

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Teachers on the Brink: Protecting Teacher Morale and Mental Health

A Year Like No Other

We expected 2020-21 to be difficult. Coming back from an abrupt shutdown the spring before, with the pandemic still coursing through the nation and no vaccines available for a few months, that would certainly be the worst it could get, right? We entered 2021-22 with a false sense of optimism, almost willing it to be a normal school year. It didn't take long to realize it wasn't. In fact, this year has quickly surpassed the stress of 2020-21 and has brought teachers and administrators both to the brink.

As administrators, you are in a precarious balancing act. You try to focus on providing high-quality teaching and learning for students, while constantly attending to mandatory testing, notifications of potential exposures, quarantine requirements, and public displays of charged opinions. All of this leads to an unprecedented amount of stress for administrators and teachers alike, and we must mitigate it now to avoid burning out before the year's end.

The Struggle Is Real

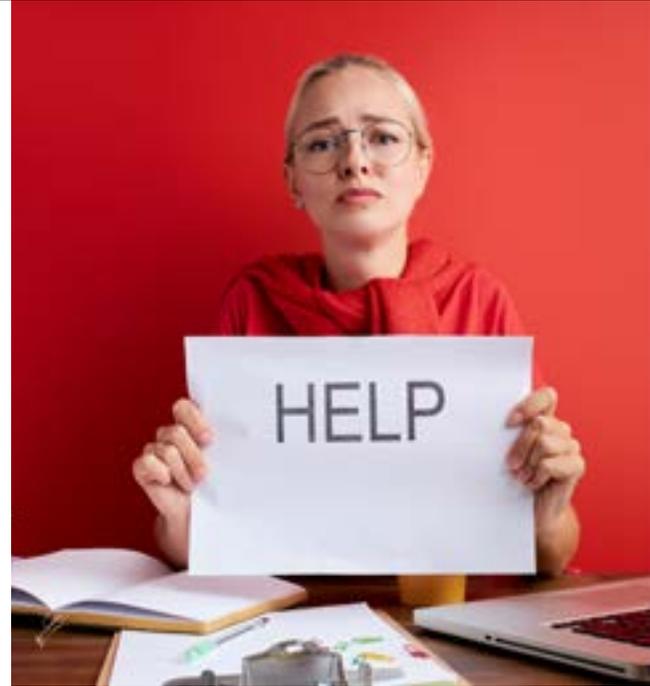
Keep in mind that teacher recruitment and retention was an issue before the pandemic. In 2018, the National Bureau of Labor Statistics [estimated 270,000 teachers](#) would leave the profession annually through 2026. The pandemic has only exacerbated the issue. A [2020 poll of educators](#) revealed that almost a third nationwide would likely retire early or leave the profession because of the pandemic. At the same time, we know that [fewer college students are seeking teaching degrees or interested in pursuing a teaching career](#).

An October 2021 poll from EdWeek Research Center found that 40% of district leaders and principals describe their current staff shortages as "severe" or "very severe." Only 5% said they were not experiencing staffing issues. So, teachers are being asked to cover for bus duty, lunch duty, sub shortages, and everything else, leaving scarce time for teaching, much less planning. It's taking a toll on them professionally and personally. Teachers are your most precious resource, so we can't let this pattern continue; we must do what we can to support and protect them.

You Can Help

There's no magic bullet for this one. Many of the things stressing our teachers (and ourselves) out are beyond our control. But there are things you can do to help. We queried administrators across the country to learn what they are doing to help their teachers. Some of the ideas are tried and true, some novel, but they essentially fall into these four categories:

- Value Time
- Show Respect
- Provide Support
- Express Gratitude



Value Time

- **Prioritize and protect planning time.** Above all else, this is the most important thing you can do for your teachers. Treat both teaching and planning time as sacred. Make sure they have time to plan individually as well as collaboratively with colleagues.
- **Cut back.** Look for any testing, data analysis, paperwork, or other non-teaching tasks that can be taken off their plate. If it's in your control, cut it back. If it's out of your control, make a case for cutting it back. Teachers will feel seen and heard just knowing that you are advocating for them.
- **Take over a class.** You're busy, too, but whenever you can, as often as you can, step in and teach a class for a teacher. This gift of time will mean the world to them.
- **Have fewer, shorter meetings.** Scrutinize the value of your own meetings. 'Because it's on the calendar' is a terrible reason for a meeting. Ask yourself: Can the content be covered in an email? Do we need a full hour for this?
- **Make meetings virtual or asynchronous.** Whenever possible, allow flexibility in when and how teachers access a meeting, especially if it's before or after school hours.
- **Hire permanent subs.** Eliminate the stress of finding subs last minute; use ESSER funds to hire enough permanent subs to cover typical daily outages.
- **Use paraprofessionals.** Instead of asking teachers to cover lunch or bus duty, tap into paraprofessionals, giving teachers more time for planning and teaching.
- **Hire high school students.** Hold a job fair and allow high school students to apply for vacancies in your cafeteria, custodial, or other departments.
- **Hire administrative help.** If teachers are spending time on clerical work, hire an administrative assistant to ease this burden.
- **End classes early 1 day a week.** Some schools around the country are taking more drastic measures to find time. For example, ending school 2 hours early every Wednesday for the rest of this school year.
- **Teach 4 days a week.** Some have reverted to a 4-day school week, making 1 day a week virtual or eliminating classes altogether 1 day a week.

