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FEATURE

Leading Educators Past Burnout

by Megan Marcus and Kelley Munger

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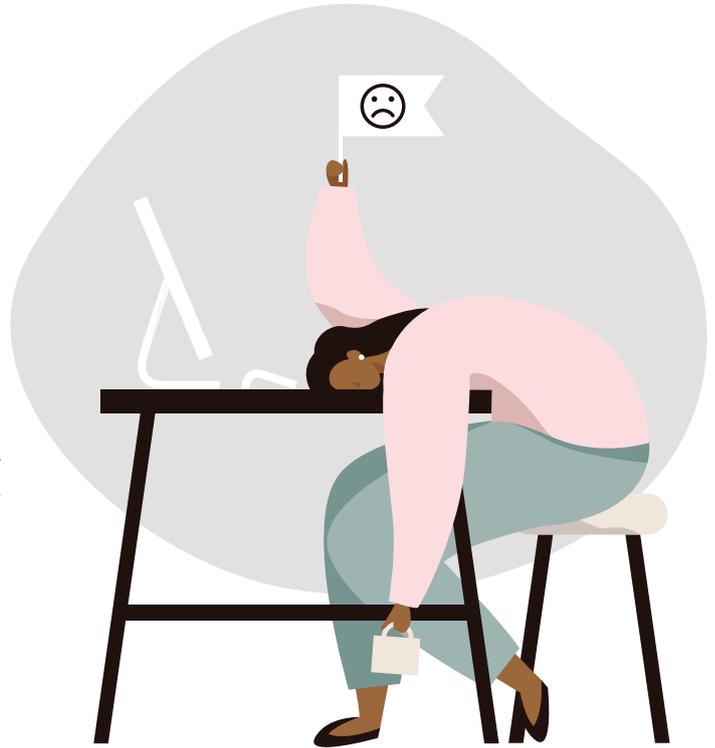
Leading Educators Past Burnout

Practical Approaches for School and District Leaders

Megan Marcus and Kelley Munger

After two years of teaching and living through a pandemic, educator mental health is at risk, at a time when students need the talents of teachers and staff more than ever. Teacher burnout and turnover—already cause for concern long before pandemic life—have increased dramatically. Prior to the pandemic, 44% of teachers typically left the classroom within their first five years.¹ Now, many educators describe the past two years of teaching as the most stressful they have ever experienced, and 55% of teachers are reporting that they plan to leave education sooner than expected because of the pandemic—in other words, because of widespread burnout.²

So, what is burnout, and how can district leaders across the country address it? The early science around occupational burnout was developed in the context of the medical field, and subsequently expanded to human services fields like education. Burnout includes emotional exhaustion in combination with feelings of detachment from the work and is related to a chronic imbalance between the demands of a profession and the resources available to fulfill those demands.³ Essentially, burnout is a psychological and physiological process in which those who at one time cared very deeply about their work lose the energy and motivation to keep caring and over-working indefinitely. Only hindsight will help us understand the particular pandemic “brand” of burnout



the education field currently faces, but some have speculated that post-pandemic symptoms might include increased social anxiety and self-isolation.⁴ This possibility is particularly concerning because research has clearly demonstrated that social support and relationships are key drivers of long-term resilience and recovery from burnout.

These Issues Are Not New

Teaching, learning, and leading in schools has always been highly stressful. And the stress is not just due to large class sizes or the pressures of state testing. The emotional lives of educators are affected by their exposure to the needs of children who are impacted by chronic stress. Because education inherently involves caring for and building relationships with students and their families, educators working in the field often absorb the stress

Megan Marcus, founder of FuelEd, and Kelley Munger, FuelEd partner—research and development, are contributing writers to *District Management Journal*. Founded in 2012, FuelEd is a nonprofit that partners with K-12 school districts to develop educators’ social-emotional competencies to bolster teacher retention and student achievement.

and trauma surrounding them. Over the course of months and years, this kind of secondary trauma can have a “wear-and-tear” effect on the mind-body system, leading to physical and emotional symptoms.⁵

Additionally, like students, teachers and principals also have their *own* experiences with stress and trauma, which shape their thoughts, feelings, and behavior in relationships. Our bodies keep a record of times in our lives where safety was lost, so any unprocessed trauma can be triggered in the classroom or the school, regardless of whether it happened 20 years or 20 days ago.⁶ And though these trauma-based reactions can be driven by protective instincts, they can also exhaust educators emotionally and damage relationships in equal measure. Call it a job hazard for educators, whose careers are built on emotional regulation and whose effectiveness is grounded in their ability to build healthy relationships.

