup>35</sup> A central focus of the WSCC framework is school system improvement across both student learning and organizational health in coordination of practice, process, and policy within 10 domains—domain 8 is focused on employee wellness.

## State Initiatives and Policies to Support Educator Well-Being

In [\*Moving Beyond Self-Care: Practice and Policy Conditions to Support Educator Wellbeing\*](#), the Council of Chief State School Officers suggests that state policy makers and education leaders consider promoting educator well-being by (1) identifying a systemwide definition of educator well-being that can guide policies and initiatives, (2) creating a framework or theory of action that guides decision making, (3) collecting data on educator perceptions of well-being, (4) inviting educators to support the development of well-being initiatives, (5) centering well-being in recruitment, onboarding, and retention efforts, and (6) providing sustainable resources and support for educator well-being.<sup>36</sup> Some states have indeed started to implement organizational initiatives and/or enacted policies to address educator well-being directly.



The National Association of State Boards of Education’s [state policy database](#) highlights policies states have enacted related to staff wellness programs. Employee wellness programs tend to address stress management, substance abuse, health assessment, and staff physical activity.

- The Washington, DC, Office of State Superintendent of Education has developed a [framework](#) that lays out the working conditions that affect educator well-being and tiers for supporting a whole school approach for educator well-being, along with a [resource](#) for schools to support implementation.
- [Rhode Island](#) has a policy that requires staff wellness programs, and Mississippi offers substance abuse prevention training while also calling for committees on responsible care, control, and management of employee health.<sup>37</sup>
- State-level resources, such as those in [Nevada](#) and [Colorado](#), address aspects of well-being such as tobacco-free environments, breast feeding, healthy food, and physical activity.
- The state of [Washington’s Substitute House Bill 1363](#) focuses on secondary trauma and compassion fatigue for educators by requiring districts to develop resources and policies in schools.<sup>38</sup>

## District Initiatives and Policies to Support Educator Well-Being

At the district level, given the importance of the local context and considerations, districts establish more customized organizational approaches to support educator well-being. District initiatives and policies tend to address training, leave policies, schedules, and individual and group supports.

- [Terrell Independent School District](#) in Terrell, Texas, reduced its work week to four days.
- [Desert Sands Unified School District](#) in La Quinta, California, created wellness monthly calendars.
- [Charles County Public Schools](#) in Maryland increased mental health staffing and started implementing programs to meet educators’ social-emotional needs.
- [Partnerships to Uplift Communities Schools](#), a charter school in Southern California, offers online support groups whose activities include mindfulness exercises and meditation.
- [Sheboygan Area School District](#) has developed a comprehensive wellness program.
- [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) has a wellness policy that promotes the well-being of staff and students.

## School Efforts to Support Educator Well-Being

At the school level, leadership often focuses on promoting educator well-being by implementing state or district policies and initiatives or developing similar efforts independently. **To translate those state and/or district policies and initiatives into practice locally or when developing their own efforts, actively engaging school staff in the conversation about and**

**Ideally, over time, leaders and administrators will implement organizational initiatives and policies that fit their local contexts in partnership with educators to create a sense of wellness, despite the exterior stress placed on the education system.**

**development of the wellness initiatives, resources, and training is consequential.** Educators ultimately are those affected most by what is enacted and the use of these organizational initiatives and policies. Often their voices and engagement remain on the periphery though, which can lead to frustration (i.e., the district or school thinks it is helping, but educators do not find the effort helpful). Ideally, over time, leaders and administrators will implement organizational initiatives and policies that fit their local contexts in partnership with educators to create a sense of wellness, despite the exterior stress placed on the education system.

To identify efforts schools can undertake to improve educator well-being, the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) convened Research to Practice Roundtables made up of research and practitioner experts from across the country to share insights based on their work and offer recommendations for improving educator well-being—[generally](#), to support [equity](#), and to support [recruitment and retention](#)—including strategies on how to engage educators in the improvement process. (See Exhibit 1 for examples.)

### Exhibit 1: Strategies on How Schools Can Engage Educators in the Well-Being Improvement Process Based on Research to Practice Roundtables

General	Support Equity	Support Recruitment and Retention
Use a holistic approach to reach all educators, on all levels.	Enact systemic change to create conditions in schools that are supportive of equity and well-being.	Establish a positive culture among educators.
Create opportunities for dialogue between and among educators and administrators.	Establish affinity groups within districts for diverse racial and cultural educators.	Offer hope and use a strengths-based approach.
Empower emotional awareness and cultural competence.	Offer DEIA training and professional development opportunities.	Learn from other schools' efforts in recruitment and retention.
Focus on efficiency with low-maintenance, high-yield practices.	Conduct relational work to help every educator feel seen and heard.	Foster a school environment that supports diverse educators to give them a sense of belonging.
Create intentional spaces for educators to take a break.		Use low-maintenance, high-yield strategies to improve teaching conditions.
Focus on well-being early, before educators ever walk into the classroom.		

## Assessments and Progress Monitoring That Support Educator Well-Being

In addition to speaking with educators as organizational initiatives and policies are developed and implemented, systematically assessing educator well-being is critical. Such assessments can identify areas of strengths and improvement, as well as support the establishment of a continuous improvement process that promotes educator well-being.

The [Organizational Well-Being Inventory for Schools \(OWBI-S\)](#) was developed as one such continuous quality improvement (CQI) tool for organizations to assess the implementation of best practices in organizational strategies to promote employee well-being. Building on the organizational well-being literature, the OWBI-S is composed of eight domains: Work Climate and Environment; Input, Flexibility, and Autonomy; Professional Development and Recognition; Organizational and Supervisory Support; Self-Care; Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access; Purpose and Meaningfulness; and Professional Quality of Life. Each domain includes eight to 10 items that are concrete and actionable practices and can be incorporated into a school-based improvement plan. (See Exhibit 2 for descriptions, example items for each OWBI-S domain, and links to related resources via NCSSLE’s [Working Well Directory](#).) The OWBI-S is available through an online platform, which is freely accessible to schools, districts, and other education entities to assess their current level of organizational well-being in one domain or all eight domains.