Show Respect

- **Compensate.** With ESSER funds, schools have access to more funds than they have had in living memory. Use this money to show teachers you respect their time, effort, and expertise. Pay more for subs (I've seen up to \$200/day), offer sign-on bonuses, retention bonuses, and raises. Offer teachers extra pay for extra responsibilities or extra time.
- **Spread the burden.** Don't lean on the same "volunteers" all the time. It's tempting because there are teachers that you can always count on, that genuinely want to be helpful, but you need to protect them even more.
- **Ask for and act upon feedback.** Survey teachers (anonymously or not) to ask them what they need. You might be surprised by how simple it is to meet their needs. But do ACT upon the information you receive. Even if it's to explain why something can't be done.
- **No new initiatives.** This is not the year to implement district-wide or even school-wide major changes. Let things lie a bit. Don't add to the problem.
- **Be sparing with PD.** PD can help morale if it's actually meeting a teacher need. Otherwise, back off for now. Respect the fact that they've had more development in the last 20 months than they've probably had their entire careers.
- **Ask them to lead a PD session.** Your teachers have learned a ton over the last year and a half. Some of them have found success. Tell them you're impressed. Ask them if they'd like to share with others.
- **Don't micromanage.** Are you reviewing lesson plans you don't need to? Are you nit-picking in observations? Just check yourself and make sure you're giving teachers as much autonomy as you can.
- **Don't punish the group for issues of a few.** When issues of performance arise, take issue with the actual offenders. Don't lecture the whole staff or put in place policies that negatively impact the whole group.
- **Notice and acknowledge student progress.** Teachers are hard on themselves this year. They are as frustrated as anyone that students aren't progressing at the rate they'd like. Help them see any and all progress; celebrate it with them; encourage them to take pride in any student progress.

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- **Be clear about priorities.** Respect teachers enough to share with them (or include them in deciding) the instructional priorities for the year. Use this [Standards Scoring Sheet](#) to identify your power standards.
- **Reduce expectations.** I usually advocate to set expectations high, but not this year. Slow down; don't expect to go as fast as you would like. Let teachers know that you understand the constraints of this year and that all our expectations might need to be calibrated to align with the realities of this school year.
- **Be visible to school and community.** If you spend most of your day in your office, teachers, students, and the community will see you as out of touch. Make yourself available to them. Be present and visible as a sign of your respect.
- **Attend PD sessions.** If it's important enough for teachers to be there, it's important enough for you to be there as well. Appreciate the time they are taking to develop themselves professionally by attending the sessions yourself.
- **Be vulnerable.** With respect comes trust. Trust your teachers with your authentic thoughts and emotions. Share your concerns, your fears, your mistakes, your triumphs. They will see your trust as a vote of confidence in themselves.

Provide Support

- **Move out from behind desk.** When teachers come to talk, move from behind your desk to a table or set of chairs. Changing from your “normal” work environment signals to them that you are attentive and listening without distraction.
- **Encourage a confidant.** Urge teachers to find one or two safe people they can talk to, ideally another teacher who understands the unique challenges they both face.
- **Hire a licensed professional counselor (LPC).** Schools are taking the mental health of their staff and students more seriously than ever. Some are even hiring a professional counselor to be on staff at the school.
- **Check for an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Ask your human resources department if your district's benefits include an EAP. Many employers offer these, and they often include up to five free counseling sessions for employees.
- **Call it “life-work balance.”** Sometimes just a switch in semantics can signal that you value teachers as people and understand that their life is more important than their work.
- **Give tools to support their emotional well-being.** Encourage staff to track their moods with this [Mental Health Tracker](#), which offers a visual format that is quick to log and interpret. Or give them this [Avoiding Burnout Checklist and Reflection Form](#) to help them proactively look for signs of burnout while providing practical tips to prevent and/or recover.
- **Use art to elicit mental health discussions.** Give teachers the prompt: *Draw a symbol to represent you and where you are on your journey.* Give staff 2 minutes to draw, then ask them to share as appropriate. Asking for a “symbol” eases any pressure to be artistically accurate, and the sharing often uncovers insights into teachers' mental health.
- **Remind one another of their unique value.** Have each staff member write their name on a piece of paper and tape it on a wall around the room. Ask everyone to go around to each paper and write what they value about that person. When done, return to your paper and share out any observations or surprises. Encourage staff when feeling stressed to tap into the qualities noted on their paper. (This can be done virtually with links on a google doc or with padlet.)