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All of these problems, of course, have been exacerbated by the pandemic, creating a context in which virtually all educators are working with stress-affected students. Since 2020, essentially all American children have experienced social, emotional, and academic disruptions, with children of color and children experiencing poverty being disproportionately impacted.⁷ The burden associated with vicariously witnessing stress while simultaneously lacking the resources or ability to even make contact with some students has been an enormous weight for educators, contributing to significant burnout-related fatigue. It is alarming the degree to which the stress of being an educator has been reinforced by heavier workloads, less support, and a loss of the close connection with students that so many educators cite as their primary purpose for being in the field. What is left is an education workforce that is not only physically exhausted but also experiencing widespread demoralization.

The Root Cause of Burnout (and Most Other Issues in Education)

Let’s take a moment to understand, systemically, why burnout may be so commonplace in education. The truth is, our education system was not designed to meet the social and emotional needs of either educators or students. Public education in the United States was originally conceived to shape an informed electorate that could uphold the ideals of democracy, but its purpose shifted as America moved from an agricultural to an industrial nation in the eighteenth century. During this time, schools became oriented toward the preparation of workers who could serve in factories and businesses; the very model of “school” was built on a model of industrial production in which uniform materials are converted into predetermined products by assembly line workers. The problem with this approach is that humans—students and teachers,

alike—are not homogenous “raw materials” but living, breathing, unique individuals with complex histories, life stories, and a range of social, emotional, and cognitive abilities and disabilities. We aren’t built for mass production or a one-size-fits-all model—we are built for relationships.

For most of the last 100,000 years, humans lived in small communities where relationships kept us together and ensured our survival. For the group, strong relationships gave the advantage of better protection, more resources, and enhanced opportunities for mating and caretaking. Because banding together improved survival, the human brain became wired to connect, and relationships became the stage for all learning and development. In the last several decades, thousands of studies from behavioral medicine, psychoneuroimmunology, social psychology, neuroscience, and education have validated the life-giving power and positive impact of secure relationships on our health, wellbeing, and ability to learn.

When humans shifted from hunter-gatherer to agricultural to industrial forms of society, a lot changed. Soon enough, our environments—our communities, governments, workplaces, and schools—began to look nothing like the

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small-scale social environments in which our brain adapted to learn and thrive, due to the following changes:

- intimate relationships with familiar others were replaced with frequent contact with strangers
- competition for resources and individual success replaced collaboration
- leadership moved from shared power to “command and control” authority

While modern systems have evolved in these ways during the last 5,000 years, our physiology, biochemistry, and neural networks remain essentially unchanged. As such, schools are a stark departure from the original “relationship culture” within which our genes evolved, and the consequences—from student outcomes to teacher performance, wellness, and job satisfaction—result directly from this mismatch. The bottom line is: the more misaligned the culture of your organization, district, school, or classroom with the needs of the social brain, the greater the chance that students and staff will struggle. Just about every correlate of teacher burnout is related directly or indirectly to the negative effects of social disconnection.⁸

It’s Not Just the Teachers

When FuelEd piloted its professional development program in 2012 with a school in Houston, Texas, our goal was to develop the social and emotional competencies, relationship skills, and emotional wellbeing of the teachers so that they could build more secure relationships with students and stay in the profession longer.⁹ It didn’t take long for us to realize that teachers need compassionate and caring administrators just as much as children need these qualities in their teachers. Just as students will struggle to engage in a classroom misaligned with their

social brains, teachers will burn out if the organizational culture of the school is not supportive of their basic social instincts. The fact that teachers are adults and professionals makes little difference when it comes to satisfying our basic social instincts to connect, belong, and feel valued.

We began working directly with school leadership so that they could grow in their ability to care for the teachers. But the same need to be seen and heard exists for a principal in relation to their district manager, the district manager in relation to their superintendent, and the superintendent in relation to their board. On and on it goes, which is why social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and mental health and wellness are not just for students, not just for teachers—but for all of us. It starts with you and all of the adults who make up your educational ecosystem—teachers, instructional coaches, support staff, assistant principals, district leaders. Everyone.

