



# To Create Safe and Healthy Schools During a Pandemic, Prioritize Educator Wellbeing



**E**ducators support complex social and emotional needs of students, often under stressful and demanding conditions. The current COVID-19 pandemic in particular, by closing schools almost overnight, left educators to support students and families under unprecedented conditions of virtual instruction during a global health crisis and staggering rates of unemployment. Educator wellbeing has always been at the core of building a healthy learning community. That is truer now than ever, given all the uncertainty about routines and structures for school year 2020–21.

This brief uses the term “wellbeing” to refer to the set of skills, habits, and competencies that promote physical, mental, and social-emotional health and resilience and that provide the foundation for overall wellness. Educator wellbeing is impacted by the climate, culture, and supports for educators within their school and community, their own social-emotional competencies and self-care strategies, as well as each individual’s history of trauma and crisis. By supporting educators and students to care about each other and for themselves, using a wide range of strategies associated with social and emotional learning, school mental health, school climate, and other similar initiatives, schools have the opportunity to promote the collective

wellness of their school community — even if “school” might be happening remotely or in new hybrid formats. This community of care begins with educators.

Educators who understand and know how to address behavioral and social-emotional factors that impact teaching in the classroom feel better equipped to support their students’ learning.<sup>1</sup> Educator social-emotional competency and wellbeing also contribute to developing warm, positive student-teacher relationships<sup>2</sup> and to having trusted adults in school who model stress management and self-regulation and thereby can help students who are experiencing stress or trauma.

## Recognizing the Effects of Individual and Collective Trauma

In addition to coping with their own challenging experiences during the pandemic, educators may experience secondary traumatic stress associated with knowing about trauma experienced by students, as well as compassion fatigue that can result from wanting to help traumatized students.<sup>3</sup> In addition to experiencing individual trauma, everyone in a school (adults included) may be affected by community trauma such as the grief and collective hardship resulting from additional economic and social instability as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators can learn the signs, symptoms, and triggers of their own trauma, which can affect their feelings of safety. A healthy, resilient educator workforce is one that is empowered with the scientific know-how, cognitive and behavioral strategies, and somatic self-regulation skills to help educators and students recognize and address the signs of trauma and stress.

### Quick Wins: What Teachers and Other Adults Can Do

Prioritizing wellbeing is as much a shift of mindset as it is a change in behavior. To make this shift manageable, educators can focus on embedding practical, accessible strategies into what they are already doing. Embedding strategies into daily routines can help reduce the sense that self-care is one more thing that needs to get done.

### Stress management

- ✓ Schedule a planned break (e.g., 10 minutes) at a set point each day. Use that short break to take a

brisk walk around the school or find a quiet place to practice slow, deep breathing to relieve stress.

- ✓ Try on mindfulness practices as a way to learn to cope with difficult emotions. See the strategies described in [this brief](#) focused on mindfulness in education.
- ✓ Learn to recognize the signs of stress in your body. [This 4-minute video](#) provides a brief introduction to the body's stress response and breaks down what it might feel like in your body.
- ✓ Practice stress management techniques such as [guided relaxation](#) and [alternate nostril breathing](#).
- ✓ Download and use a mindfulness or meditation app such as [Headspace](#) or [Calm](#) to have easy access to just-in-time exercises to promote mental, physical, and emotional wellness.

### Cultivation of positive states of being

- ✓ Focus on the building blocks of wellness, such as compassion, empathy, and social connectedness. Check out practices for self-care and self-compassion on the [Greater Good in Action website](#), such as
  - » Try this [5-minute self-compassion](#) break to practice mentally reframing and cutting yourself some slack.
  - » Create a habit of considering gratitude, such as by spending a few minutes toward the end of each day reflecting on [three things](#) that went well and on why you think these things happened.
- ✓ Make an effort to cultivate authentic relationships with fellow educators and others within your community. For example
  - » Ask your colleagues for ideas and engage them in conversations about what worked and didn't work in lesson plans.

- » Create some routines for how you can use common planning time to support and be supported by other educators, such as collaborating on a new approach to teaching a unit or project that you and others are interested in.

### Universal Supports: Schoolwide Policies, Practices, and Programs

Healthy systems encourage positive, supportive relationships between members of the community (both within the school and beyond). School leaders can organize their buildings and encourage routines to promote as a core organizational value the perspective that everyone has collective responsibility for the wellbeing of their peers.

#### Peer-to-peer supports

- ✓ Use professional learning communities (PLCs) to build community and provide a dedicated time and space for attending to adults' social and emotional learning (SEL).

