

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Push for Teacher Mental Health Support

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Introduction

The health and wellbeing of educators has a direct association with their job satisfaction, effectiveness, and student outcomes (Aud et al., 2011; Malmberg & Hagger, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Considering that urban teachers have one of the most stressful jobs across the United States (Kovess-Masf  ty, Rios-Seidel, & Sevilla-Dedieu, 2007), it would seem critical that their mental health be carefully tended to in order to secure the success of their students. However, across the nation, teachers are battling mental health issues, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, and these issues present themselves in the urban classroom to the detriment of students (Borrelli, Benevene, Fiorilli, D'Amelio, & Pozzi, 2014; Chang, 2009; Chang, 2013; Kovess-Masf  ty et al., 2007).

Time again, studies have shown that work stress for teachers is higher than that of other careers (Kelly & Berthelsen 1995; Kovess-Masf  ty et al., 2007; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). This stress is caused by factors that are common within urban education such as overcrowded classrooms that lead to classroom management concerns, lack of flexibility in scheduling, insufficient planning time, and increasing expectations to tend to the mental health of students (Benson, 2018; Ouellette et al., 2018). However, these factors are not the complete issue. There has simultaneously been a lack in organizational progression necessary to support teachers in their pursuit to meet these rigorous expectations (Benson, 2018).

Further, teachers are not typically prepared in their pre-service programs to handle the complex settings of urban schools and are therefore more likely to fall mentally ill and/or burnout from the profession (Albright, et al., 2017; Fiorilli, Albanese, Gabola, & Pepe, 2017; Helfeldt, Capraro, Capraro, Foster, & Carter, 2009). This impacts student outcomes since mental illnesses such as certain depressive and anxiety disorders interfere with one's ability

to cultivate meaningful and lasting relationships (Rosenthal, 2003), which is necessary to establish positive student-teacher interactions. Additionally, with such a high rate of teacher turnover, students are receiving inconsistent instruction from a revolving door of novice educators (Ingersoll, 2002; Williams III, Persky, & Johnson, 2018). Thus, this brief will analyze two sets of survey data; one from the 2017 national Educator Quality of Work Life (EQOWL) Survey and the other from the 2016 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NC TWC) Survey. The results from the national survey will be used to create suggestions for updating the amount of attention given to teacher mental health within the NC TWC Survey. Ultimately, the goal of these suggestions is to promote positive outcomes in student achievement, teacher retention, and school climate by providing stronger mental health supports to urban educators in North Carolina.

Research

Every two years, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) administers the NC TWC Survey to educators across the state to "report educators' perceptions of teaching and learning conditions..." (New Teacher Center [NTC], 2016a, p. 2). Though the purpose of this survey is to provide data for schools to implement necessary improvements, a comparison of the survey results from 2011-2016 found that perceptions of teaching and learning conditions have remained stable since 2011 (New Teacher Center [NTC], 2016b). This suggests that schools are not making and/or sustaining organizational adjustments in response to the results of the biennial survey. Also found in the 2016 NC TWC Survey analysis was that teachers who leave their schools (whether through attrition or migration) reported lower satisfaction with teaching conditions before leaving (NTC, 2016a). Further, it was found that this relationship is "more pronounced in

[Community Eligibility Provision] schools" (NTC, 2016a, p. 8), which are typically classified as urban schools. Thus, teachers are leaving urban schools as a whole, or migrating to non-urban schools, due in whole or in part to their working conditions.

In another study conducted in 2017, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Badass Teachers Association (BATs) distributed the EQOWL Survey to gauge educators' perceptions of their working conditions, and consequent feelings of job satisfaction and mental health. Twenty-one percent of the teachers who responded to this national survey reported having poor mental health for 11 or more days of the last 30, which is more than double the rate of other United States workers (American Federation of Teachers [AFT] & Badass Teachers Association [BATs], 2017). Additionally, 61 percent of respondents reported that work is often or always stressful (see Figure 1); more than half of the respondents reported that they have less enthusiasm now than at the beginning of their education career; and 51 percent of respondents teaching in Title I schools reported sleeping six or fewer hours per night, compared to 38 percent of teachers in non-Title I schools (AFT & BATs, 2017). All of these results highlight the heightened risk that [urban] schools have for low educator job satisfaction, low teacher retention, and poor school climate—all of which have a negative impact on student outcomes.