Practices to Help Move Forward

If we are going to move forward and have any chance of addressing the failures of the system that have been laid bare by the pandemic, we will have to think in new ways.

While many aspects of the educational system are a bad fit for our social brain, hope is not lost. Researchers have discovered that the most successful institutions and individuals are those that strike a balance between maintaining large groups while preserving a sense of small-scale living and relationships.¹⁰ The accommodations or practices that are designed to meet social needs within large hierarchies have been referred to as “work arounds” in management sciences and cultural anthropology.¹¹ What this means for you as an educational leader is that the more you can establish a sense of community among faculty and staff, the more educators will thrive, feel satisfied, and stay in the profession.

While developing and implementing a truly relationship-driven district is a long-term investment, we share here some proactive, pragmatic practices that district leaders can implement right away that can move your systems into greater alignment with our social instincts.

Recommendation #1:

Uncover needs, meet needs

When trying to understand burnout, symptoms and root causes can easily be confused, and often interventions that are intended to address burnout are actually just addressing the *symptoms* of burnout. For instance, encouraging a teacher to get more sleep may address the symptom of exhaustion, but will not solve the fundamental issues causing exhaustion. It may be helpful to reflect on the following common root causes of occupational burnout and think about which might be at play in your school system:

- An increase in workload without an increase in support
- Loss of autonomy and agency
- Instability, i.e., too much change too quickly
- Insufficient pay, time, support, and resources
- Underappreciation and lack of a safe culture

Because burnout is highly contextual, we suggest that before designing solutions, you design a listening tour that will allow you to uncover the root causes of burnout in *your* context, according to those closest to the ground. A short, preferably incentivized, anonymous survey can help you gain insight. An alternative to a survey methodology would be to host town hall–style focus groups that gather educators from varying perspectives to discuss burnout causes and prevention strategies. As long as there is sufficient psychological safety for participating educators to be open and honest, this avenue may provide more nuanced data about root causes impacting your district and allow for dialogue in the exchange.

You might also consider integrating questions into your listening tour that give you feedback on one of the most powerful levers for change: you. The truth is, we would all rather be led by someone who is empathic, self-aware, and humble. Are you experienced as empathic and supportive or dismissive and directive? Take the time to find out how you're doing with a short anonymous survey that will let you know how staff experience your communication style and what they need to feel more supported by you. Gathering this data can be a humbling experience, but it can also provide valuable information about areas where your growth and leadership can be supercharged with the appropriate training, such as in empathic communication and self-awareness.

Once data has been gathered and analyzed, use the insights to create areas of focus for developing initiatives, practices, and/or policies that directly address as many root causes as possible. Make a plan to report out with transparency. Don't rush the process. There are no quick fixes.

Why Does This Work?

Responsivity and availability are key predictors of what is called “felt safety” in attachment science.¹² At a systemic level, knowing that administrators take a genuine interest in the thoughts, opinions, needs, feelings, and beliefs of educators makes staff feel that the administration is available to support them. This belief, in and of itself, can serve as a protective buffer during stress. Additionally, when administrators are willing to take action to try to



meet needs—even if imperfectly—educators develop a belief over time that administrators are not only available, but responsive. This is key in helping educators manage their own distress as they face challenges.¹³ Essentially, being reliable and available are correlated with secure relationships as well as effective and trusted leadership.¹⁴

Recommendation #2:

Helping educators feel seen and safe

While you may not be communicating directly with educators and staff every day in your role, be mindful of the significance of district messaging.

Often, leaders can tend toward a silver-lining approach that inadvertently bypasses the reality of educator experience. This might be expressed as, “You are heroes!” This is the well-intentioned language of encouragement, but many educators report that they want to be seen first as professionals and human beings with human needs. When asked, “What do you think your school or district could be doing differently to address the mental health needs of teachers?” in a 2021 survey of 500 educators conducted by FuelEd and Teach Plus, the frequency with which educators mentioned wanting to be able to meet basic, bodily needs—like taking breaks, having time to eat and drink—while doing their job was striking.¹⁵ The hero narrative, while well-intentioned, may inadvertently send an implicit message that educators are going to be

expected indefinitely to continue to exert and stretch themselves in ways that are “superhuman.” Another common message given to educators that may have an unintended impact is, “It will be okay.” While this may be reassuring to some, to others, it feels hollow when the theme of the past two years has been uncertainty and unpredictability.

