

Lead with social and emotional support

A POWERFUL LEADERSHIP APPROACH YOU SHOULD BE USING



BY JAMES A. BAILEY AND RANDY WEINER

“I am not sure what to do. I am not sure how to deal with the emotions my teachers are showing. I don’t feel like we are getting lots of help to know how to help our teachers. I think I am going to lose half of my staff this year.”

Sadly, we have heard this refrain over and over in recent months, as we’ve talked with school leaders across the country. School leaders describe, in heartrending detail, the emotional pain and suffering they and their teachers have experienced over the past 18 months.

Educators are dealing with tremendous amounts of stress, experiencing burnout, and feeling a lack of efficacy, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and ongoing threats to their autonomy as professionals.

Despite their desire to help, school leaders have been caught short on how to provide the support teachers need.

It doesn’t have to be this way. A leadership approach that supports teachers’ social and emotional well-being offers an accessible, research-based way to increase not only teacher well-being and effectiveness, but also student outcomes.

TEACHER EMOTIONS

Why is it important to support teachers’ social and emotional well-being? Teaching is a form of emotional labor (Kwok, 2011). Emotional labor means investing emotional energy but also suppressing one’s feelings to meet a job’s goals, and it comes in many forms.

Teachers’ aspirations and satisfaction are often fueled by the emotional energy and rewards they

receive by helping their students achieve, but this can come at a price, because teachers often have to push aside their own emotions. Teachers are often warned to avoid extreme emotions like anger, sadness, or even happiness in the name of appearing unprofessional.

For instance, with distance learning, a teacher may feel inadequate internally while simultaneously externally displaying an air of control and happiness so as not to influence students’ moods. Managing emotions this way can be exhausting, and too much emotional labor with too much emotional suppression can lead to depersonalization, a lack of commitment, and enhanced stress (Wang et. al, 2019).

Even before the current set of crises, teachers’ social and emotional



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well-being was under threat. One factor has been overreliance on strict accountability measures, which has led to a significant intensification of their work (Lawrence et al., 2019) and considerable stress for educators.

This has led to unintended consequences. Since 2014, the national attrition rate of teachers before retirement age rose to 8% annually, mainly due to challenging teaching conditions such as a lack of collegiality in the workplace, input, and support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In 2017, only 50% of teachers in a national survey agreed that they had full administrative support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In other surveys, a majority of teachers

rated their mental health as “not good” (American Federation of Teachers, 2017) and listed “overwhelmed” as the word that best describes their feelings about their job (Knoblach, 2019).

In the midst of once-in-a-lifetime events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, stress and burnout are even more acute. Teachers are under pressure to do more and perform at higher levels. As they put in more hours to navigate unexpected conditions such as hybrid teaching, many lose a sense of work-life balance and well-being.

THE EMOTIONAL PATH

To combat this, teachers need leaders to recognize and support the emotional dimensions of their work, and leaders need strategies and mindsets

they can leverage to do so.

Leithwood et al. (n.d.) argue that school leaders can influence teaching and learning through four interrelated paths, one of which intentionally centers on supporting teachers’ social and emotional well-being:

- The **rational path**, which includes the technical core of curriculum, teaching, and learning;
- The **organizational path**, which includes structures, operating procedures, and culture;
- The **family path**, which guides how a school includes and works with parents and the community; and
- The **emotional path**, which helps guide individuals’ attention, cognition, and perceptions in the school environment.

Though perhaps the least used and

most underdeveloped path (Leithwood & Beatty, 2009), the emotional path may be the most promising approach to increasing teacher commitment and well-being. In a review of over 90 empirical studies of teacher emotions and their impact on teaching and learning, Leithwood and Beatty (2009) found a significant relationship between teachers' internal states — their thoughts and feelings — and classroom practice, engagement, and student learning. Schools benefit when leaders directly and positively address teachers' emotional states.

EMOTIONAL LEADERSHIP

To lead the emotional path to support their teachers, leaders need to recognize emotional leadership as a critical management tool (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021).

School leaders must also engage in their own social and emotional development and strengthen it through their professional learning to model and support it in teachers and other staff.

For instance, school leaders need to understand the impact of their emotions, biases, stress management, and impulse control on all stakeholders in their educational community. Similarly, leaders should also realize the importance of the social competencies such as social awareness, relationship skills, and ethical decision-making and how specific social and emotional learning (SEL) skills such as attunement, perspective-taking, empathy, and relationship building can impact teachers and other staff.