**Baldwin Park Unified School District is offering group book study sessions on Marc Brackett's "Permission to Feel" for district administration and site principals for their personal self-care and development of SEL.**

- ✓ Prioritize teacher induction and mentoring programs, particularly for early career teachers, who are at especially high risk of burnout.
- ✓ Designate several psychological "first responders" in each school who are trained in [psychological first aid](#) and can be the first line of peer support in times of individual or collective need.

- ✓ Increase mental health awareness and teach educators how to recognize and respond to others experiencing distress, using programs such as [Mental Health First Aid](#).

#### Supports from school leaders

- ✓ Explicitly build a focus on adult SEL and wellness into educator professional learning in such a way that mirrors a school's SEL approach for students.
- ✓ Cultivate a culture of frequent and open communication between staff and administrators to identify and reduce sources of stress.
- ✓ Regularly survey and assess the wellness needs of educators, using a validated [wellness measure](#) (e.g., Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire,<sup>4</sup> [Professional Quality of Life Scale](#)<sup>5</sup>) or school climate survey (e.g., [California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys](#)). Use the results to identify individual and collective needs that can be brought to the attention of school leaders and others.

**Paradise Unified School District conducted a districtwide universal screening of its students and staff in the fall of 2019, following a devastating fire. For staff, the Professional Quality of Life Scale was used and found a large number suffered from secondary trauma. The district was able to add a full-time counselor dedicated to supporting the emotional wellbeing of staff members, as well as mindfulness courses for students and staff.**

#### School community norms and routines

- ✓ Embed simple stress management and wellness activities into schoolwide staff development activities and create routines of providing care and support to fellow educators (e.g., begin department meetings with 5 minutes of movement or guided relaxation).

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At McKinleyville High School in Northern Humboldt Union High School District, administrators, teachers, and coaches use a set of “rounding questions” to check in with one another and to help plan professional development: *What is going well for you/ what is working? What challenges are you facing? How can I help? Who/what are you grateful for?*

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- ✓ Integrate stress management and wellness strategies into morning announcements and other schoolwide announcements.
- ✓ Look into the availability of workplace wellness programs that can come to your school and provide free wellness check-ups, chair massages, and/or ergonomic assessments for teachers.
- ✓ Work through your parent association or booster club to arrange complementary gym memberships or group fitness classes provided by local gyms or health clubs.

### Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for Teachers

A culture that values the wellbeing of individuals in a school community can be reinforced through regular mental health check-ins embedded into the school culture and calendar.

- ✓ Try out creative ways to monitor the cognitive, physical, emotional, and behavioral signs of educators in your school community, and help them access additional help early on.

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San Diego County Office of Education hosted a “Check Your Mood Day” for educators. The event encouraged staff to assess and monitor their emotional wellbeing. Check Your Mood resource tables provided information on free community mental health resources and materials, staff mental health and wellness opportunities and activities, and services offered through Employee Assistance Programs.

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- ✓ Organize a “buddy system” to embed shared accountability for educator wellbeing through regular routines such as monthly email notifications reminding each buddy to check in with the other.
- ✓ As best as possible and with respect for individual privacy, be aware of educators within a school community who have experienced psychological trauma, recent loss or grief, or lack of family and/or social resources that can be supportive to wellbeing. These individuals may be at increased risk for health and mental health challenges, particularly given the disruption and stress wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ✓ Make it easy for educators to access behavioral and mental health services in times of need, including screenings and short-term counseling through an Employee Assistance Program or other fast-response network.

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In the Los Angeles County Office of Education, Employee Assistance Service for Education (EASE) provides mobile crisis response to local education agencies and their staff to address tragedies such as student and staff death, suicide, or school shootings. EASE offers a 24/7 counseling hotline for employees and family members.

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## How to Know When to Get Help

A resource titled [Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#), from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), outlines the behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive signs of stress to monitor in yourself and others. As part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, The California Department of Health Care Services launched [CalHOPE](#), a website with resources to support people experiencing stress from the pandemic. If fear or hopelessness is disrupting your daily functioning or you suspect that another adult in your community needs help, the CalHOPE Warmline is live and answering calls — call or text (833) 317-HOPE (4673). [Calling 211](#) in California will also connect you to referral services in your county.

## Endnotes

- 1 Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79, 491–525.
- 2 Jennings, P. A. (2018). *The trauma-sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teaching*. Norton & Company.
- 3 Hydon, S., Wong, M., Langley, A. K., Stein, B. D., & Kataoka, S. H. (2015). Preventing secondary traumatic stress in educators. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 24, 319–333.
- 4 Renshaw, T. L. (2020). *Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (TSWQ): Measure and user guide*. Open Science Framework. <https://osf.io/6548v>
- 5 Hudnall Stamm, B. (2009). *Professional quality of life: Compassion satisfaction and fatigue, version 5*. ProQOL. <https://proqol.org/>

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