So, how do we begin to make educators feel seen when our best attempts might be having the exact opposite effect? Our answer is empathy. Empathy is key in helping us humans begin to move from a space of confusion to more clarity and coherence, particularly in making sense of painful or stressful experiences (such as the one that has lasted from 2020 to now!). At FuelEd, we define “empathy” as the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing from their perspective and to communicate this understanding. It involves a few components:

- **Taking others’ perspective.** We get into someone else’s shoes, and try to imagine what they might be experiencing—even if we’ve never gone through it before.
- **Recognizing emotions in others.** We go beyond understanding a person’s point of view to paying attention to the feelings they might be having.
- **Staying out of judgment.** We accept others’ emotions and experiences, even if we might disagree or have a different experience.

- **Communicating understanding of others.** We supercharge our empathy powers when we verbalize our understanding of what a person is going through—their problems, feelings, needs, thoughts, and values—to help them feel seen. This might sound like, “Yeah, you feel really sad. You’ve lost so much this year, and you really need space to process it”; this is a skill known as empathic listening, or “mirroring,” that can be learned and taught.



Photo credit: FuelEd

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Part of leading with an empathic posture involves not only growing your empathic listening skill but remaining mindful of how you're communicating, as you hold the power to soothe in every interaction you have with teachers and staff.

Why Does This Work?

When we are in a state of stress, receiving empathy helps our brain to integrate the “emotional charge” of stressful experiences into a coherent story—creating an experience of what is called “felt safety.” When experiences of safety are repeated, past and present stress becomes more manageable, and feelings of loneliness and powerlessness can be alleviated.

Imagine you are telling a fellow administrator about a painful experience, and instead of trying to provide quick solutions, they are able to empathically respond to you, “You're overwhelmed, and it's hard to see how it can all be managed when you're pulled in so many directions. You're not even sure of your ‘why’ right now.” This empathic response calms the emotional part of your brain that is activated and also gives you words for what's going on.¹⁶ Through this kind of interaction, an experience of being alone and distressed is transformed into an experience of feeling seen and felt.

Part of leading with an empathic posture involves not only growing your empathic listening skill but remaining mindful of how you're communicating, as you hold the power to soothe in every interaction you have with teachers and staff. Committing to using language that acknowledges and names the emotions and experiences in all communication (emails, announcements, meetings, one-on-one interactions) can show that you understand just how hard the past few years have been. This alone will make it feel safer for staff to share

(and verbally process) hardships, making resilience and cohesion more likely.

The following are some additional messaging recommendations that are founded in empathic understanding of an educator's experience:

- **“This really isn't how it's supposed to be.”** Acknowledging the specific ways in which educators' burdens have increased, and the specific losses or stressors they have faced demonstrates respect for all that educators have been through.
- **“Thank you for how you show up.”** Gratitude is closely related to empathy, and many educators have experienced deeply hurtful seasons of underappreciation. Sincere gratitude communicates: “I refuse to take you for granted. You are a human being with inherent value, and what you do each day is important.”



Photo credit: FuelEd

- **“This doesn’t impact everyone the same way.”** Black teachers have been disproportionately impacted by the fatigue of teaching through a pandemic with an unequal death toll in the Black community and during the onslaught of high-profile police killings of Black people, in addition to the long history of racial inequality and pain in the teaching profession.¹⁷
- **“I see you, and I’m committed to making changes.”** Leaders can communicate to educators that you see the systemic problems facing the profession. Often, educators are choosing between a profession they love and a job they hate. Without increased attention to pay scale, workload, quality of life, and general respect for educators, the teaching profession is likely to continue in crisis and decline. While you can’t solve these problems on your own, communicating directly and explicitly to educators that you understand their needs and are committed to advocating for them communicates that they matter and that their concerns are valid and real.

