

Sustainable Workplaces, Retainable Teachers

The sense of calling that compels educators to persist through difficult times and cope with stressful situations also puts educators at risk for burning out.

By Nathan Eklund

Educators hold a common image of themselves when they enter the profession. We picture ourselves running into a former student somewhere in the community. A smile beaming from her face, the student comes and gives us a big embrace and effuses, “It’s so good to see you! Thank you so much for raising my mandated test scores and preparing me to compete in a global economy!” This scenario would seem funnier if it weren’t fully reflected in the changing job that educators face in today’s schools.

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In fact, teachers enter the profession with a vastly different view of that same scenario. When we run into former students, we want to hear that they're happy and successful and that our presence in their lives, both academically

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and personally, made a difference. However, too many educators find themselves distanced from this original desire to influence young lives.

No wonder we have a recruitment and retention crisis on our hands in American education. But all hope is not lost. In fact, our better days are ahead if we can align policies and practices to reflect the reasons teachers were drawn to education in the first place.

TEACHING AS A CALLING

Like most service-based professions, teaching is probably a “calling” for most educators. Teachers come to this work laden with strong beliefs about the work and deeply held convictions about their own self-image. The altruism and prosocial effects of teaching are strong lures. Teaching is one of those rare jobs whereby on any given day you can *literally* change someone's life. This sense of calling compels educators to persist through difficult times, cope with stressful situations, and often succeed despite trying environments. However, it is this very same sense of calling that puts educators at risk for burning out.

SHINING BRIGHTLY OR BURNING OUT?

Herbert Freudenberger originally coined the term “burnout,” describing the condition as a “state of exhaustion that resulted from working too intensely and without concern for one's own needs” (1974). Sadly, this state might sound all too familiar to many educators. In fact, education often suffers from this sense of burnout not only

among individuals, but also at the systemic level. Whole schools have cultures in which working beyond one's personal limits is a norm, breeding competition among staff. Teachers come to believe that somehow exhaus-

tion (if not misery) somehow proves their dedication to students.

To make matters worse, the teachers we can least afford to lose are often the ones at the greatest risk of burning out. As researcher Bernd Rudow writes, “In general, only the teacher who is ‘burning’ can ‘burn out.’ Teachers subject to burnout are those who are involved, devoted, and conscientious. Their involvement is determined by social caring and selfless motives, which make up the personal purpose of the job” (1999, p. 55). Put bluntly, the more you care about this work, the greater your risk of burning out.

Within this discussion, though, lies great promise for improving schools and recruiting and retaining gifted educators. Two approaches make this possible:

- Schools must be supportive, healthy workplaces for adults as well as students.
- Educators must be mindful daily of their own boundaries and limitations.

We need to make a macro shift in our conversations about and conceptions of schools and teaching. Schools that wish to retain quality teachers need to make staff climate a higher priority. And for teachers who want to last in the profession, attention to collegiality and personal wellness are essential.

HOW WAS YOUR DAY AT SCHOOL?

In my work with educators and school districts across the country, I often ask these three questions:

1. What makes a good day at work for you?
2. What makes a bad day at work?
3. What can save a bad day?

The answers, while varied, share a remarkable similarity across grade levels, geography, and district profile.

Good days are composed of laughter, collegiality, freedom to innovate, recognition of good work, thank-yous, self-directed use of time, minimal meetings, and, above all, a general ability to actually do the job of *teaching*.

Bad days are marked by conflict with colleagues, chaos, loss of time, lack of support, and a whole host of factors contributing to feeling separated from the very reasons individuals chose to become educators.

So, what saves a bad day? Encouraging words, humor, exercise, family and friends, collegial and administrative support, and positive interactions with students.

