



Major Levers in Addressing Educator Stress

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Educators have been impacted by a year full of uncertainty, fear, and the call to nearly constant adaptation. [Staff stress](#) is a growing concern (Luthra, 2021). Madeline Will (author at Education Week) notes that staff stress is problem for the entire system of education, as “[staff stress, more than low pay, is the main reason public school teachers quit](#),” (Will, 2021). That was true before the pandemic. Things seem to be getting worse.

The Mayo Clinic [provides resources for people to identify sources of their own stress](#), which exposes an important question in this pressing situation: if stressors are not always obvious in oneself, then how can one make predictions regarding educators at large? (Mayo Clinic, 2019)

It is a serious dilemma. The solution is never clear, but the approach should be twofold: 1) identify anchor concepts and 2) adjust by context where possible. It can be difficult but necessary work.

In December of 2020, we surveyed twenty-two (22) active staff members at a Chicago-area high school using a Google Form survey. We used a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1 indicating the lowest level of stress and 5 indicating the highest level of stress. The survey also included a series of questions regarding personal health and wellness (stress, sleep, and social interaction were our “anchor” concepts). What we found was significant, though not surprising: nearly 65% of respondents reported experiencing high levels of stress (4 or above).

We then dug a little deeper to understand context-specific concerns. What we found was surprising and can inform future interventions focused on alleviating staff stress.

(14)

Major Levers in Addressing Educator Stress, continued (15)

Social Creatures

Human beings are social by nature. We are a species that [survives and thrives through cooperation](#), (Nature, 2018). For that reason, we assumed that staff members experiencing high levels of stress might also be experiencing low levels of peer connection.

At first glance, low peer connection and high stress seem to be related variables – side-by-side, the graphs look like near-exact inversions of one another. 65.2% of participating staff report high levels of stress (Fig. One) while 68.2% report low levels of peer connection (Fig. Two). Could lack of peer connection be an “anchor” variable?

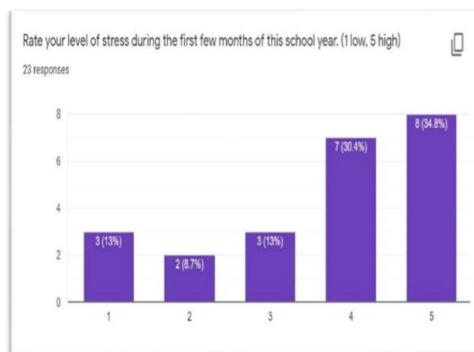


Fig. One

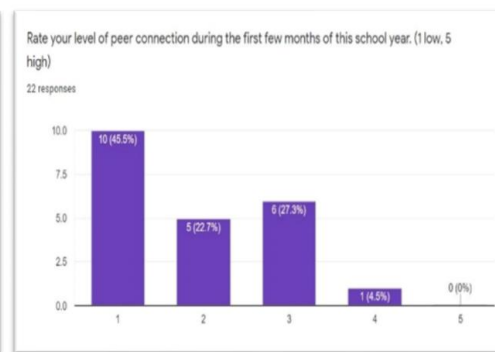


Fig. Two

Further investigation of individual responses shows that the correlation is not as strong as it initially seems. From all participants reporting high levels of stress, only 60% indicated a low level of peer connection. From the participants reporting low levels of stress, only one of them also reported a high level of connection. The relationship is not linear (low peer connection ≠ high stress, and high connection did not necessarily lower stress levels).

In pursuit of contextual specificity, we conducted informal follow-up with survey participants. This led us to believe that a break from interaction with coworkers was – interestingly enough – welcomed. Staff members said that they were able to *selectively* communicate with work peers, as needed.

This might not hold up across all populations and it is important to note that all of the people we surveyed had families, so isolation was not a significant factor. They all maintained their jobs through the lockdown, so financial insecurity was not a factor. Still, the fact that they did not seem to miss out on peer-to-peer connection in a way that affected their stress levels was an important discovery.

There must be have been something else going on.



Major Levers in Addressing Educator Stress, continued (16)

Sleep and Stress

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends 7-9 hours of sleep per night for adults. The national average has been [steadily declining](#) to a measly 6.8 hours per night (CDC, 2016). The U.S. is, strictly speaking, [a sleep deprived nation](#) (Davis, 2019).