Recommendation #3:

Build systems of collective care over self-care

While many well-intentioned efforts are being made to solve the problems associated with widespread educator burnout, most efforts center on educator self-care. Teachers are told to put their own oxygen masks on first. They’re encouraged to “take care of themselves,” get more sleep, take deep breaths. Mindfulness training and toolkits have gained attention as promising school-based interventions to address the burnout cascade, but most mindfulness approaches reflect a primarily *solitary* practice aimed at *individual* growth. These self-care strategies, while well-intended, can feel dismissive to teachers. It’s as if we are telling a sick person to just “get better.” We hate to be the bearers of bad news here, but no amount of self-care can fix burnout.

The problem with the current focus on educator self-care is that what is traditionally thought of as self-care simply isn’t possible, on a neurological level, without first receiving care in relationships. Over the course of our development as social creatures, humans go on a journey from being almost completely regulated

by others—as is the case with a hungry, crying infant who needs the constant care of an adult—to being *co-regulated*, where we get help from another person as we attempt to regulate ourselves. Over time, through repeated experiences of being calmed and cared for through relationships, we humans develop the brain structures and skills for self-regulation, self-care, and resilience in the face of stress. Co-regulation precedes self-regulation. Care from others precedes self-care. Perhaps solving the teacher stress crisis is less a matter of asking teachers to put on their own oxygen masks than of ensuring that every teacher has someone who can help them put on their oxygen mask.

Creating and incentivizing feasible systems where educators both give and receive care as a routine part of the profession is an innovative approach to the problem of teacher burnout. Practically, this means directing funds toward relational spaces, trainings, and practices that focus on relationships and/or educator social and emotional (SEL) development:

- **Shape spaces.** Providing actual physical space such as a “retreat room” or relationship-building meals or retreats can shift the message from “Take care of yourselves” to “We want to take care of you and empower you to take care of one another.” This shift is subtle but meaningful, and is more attuned to the neurobiological needs of educators.
- **Make time.** Educators have indicated that they need and value trauma-informed adult SEL and wellness work, but express tension about not having time or space to engage in it regularly. While most traditional educator professional development focuses on educators’ content knowledge and instructional skills, consider prioritizing professional development that focuses on building educator relationship skills and social-emotional capacities, as these can be a higher-leverage means of achieving your goals related to both student and teacher outcomes. In *Prioritizing People: Purposeful Investments to Better Support Student and Teacher Mental Health*, educators reported that they need more time and space to both develop skills related to emotional wellbeing *and* to build relationships with one another.¹⁸ Some suggested topic areas for trainings may include self-awareness; self-compassion; collective mindfulness; and communication skills such as empathic listening, genuineness, and collaborative problem solving. Unlike traditional



Photo credit: FuelEd

“sit and get” professional development that often leaves educators feeling as if they have “one more thing” to do, adult SEL trainings can help educators feel and be more effective in their everyday interactions with students, fellow teachers, and administrators.

- **Build practices.** Consider building a low-stress, low-cost peer support system at your school or district. The return on investment is huge in terms of self-regulation and stress release. FuelEd’s stewardship model is a practical, scalable translation of this concept: a peer support practice can provide every educator in a system with a place where they can feel heard and cared for. Educators are first trained in the skill of empathic listening and then paired to form a network of ongoing social and emotional support. Each week, one educator shows up ready to listen deeply, and the other shows up ready to share real problems from their professional or personal lives, with honesty and vulnerability; the following week, the pair switches roles, and so on. The relationship skills developed through FuelEd’s brief training provide the foundational building blocks needed to support fellow educators and to receive support from them. What results is a repeated and reliable experience of co-regulation: helping educators move from stress to calm with the support of a caring relationship. One teacher described the impact:

“You feel like there’s someone there for you—just listening. She’s not giving me answers or tools, but the fact that she is listening helps so much. There’s no other time in my week where I have an hour to speak uninterrupted about something of emotional weight. It’s good for my mental health and makes me more conscious in my relationships—particularly with my kids. This inspired me to move away from [mere] survival, to look at myself as a human being, not just a teacher. This helped me to take care of myself.”

To implement stewardship effectively, the following supports are needed: (1) diverting professional development time and funds toward training in empathic communication; (2) explicitly committing time and support for the practice; and finally, (3) identifying and equipping key personnel to manage and support stewarding pairs.

Why Does This Work?