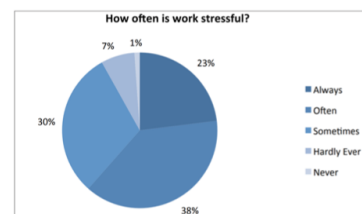


Figure 1. EQOWL Survey responses to "How often is work stressful?" Reproduced from "Educator Quality of Work Life Survey" by AFT and BATs, 2017, https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017_eqwl_survey_web.pdf

Recommendations

The NC TWC Survey and the EQOWL Survey results provide analytic insight into the common and consistent grievances that urban educators have been asserting for decades. However, with the countless reform efforts to address these concerns, the idea of tending to the mental health of educators has not been pursued on a large or consistent scale. It can be argued that virtually every decision a teacher makes has an impact, direct or indirect, on his or her students (Day & Qing, 2009). It can be further argued that every decision a teacher makes is an extension of his or her mental health (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Björklund, Jensen, & Lohela-Karlsson, 2013; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; McLean & Connor, 2018). Therefore, in order to properly address the concerns within urban education, the concerns of urban educators must first be addressed.

Further, in order to address the expressed concerns of teachers' mental health, such concerns must first be properly assessed. There is currently nothing in the NC TWC Survey that directly regards the mental health of educators. Though there are questions on the survey that can be associated with mental health, these are just inferences. For example, the School Leadership construct is described as the "[a]bility of school leadership to create trusting, supportive environments and address teacher concerns" (NTC, 2016b, p. 3), and the responses to this question could support an indirect analysis of teacher mental health. However, there could be included on this survey an additional construct that is specifically dedicated to evaluating the many layers teachers' mental health.

The EQOWL Survey, on the other hand, provided a Health and Well-Being construct that explicitly asked about the mental health of its respondents. There was only one item asking specifically about mental health, but there were others that alluded to mental health (e.g. hours of sleep per night and feeling of stress at work). Highlighted in Figure 2, twenty-one percent of educators who responded to the EQOWL Survey reported that their mental health was "not good" eleven or more days out of the past thirty. This is eleven percentage points higher than other employees across the nation. Though this information is useful to show the disproportionately low mental health of educators, the data from the Health and Well-Being construct would have had a greater impact if there were more questions directly linked to mental health.

Therefore, in order to improve the mental health of educators across North Carolina, the NCDPI should revise the NC TWC Survey to include a construct for mental health. Since over 90 percent of North Carolina educators responded to this survey in 2018 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018), it provides the proper sample necessary to reach a true, representative evaluation of the teachers across the state. Next, with the addition of the new mental health construct on the NC TWC Survey, researchers must craft reliable and valid survey questions that will provide a true general mental health assessment of educators across the state. Then and most importantly, schools, districts, and states must make the proper adjustments to support the mental health of educators. Examples of possible adjustments are as follows:

- On the school level, administrators could increase teacher input in their establishment of policies (Collie, Shapka,

& Perry, 2012), and work to foster trusting, positive relationships with their teachers (Schermuly & Meyer, 2016).

- On the district level, policymakers could provide an allotted number of "mental health days" to protect educators from repercussions after missing work to tend to their mental health.

- On the state level, elected officials could provide insurance policies to educators that allow greater access to mental health professionals.

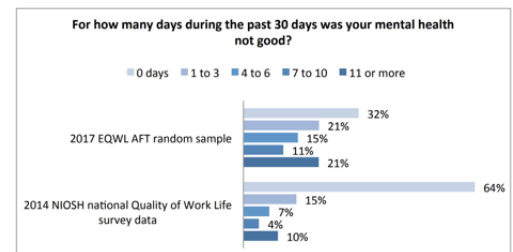


Figure 2. EQOWL responses to "For how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?" Reproduced from "Educator Quality of Work Life Survey" by AFT and BATF, 2017, https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017_eqwl_survey_web.pdf

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