

Students do better, schools are more stable when teachers get mental health support

February 20, 2024



When it comes to mental health at school, typically the focus is on helping students, especially as they emerge from the pandemic with heightened levels of anxiety, stress and emotional need. But as school officials seek to put resources toward student well-being, another school population is possibly being overlooked: teachers.

Teachers are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and work-related trauma in the classroom – much of it stemming from student behavioral problems. The pandemic exacerbated this issue, impacting students and teachers alike.

According to 2022 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 87% of public schools reported that the pandemic “negatively impacted student socioemotional development.” Additional stressors from the pandemic, including new levels of uncertainty, higher workloads and a more negative perception of teachers in society, have also impacted teachers’ mental health and well-being.

As teachers navigate the highs and lows of their profession, taking care of their emotional and mental well-being is essential. Research backs this up. Not only do teachers personally benefit from improved mental health, but their students do, too.

As the author of a forthcoming paper about teacher experiences during the pandemic, I have identified four benefits of prioritizing teacher mental health that create a more stable and effective educational environment.

Reduces burnout and turnover

An undeniable link exists between teacher mental health and burnout and turnover, especially for early career teachers. For young teachers in particular, a workaholic culture can contribute to the deterioration of their mental health.

The demanding nature of teaching, characterized by heavy workloads and high performance expectations, can take a toll on all teachers. This is especially true for teachers of color, who are more likely to leave their schools, or the profession, due to poor working conditions and a lack of support.

According to the 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey by the Rand Corporation, 13% of respondents said their schools offered teachers no mental health or well-being supports. Furthermore, teachers report worse well-being than the general population.

This is where schools can really make a difference in teacher retention. In schools with more positive leadership and support, including for mental health, teachers are more likely to stay. Examples of mental health supports include setting appropriate work-life boundaries, incorporating self-care and stress management techniques into the school day, and creating an open environment where mental health can be discussed without stigma.

Improves teaching effectiveness

Teachers excel at their jobs when school leaders prioritize their mental well-being. Research has directly linked teachers' well-being with greater resilience. For instance, the research found, when a teacher remains calm and solution-oriented in the face of challenging classroom situations, it creates a more positive environment and supportive atmosphere for students.

Teachers also burn out less when they're encouraged to be creative in the classroom. Creative activities allow for a greater level of connection between student and teacher – and satisfaction on the job.

Being creative and having a positive rapport with their teachers also develops students' competence and improves their academic performance. A teacher with poor mental health, however, may have a hard time showing up for their students in such a positive way.

Preserves institutional knowledge

Reduced turnover has a profound impact on preserving institutional knowledge – the collective understanding of how a school and its students work best. When experienced educators leave unexpectedly

or earlier than planned, schools lose a lot of valuable insight and expertise. Reducing turnover enables schools to benefit from experienced teachers for longer periods of time.

When teachers remain at their schools, they contribute to the schools' ongoing stability and the accumulation of best practices over time.

Fosters a positive organizational culture

Prioritizing the mental health of teachers is not just about personal well-being. It's also about building a positive and supportive organizational culture within schools.

A culture that prioritizes mental health and wellness creates an environment where teachers feel acknowledged, understood and supported. This positive culture of educators, which can in turn positively affect student learning. A supportive atmosphere , open communication and a shared dedication to the well-being of everyone within the academic community.

Recognizing and supporting the needs of teachers is crucial. It's not just about problem-solving. It's a smart investment in the long-term success and resilience of the entire educational community.