Self-care, self-regulation, and resilience are grown *through relationships* that take us deeper into self-awareness through being known, seen, and loved. Reaching out helps us reach in. This is especially true in times of crisis and transition. Researcher Dr. Liesel Ebersohn describes the social phenomenon of “flocking”—huddling up and sticking together, like a flock of birds—as a way of coping with stress that is more adaptive in certain contexts than the other more commonly known stress responses of flight, fight, or freeze.¹⁹ With an overemphasis on self-

care versus collective care (in which the latter restores educator resilience *through* relationship), isolation and “flight” from the field may occur.²⁰

Recommendation #4:

Support processing and healing through story

All of us have been through a lot over the last several years, and in some ways, each of us is just trying to get by in the best way we know how. But we think there’s a role for educational leaders to play in proactively creating space to help educators acknowledge, share, and make sense of their experiences with the stress and trauma of the last two years.

“ When educators have the opportunity to process the story of what happened to them, within safe and supportive structures, the result is emotionally regulated educators with the capacity to build strong relationships, strong learning experiences, and strong schools. ”

Being able to narrate and share one’s own story with its attached emotions, while receiving empathy, can lead to increased agency, connectedness, and hope in the narrator.²¹ By telling one’s story, the experience of being “alone with pain” is translated into an experience of being together with others who care about your pain. Besides receiving short-term relief in the form of soothing stress, the narrator develops and internalizes new expectations for all relationships: “If I am distressed, others can help me. Relief and comfort is available when I struggle.”²² In short, a safe relationship not only creates regulation and resilience in the present, it has the power to store regulation and resilience for the future. As an added bonus, the listeners have the opportunity to practice empathy and to even release the bonding hormone oxytocin, which can lead to increased compassion and connectedness.²³

Because narrative processing is a sensitive but beneficial process, use the following guidelines to safely integrate processing spaces into retreats or professional development for educators:

- Establish time and space for sharing, whether one-on-one or in small groups.
- Contract mental health professionals who have training and experience to lead spaces of sharing. When selecting mental health professionals for this purpose, look for the primary skill set of sensitivity, attunement, and empathic listening.
- Counseling is one pathway for one-on-one sharing as it represents an intensive relational experience of being safe, seen, and soothed. FuelEd has provided over 12,000 counseling sessions to teachers since 2012, and we have found that when school districts actively promote, normalize, and create pathways for attending therapy, many teachers engage and experience powerful impacts on their wellbeing and careers.
- Make these spaces optional. Processing stories of trauma and stress should never be compulsory.
- Provide appropriate time, follow-up resources, and support.

Why Does This Work?

When trauma or stress goes unprocessed—meaning, when one does not have the opportunity to seek support and cope in ways that reduce stress in the body—long-term emotional and physical symptoms can develop. Shortly after a potentially traumatic experience, it is normal to feel overwhelmed and experience exhaustion, anxiety, and/or numbness. But when social support is not available for soothing this initial reaction, the body may become “stuck” in the stress response. The simple explanation for this is that the body is stuck in hyperarousal—vigilant, on alert—in order to remain prepared for the next potential threat. But when in hyperarousal,

the body misses opportunities to calm down and return to equilibrium. Without this time to “rest and digest,” healing processes and general wellbeing are compromised, leading to long-term changes in the brain and body, including impairments in the limbic system and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis functioning, all of which are critical to effective cognitive, emotional, and physiological regulation.²⁴ Clearly, when educators experience ongoing dysregulation because of unprocessed trauma, handling the demands of teaching students becomes simply unmanageable. On the other hand, when educators have the opportunity to process the story of what happened to them, within safe and supportive structures, the result is emotionally regulated educators with the capacity to build strong relationships, strong learning experiences, and strong schools.²⁵

Recommendation #5:

Invest in practices that reduce “hierarchical distance”