These skills, when used well, become the foundation of the school's culture and can be practiced and supported through a focused and deliberate practice plan.

In addition, leaders should realize that social and emotional competence can be taught, trained, and developed, and they should support their staff to engage in that work.

To help develop those skills and build the emotional path, school leaders can engage in the following strategies

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to address teachers' affective states and needs.

Build trust by enhancing empowerment. Trust is a highly complex affective state that is important for educator collaboration. School leaders and teachers who can work together in a trusting manner can more easily solve the challenges they face in their school.

School leaders can improve trust through being honest and reliable, demonstrating a positive mood, building solid relationships based on shared values, and taking a strengths-based approach. But perhaps the most essential action for leaders is giving teachers the power to make the right decisions for their students to create a sense of agency.

Develop teacher efficacy through creating mastery experiences. Self-efficacy here refers specifically to teachers' belief that they can increase student performance. Teachers need to feel both a sense of individual and collective efficacy in their work. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have been asked to teach in ways that are unfamiliar and often not ideal for student learning, thereby diminishing their self-efficacy.

School leaders can help teachers build and rebuild their efficacy by providing mastery experiences such as working with highly skilled teachers or coaches and promoting a learning mindset through cycles of deliberate practice. Helping build this vital individual and collective belief requires leaders always to be in sync with an

instructional leadership team focused on developing others.

Build satisfaction and commitment through constant reminders of meaning and purpose. There is little doubt that teacher satisfaction has decreased over the past decade, and especially over the past 18 months. Our education system is not designed to support teachers very well, even during noncrisis times.

The increased calls for accountability and rapid changes in our society have left many educators with a decreased sense of commitment to their jobs. Commitment reflects a strong desire to accept the school's goals and values, a desire to maintain membership, and a willingness to exert effort on behalf of the school.

To develop a sense of satisfaction and commitment, principals need to become highly skilled in perspective-taking and acting on empathy, as well as reinforcing the higher sense of meaning and purpose inherent in teaching, including communicating to teachers their essential role in achieving common goals.

Enhance recovery through reframing. Teachers often face challenging emotional situations with students and families, leading to a sense of loss of agency and control. This loss can lead to an extreme sense of anger, fear, or even sadness. School leaders need to be highly skilled in emotion recognition and reframing techniques to help teachers rebuild a sense of agency and self-determination.

Reframing as a skill, in this case, means assisting the teacher in making sense of an event from different perspectives and regaining a sense of control over the situation. Principals who take the time to help teachers reframe challenging situations help them form this mental habit.

Rebuild resilience from stress and burnout through reappraisal (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Without suitable coping mechanisms, the excessive stress implicit in teaching, when not dealt with, can eventually

lead to burnout. School leaders need to be highly aware of teacher stress levels and use simple reappraisal strategies, such as analyzing the causes of stress, determining what can be controlled, and deciding on a specific coping strategy, to increase emotional regulation.

These approaches are not one-and-done activities. Although we would like to believe that once the emotional path is paved, no other problems will occur, schools are rife with emotional issues that deplete resilience stores over time. A leader should be aware that the emotional path takes constant tending and should anticipate times when extra care is needed.

EXPANDING THE EMOTIONAL PATH

Emotional leadership is a relatively new entry in school leaders' lexicon. Although much research exists on transformational leadership and its emotive qualities, little is available to help explain which specific leadership skills describe a high-quality emotional leader.

Basic skills like emotional recognition, deep listening, and communicating are necessary but not sufficient to support teachers. Instead, a deeper understanding and specific skill set for building and rebuilding the emotional path has become the essential skill set for school leaders since the COVID-19 pandemic. Competence

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in this area must become accessible and concrete to meet the challenges of developing, supporting, and keeping teachers in the classroom.

Although most school leaders, school leader books, and school leader preparation programs advance the need for strong relationships between school leaders and teachers, they lack explicit attention to the role of social and emotional learning for school leaders in creating these relationships.

If we are serious about supporting teachers' social and emotional well-being, then we must better train and support school leaders in developing their own social and emotional competencies. The emotional path provides an explicit and accessible SEL leadership approach to do exactly that.

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