### Exhibit 2: The Organizational Well-Being Inventory for Schools (OWBI-S)

Domain	Description	Example Items
<b><u>Work Climate and Environment</u></b>	Focuses on the physical and emotional climate of a school. This includes how well the physical space is maintained as well as whether policies support a friendly and supportive work environment in which employee rights are clear and protected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My school’s exterior and interior spaces are well lit and physically well maintained (e.g., clean, secure, healthy).</li> <li>■ Information and resources about employee rights and staff well-being are posted in places that are visible.</li> </ul>
<b><u>Input, Flexibility, and Autonomy</u></b>	The degree to which employee input is valued and incorporated into practices and policies and the degree to which employees can work flexibly and independently.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My school provides employees with a clear, effective process for giving feedback about practices and policies.</li> <li>■ Employees at my school are given the autonomy to self-manage their work.</li> </ul>
<b><u>Professional Development and Recognition</u></b>	Efforts to train employees on relevant job skills and to acknowledge and reward job performance, professional accomplishments, and personal milestones and successes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My school provides all employees with training related to their specific job tasks.</li> <li>■ My school regularly recognizes and celebrates professional accomplishments (e.g., promotions).</li> </ul>

Domain	Description	Example Items
<b><u>Organizational and Supervisory Support</u></b>	Employees have organizational and supervisory support to define and navigate job responsibilities and are evaluated fairly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ School employee roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and adhered to.</li> <li>■ My school provides effective and timely support to address student-related issues (e.g., student emotional and behavioral concerns).</li> </ul>
<b><u>Self-Care</u></b>	Organizationally assess and foster employee self-care, including education and training in job stress and self-care, accessible employee assistance programming, and opportunities for mindfulness and breaks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My school provides continuous education and training for all employees to understand the connection between stress, well-being, and health, including signs of burnout, compassion fatigue, or vicarious or secondary trauma.</li> <li>■ My school provides opportunities and space for all employees to practice mindfulness/take quiet time during the day.</li> <li>■ An employee assistance program is readily available to all employees and its use is encouraged.</li> </ul>
<b><u>Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access</u></b> <sup>b</sup>	Ensure that multiple perspectives are represented, respected, and valued; that all members are treated fairly and justly; that space is made for the characteristics that each employee brings; and that diverse individuals are engaged in all aspects of organizational work, including decision-making processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My school has a clear working definition of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access.</li> <li>■ My school engages in equitable decision-making by including input from multiple sources.</li> </ul>
<b><u>Purpose and Meaningfulness</u></b>	Organizational strategies to align employee work with their personal values and strengths, and to provide work that is meaningful to employees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My school supports employees to identify their personal values and align those with their work.</li> <li>■ Employees derive a sense of purpose from their careers.</li> </ul>
<b><u>Professional Quality of Life</u></b>	The extent to which organizations create a day-to-day work environment in which employees have positive collegial relationships and derive pleasure from doing their work well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The workload for employees is reasonable and achievable.</li> <li>■ My school creates a sense of collegiality and teamwork among employees.</li> </ul>

<sup>b</sup> Within the Working Well Resource Directory, narrow the results by filtering staff well-being focus populations.

# Quality Improvement

Improving educator well-being requires schools to have a systemic mindset that takes federal, state, and local initiatives into consideration, while including key partners' voices and feedback at both school and district levels. Beyond the OWBI-S tool, the free [School Mental Health Quality Assessment tool \(SHAPE\)](#) can help districts and schools engage in continuous quality improvement by improving their school mental health system—a space in which educator well-being efforts often reside—through assessing how their current school mental services and supports map onto state and national performance standards. SHAPE allows users to collaborate across schools and districts *and* within districts and states to optimize strategic planning and resource sharing. Schools and districts can also evaluate their own data and then compare themselves to other schools or districts within a state to inform the systemic quality improvement of their comprehensive policy and program development.

For educator well-being specifically, it is critical for schools and districts to assess root causes of well-being issues, as well as utilize a “small wins” approach to inform current school-based and district-wide initiatives, trainings, and resources. These evaluative approaches then help set strategic improvement priorities.

To stay focused and ensure improvement efforts are manageable, schools should focus on one to two improvement areas aligned with their priorities and develop SMARTIE goals,<sup>39</sup> a key component to equitable and inclusive public health policy and program development.

## Examples of SMARTIE goals could be:

### **OWBS-I Domain Focus:** Input, Flexibility, and Autonomy

**SMARTIE Goal:** By the end of the school year, our school's administration will collect anonymous surveys from all school staff regarding the organizational climate. In partnership with educators, our school's administration will use the data to review the top areas of concern for staff and develop an action plan to address the top one to two areas highlighted by staff.

### **OWBS-I Domain Focus:** Professional Development and Recognition

**SMARTIE Goal:** By the end of the first month of school, our school's employee wellness committees will (1) create a bulletin board in the staff lounge to highlight employees' professional accomplishments and personal milestones and (2) update the board monthly to highlight the diversity of interests and accomplishments at their school.

# Conclusion

The growing concerns centered on educator well-being have become an urgent area of focus for federal agencies, states, districts, and schools. Given the breadth of educator well-being, it is critical to ensure initiatives and policies move beyond solely focusing on individual well-being and promote organizational elements to support improvement. It is time to listen to educators, learn from their experiences, and embrace feedback on initiatives and policies as schools and districts engage in the important work of continuous quality improvement.

# Endnotes

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