These responses aren't simply ruminations to be tossed aside lightly. Instead, they offer schools and individuals an unbelievably powerful and practical road map to creating healthy workplaces filled with healthy adults.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE CHILDREN

Teaching is a profession that has “it's all about the children” coded into its genome. That pervasive sense of being fully committed to the well-being and success of students at all costs is perhaps the saving grace of education but is also a massive pitfall. Think of it this way: We're reminded by flight attendants that in an emergency, we are to secure our own air mask before helping others. The same can be held true for educators. If we're not adequately taking care of ourselves, we're jeopardizing our ability to take care of others. We shouldn't even need this reminder, but within the culture of teaching, this line of thinking is rare.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

In order to create a climate in which adults are supportive of and supported by colleagues, schools must first estab-

lish what being a positive colleague looks like. We are crystal clear with students about our expectations of them. We model positive behavior, write student handbooks, and create systems of rewards to encourage desired behavior and attitudes. Your school should be equally clear in terms of its expectations of staff. Try these strategies:

Agree on norms of collegial relationships. Don't leave intended and desired adult behavior to chance. Invite the staff to dialogue about what they consider to be the traits and behaviors of being a good professional colleague. After such a discussion, encourage them to spell out norms that everyone can agree to. Occasionally revisit those norms to remind everyone about those agreements and, as needed, revise them to keep pace with changing expectations.

Use existing opportunities to recognize, celebrate, and address the good work of staff. If you already have weekly or monthly staff meetings, use these times to build community among colleagues. Our time in community can get eaten away by administrivia, or it can be used to create meaningful dialogue, consistent recognition of good work, and constructive conversation about critical issues facing staff. These opportunities are too important to miss.

Empower staff to address their "meat and potatoes" issues. Daily stressors can erode staff morale. For example, one high school English department struggled with disparities in their grading practices. Some of the teachers were turning essays around within a day or two; others were taking a month. The department experienced palpable tension as a result. They sat down together and agreed on a new department standard (one week), which worked well for them and their students. This solution wasn't part of an administrative edict, nor was it a product of a "Staff Climate Task Force." Instead, it exemplifies the power of teachers solving problems together.

Use a colleague-led hiring process. A new teacher is not only the students' new teacher, she's also a new colleague. Ensuring a good fit with other staff mem-

bers is essential to retaining teachers.

Establish a shared sense of balance between work and personal life. Some schools experience a cultural norm for educators to essentially "compete in misery"; the teachers who are the most exhausted or miserable somehow are also the most valuable. Dedication is admirable, but martyrdom is unsustainable. Schools need to make it okay for educators to maintain energy, balance, and happiness.

Teachers subject to burnout are those who are involved, devoted, and conscientious.

— Bernd Rudow

WHAT INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS CAN DO

As schools move toward improving the experience of teaching, educators themselves must also take ownership of their responsibilities to themselves and their colleagues. In your own work life, make the following efforts:

Follow your own advice. We coach young people to self-advocate, make healthy decisions about their behaviors, seek meaningful resolutions to conflicts, and change the things that need to be changed. We must do the same for ourselves. If we have lingering issues with a colleague, we must resolve them in order to be fully present in the workplace. If we have growing dissatisfaction with a workplace condition, we must take personal responsibility to address it and look for reasonable change.

Begin a "Colleague of the Month" award. This is vastly different from a "Teacher of the Year" award, an award potentially given to an educator who worked the hardest and the most publicly, but not always in the healthiest manner. Nominate and celebrate the individuals who make the job more appealing for their coworkers.

Pursue passions, interests, and enrichment outside of work. We don't want our students forgoing their own

curiosities and interests in the name of education. We shouldn't either. If exercise is important to you, then you're going to have to make time for it. If you enjoy reading, you're going to have to make time for it. Get in the habit of creating purposeful time for yourself within your daily schedule.

Laugh loud and laugh often. Having friends at work is one of the most important factors leading to job satisfaction. Isolation is a leading cause of burnout. When asked to identify what makes a good day good, "laughter" and "time with colleagues" is often at the top of the list. Without fail, educators tell me that a true sense of camaraderie is at the center of good days at school

REMEMBERING WHY WE TEACH

Ultimately, all of this work is about establishing new priorities. Claiming that we don't have time to take care of ourselves or one another is an easy excuse. When systems fail to care for the staff as well as the students, and when individual teachers neglect their own needs, the results are disastrous. Today's growing shortage of teachers tells us we're failing to protect our most valuable commodity. Until we ask educators, "How was *your* day at school?" we will miss the simplest means of reforming education.

As the promise of a new year stretches before you, seek ways to reconnect with the reasons you chose this profession in the first place. The distance between how you view yourself as an educator and the daily reality of your job is the space where fatigue and frustration set in. Close that distance, and you and your colleagues are on your way to a joyful, sustainable workplace. ■

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