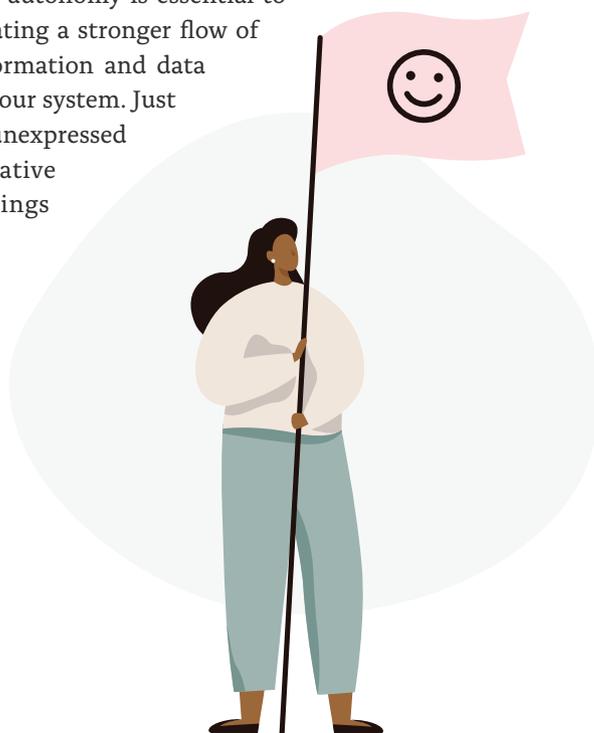
District leaders carry the heavy burden of making sure an entire system’s resources are stewarded effectively. This responsibility can create an endless pull on time and energy, as well as unintended distance between the leadership and the educators working on the ground. Finding even small ways to reverse the flow of organizational energy to be more reciprocal and less top-down can increase a sense of empowerment, competence, and effectiveness across the system. The following strategies can be adapted to the size of the district or distributed across different district roles as time and energy allow:

- **Create paths for communication with “on-the-ground” educators.** Depending on the size of the district, this could include sending newsletters or messages to communicate your awareness of educators’ work and lives. In smaller districts, there may be space for more direct communication or even face-to-face contact.
- **When time and geography allow, spend time co-working in schools.** If possible, pack up your laptop and “co-work” in schools, or identify other district roles that are aligned with spending time working in person at various school sites. The physical presence of district leaders can create a sense of being “with” rather than “over.”

- **Invite “in-the-field” educators into district leadership spaces,** even for brief periods. The invitation to bring the voice and experiences of educators communicates respect. This posture can also be integrated into planned focus groups where educators share their experiences with district offices.
- District leaders filling in gaps in schools during Covid-19 shortages made headlines. But what if this is actually an innovative practice? **Spending any amount of time assisting other educators** in non-evaluative ways provides valuable experiences for understanding the needs and realities of educators, reducing the distance between district offices and classrooms, between those who make weighty decisions and those who are most impacted by those decisions.

Why Does This Work?

As mentioned earlier, secure leadership depends on being available and responsive; it also depends on being willing to share power and support autonomy. When secure leaders communicate trust in those closest to the problem, educators are more likely to perceive these leaders as safe, and educators will also more naturally take on more positive risks and ownership to develop themselves personally and professionally. The message of “I trust and respect you” rather than “I’m in charge of you” is foundational to developing secure relationships. Additionally, creating an atmosphere of safety through shared power and autonomy is essential to creating a stronger flow of information and data in your system. Just as unexpressed negative feelings can



turn into physical illnesses in our bodies, they can also turn into systemic failures in a school. By reducing hierarchical distance, principals and other administrators may make it more likely that educators' negative emotion can be expressed in safe and constructive ways—helping the entire system to flourish.

Caring for Teachers Is Caring for Students

Scientists have recently discovered a species of ferns that miraculously and mysteriously collect and distribute water to the roots of other ferns around them.²⁶ Like these ferns, we, too, thrive when we nurture one another's roots. What if schools worked this way? What if every educator had even just one person at school they could count on in times of stress, to make them feel seen, safe, and soothed?

But we can't ask teachers to take care of themselves if there's no one taking care of them. That's why creating communities of empathic care is essential to building safe

cultures where relationships can thrive. Empathy is the bedrock of all safe relationships, and when embedded in a system as a normative practice, it can create a pathway for safer cultures.

After a profound season of isolation, now is the time to invest in building a web of emotional and relational supports for educators. Educator care truly is not and cannot be a flash in the pan. It's not one-time professional development, it's not a worksheet, it's not a daily meditation nor a sudsy soak in the tub. Building individuals means building communities, and vice versa. And so, the very best thing we can do for our children, and the adults who serve them, is to make schools into places where secure relationships and adult development happen every day in the regular course of work. Our schools should be places where educators are accepted for who they are and encouraged for who they can become—so they can do the very same thing for our children. ♦

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