

Online Resource 3.1 • Causes of Teacher Stress

Educators face a myriad of challenges and stressors including expanding job descriptions, secondary trauma, lack of professional control and respect, pressure to improve students' standardized testing scores, low pay, long hours, and lack of resources. And these stressors were all having an effect on us before COVID-19 upended school as we know it. Now overworked and understaffed teachers battle global and workplace uncertainty and navigate health and well-being concerns for their students and their own families, all while adapting to new technologies and modes of instruction.

Expanding Job Descriptions and Vicarious Trauma

Due to limited budgets and resources, educators are too often deemed de facto mental health counselors, psychologists, and even caseworkers. "Being a teacher is a stressful enough job, but teachers are now responsible for a lot more things than just providing education," says a manager at Trauma Smart, an organization helping children and adults navigate trauma. "Teachers have in some ways become case workers. They get to know about their students' lives and the needs of their families, and with that can come secondary trauma" (Minero, 2017).

Roughly half of American schoolchildren have experienced some form of trauma—be it neglect, abuse, or violence (Lander, 2018). With alarming numbers of teenage suicide and more frequent school shooting incidents, trauma and its effects show up in the classroom, where teachers end up supporting and comforting students, often at the expense of their own mental health and well-being.

Lack of Control and Respect

Many stressors originate outside of the classroom, such as district bureaucracy, changing state mandates, and fluctuations in testing and other requirements (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2017). Teachers are frustrated by their lack of input and control over policy decisions such as curriculum selection, professional development programming, and budget decisions (AFT, 2017).

The COVID-19 crisis has increased many parents' and communities' respect for teachers and all that they do; however, it remains to be seen if this respect will translate into additional involvement in decision making and increased pay.

Standardized Testing Pressure

A National Education Association (NEA) survey asked 1,500 pre-K–12 teachers their thoughts on standardized testing. Most teachers (72%) felt "moderate" or "extreme" pressure from school and district administrators to improve test scores. The emphasis on high-stakes testing reduces time for more engaging, creative, and relevant learning opportunities, and teachers complain of pressure to "teach to the test." Teachers are also frustrated by the emphasis on standardized test scores as the main evaluation metric for teacher effectiveness and school funding. Overall, nearly half (45%) of surveyed teachers considered quitting because of standardized testing (Walker, 2014).

Long Hours, Low Wages, and Lack of Resources

Teachers work long hours, with AFT's (2017) survey respondents averaging more than 50 hours of work per week. Despite long hours, important work, and demanding responsibilities, teachers receive distressingly low wages. According to NEA data, teacher salaries fell 4.5% over the last decade when adjusting for inflation (Camera, 2019). According to the Economic Policy Institute, teachers receive 21% less pay than similarly educated and experienced professionals (Allegretto & Mishel, 2018).

Educators also face funding and resource deficiencies. One teacher in South Carolina noted, "I never had enough novels to allow my kids to take them home and read them. We had to read everything in class. I had to pay out-of-pocket for items like tissues, hand sanitizer, and dry-erase markers." She also spoke of playing math games in her head to reduce font sizes, spacing, and margins in order to make her photocopy limit go further each semester (Amato, 2015). Rural schools in particular struggle with a lack of resources and have difficulty attracting and retaining teacher talent.

General Uncertainty

Overall uncertainty can be exhausting and take a serious mental toll on educators (TFA Editorial Team, 2020). During the summer and fall of 2020, no one knew what the future would hold, making it nearly impossible to plan for remote, hybrid, or in-person learning. Many schools abruptly opened and closed due to virus risks or quarantine-driven staff shortages, putting the burden on teachers to suddenly switch back and forth between in-person and online teaching (Singer, 2020).

Concerns for Health, Safety, and Well-Being

At the end of March 2020, 5,000 U.S. teachers responded to a survey sharing the most frequent emotions they felt each day. *Anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad* were the top responses (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020). Frustration and anger were also common as infection rates rose and many teachers worked in potentially unsafe conditions (e.g., poor ventilation, crowded conditions, limited PPE) (TFA Editorial Team, 2020). An English teacher in London said the pandemic had created "the most stressful environment I've ever worked in" (Beswick, 2020).

Many teachers lamented staff shortages and lack of resources that only compounded their anxiety. Lockdown measures became stricter in France during the fall of 2020, but many schools didn't have the means to enforce them. "We don't have enough money to be able to clean several times a day and each student must have a mask that they should change every four hours but many don't wash or swap their mask at all during the week, so in terms of security, well it's zero," a physical education teacher in Paris shared (Beswick, 2020).

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