The correlations between sleep and stress are clear. The American Psychological Association [has released data](#) on the relationship between stress and sleep which identified higher levels of overall stress in a sleep deprived population (APA, 2013). Those with high stress and poor sleep also reported feeling more irritable, sluggish or lazy, and having trouble concentrating.

In our review, 54.6% of responding staff members could safely be described as sleep deprived, with another 18.2% of respondents right on the edge. Only 27.3% of these school employees consistently received adequate sleep.



Fig. 3

The correlations of sleep quantity to self-reported stress levels in school staff was convincing. Fifteen (15) staff members reported high levels of stress. From that stressed out population, 73.33% also reported low levels of sleep.

Eight (8) staff members reported medium/low levels of stress. From that ‘less stressed’ population, 75% reported high levels of sleep.

Five (5) staff members reported sleep quantities that the CDC would unequivocally describe as sleep deprived (between 5 and 6 hours/night). From that population, 100% also reported high levels of stress.

In this small group of educators, it was clear that healthy sleep resulted in low levels of stress more often than not, and sleep deprivation was always related to high levels of stress. It seems that sleep, even more than lack of peer connection, plays a role in staff stress through these uncertain times.

Interpretation and Implications on School Climate

From the group of surveyed educators, sleep deprivation (between 5-6 hrs) led to high stress 100% of the time. Sleep matters. Sleep deprivation will almost assuredly lead to higher levels of stress. That said, sleep improvement does not necessarily align with low stress. From the eleven (11) staff members who reported high sleep quantity, only 54.55% also reported medium/low levels of stress.

Since high levels of sleep do not guarantee low levels of stress, but low levels of sleep predispose one to high levels of stress, schools should work to improve healthy sleep standards within their faculty and staff. Initiatives built to alleviate staff stress without first addressing staff sleep ([and other physiological wellness habits](#)) are not likely to succeed (Davis, 2020). Improved sleep might not alleviate stress, but absence of sleep almost certainly promotes it.

If a school wants to support the sleep of their employees, here are three keys to consider.

1. **Understanding.** Do staff members understand how sleep impacts their performance? How it impacts their relationships and, of course, their levels of stress? While it may seem obvious, it is often overlooked. Professional development in this area is essential to bridge the understanding gap.
2. **Motivation.** Staff support should align with the motives of the staff. A school should align initiatives (including professional development to support Understanding) with the goals of the staff. This sort of [motivational investigation is standard practice in business](#) (Indeed, 2021). We should work toward this alignment in schools as we move toward healthy sleep practices.
3. **Access.** Do staff members have access to a sufficient sleep opportunity? If the culture of education continues to push its high achievers to burn the candle at both ends, staff stress can be expected. If the goal of a school is to minimize staff stress, then the structures of the school itself should be examined. Start times influence wake times. It is possible that schools everywhere have [created systems which increase the likelihood of sleep deprivation](#) in their staff, ultimately (and likely, unintentionally) increasing staff stress (Davis, 2019).

Major Levers in Addressing Educator Stress, continued (18)

Increasing understanding, motivation, and access surrounding staff sleep seems to be working for the group we surveyed in Chicago.

After confronting the alignment of sleep and stress, one of the initial participants in the Chicago-area survey began to prioritize sleep in a way she previously had not. “I’ve been working [in the school] for 23 years,” she said, “and I’ve never felt this good coming in to work.” She reports being more patient with students and co-workers. She continually acknowledged how good she felt, adding that she is now, “less foggy, less angry.”

She also mentioned that improved sleep has led to improved engagement with other de-stressing strategies. For instance, she has added breathing and mindfulness to her daily routine. One of her favorites, a gratitude practice, “used to be hard to keep up, now I can sit with it longer and I do it almost every day.”

As we look to alleviate negative stress in the lives of educators, we will want to accurately identify key factors – the “anchor” components – to that stress. While sleep is not a cure for all concerns, physiological health and wellbeing serves as the bedrock upon which other initiatives can be built. Health is always a good place to start.

During times of uncertainty, fear, and almost constant adaptation, we might all benefit from starting with a good night’s sleep.

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