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- **Embed mental health into PD.** If teachers engage in PD sessions, make sure the facilitator understands the unique challenges of this year and builds in exercises to promote teacher mental health and well-being alongside any pedagogical insights.
- **Encourage staff to have non-work-related goals.** Show an interest in and encourage teachers' non-work-related aspirations. Pair them with a check-in buddy to keep them accountable to nourishing their lives outside of school.
- **Remind them to take it slow.** Let teachers know that you understand this year is not what we all expected, and encourage them to slow down. There's a lot of school year left!
- **Give them an out.** Teachers put a lot of pressure on themselves. Sometimes they need to be given "permission" to let something go. Use this [Teacher Permission Slip](#) for a teacher who you see struggling with guilt.
- **Utilize an SEL curriculum for students.** Life has been so disrupted that many students have forgotten how to do school. Offering an SEL curriculum gives teachers the tools to reestablish some basic norms. To drive this point home, give teachers this [Last Normal School Year flier](#) to remind them how long it's been since students had a "normal" school year.
- **Provide resources.** Teachers shouldn't need to create instructional resources from scratch or spend their own money on tools to improve instruction. With ESSER funding, you can give them resources to bridge the gaps of lost instructional time and accelerate learning for all. Use this [Funding Request Form](#) to see what your teachers need. The form allows them to share with you the resource they need, how much it costs, as well as how it aligns to any school goals or initiatives.

Express Gratitude

Warning: Implementing anything from this list without implementing actions from the first 2 lists may backfire. Seriously, don't do that.

- **Hand-written notes.** Give a teacher a hand-written note; you know it will make their day.
- **Say thank you.** This one is so easy, yet how often do we forget? Just make sure you say thank you. Not just for the extra tasks, but for showing up and giving their best to their students on any given day.
- **Sticky notes.** Place a sticky note with some nice words where a teacher is sure to find it. To ensure everyone gets this boost of encouragement, allot an amount of time (a month, for example), and place all staff names on a day for that month. Each morning, check your calendar and distribute sticky notes to the staff you've assigned for that day.
- **Smile knowingly.** Don't walk through the halls with a pasted, fake grin. Instead, when you pass your colleagues in the halls, give them that genuine smile that says, "I know it's hard; I see you; I appreciate you." They can tell the difference.
- **Surprise gifts.** Sometimes teachers just need one tiny bright spot to lift the mood of their whole day. Ask them for their favorite guilty pleasure that's under \$5. Maybe it's a gourmet cupcake or maybe it's a peppermint latte. Periodically surprise staff with that thing that makes them uniquely smile.
- **Relax the dress code.** Honestly, with recruitment as hard as it is, you may want to relax the dress code permanently, but if you do have a 'no jeans' policy or other dress code policy that you know teachers roll their eyes at, now's the time to ditch it—at least for a day, if not for good.
- **Walk around and distribute popcorn.** The smell of fresh popcorn wafting from the halls and then hand delivered to their room is sure to boost their spirits. (Don't burn it. Don't be that guy.)
- **Bring them an apple.** Sure, it's cheesy, but most teachers love a little extra cheesy in their lives. Bringing them an apple hits on two levels: it's a healthy snack, and it's a subtle reminder of why they got into teaching in the first place.

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- **Bring in a food truck.** How excited would your teachers be to see a coffee or dessert food truck outside the school? Making such a grand gesture is a great way to express gratitude.
- **Solicit help from parents.** Ask parents to share a positive note or even bring a meal to a teacher. One teacher told us that a parent brought her a meal and it moved her to tears!
- **Leverage your community.** Your community wants to help. Ask local businesses (restaurants, spas, community centers, gyms, memberships, etc.) to offer teacher discounts or freebies. Teachers love a deal, so scoring just a few of these could make their day. Also, you can share this [Ultimate List of Stores](#) that lists national chain stores that offer teacher discounts.

Protecting Teacher Morale and Mental Health: At a Glance

Value Time	Show Respect	Provide Support	Express Gratitude*
Prioritize and protect planning time	Compensate	Move out from behind desk	Hand-written notes
Cut back	Spread the burden	Encourage a confidant	Say thank you
Take over a class	Ask for and act upon feedback	Hire a licensed professional counselor (LPC)	Sticky notes
Have fewer, shorter meetings	No new initiatives	Check for an Employee Assistance Program	Smile knowingly
Make meetings virtual or asynchronous	Be sparing with PD	Call it "Life-Work Balance"	Surprise gifts
Hire permanent subs	Ask them to lead a PD session	Give tools to support their emotional well-being: Mental Health Tracker , Avoiding Burnout Checklist and Reflection Form	Relax the dress code
Use paraprofessionals	Don't micromanage	Use art to elicit mental health discussions	Walk around and distribute popcorn
Hire high school students	Don't punish the group for issues of a few	Remind one another of their unique value	Bring them an apple
Hire administrative help	Notice and acknowledge student progress	Embed mental health into PD	Bring in a food truck
End classes early 1 day a week	Be clear about priorities: Standards Scoring Sheet	Encourage staff to have non-work-related goals	Solicit help from parents
Teach 4 days a week	Reduce expectations	Remind them to take it slow	Leverage your community: The Ultimate List of Stores
	Be visible to school and community	Give them an out: Teacher Permission Slip	* <i>Warning: Implementing anything from this column without implementing actions from the first 2 columns may backfire. Seriously, don't do that.</i>
	Attend PD sessions	Utilize an SEL curriculum for students: Last Normal School Year	
	Be vulnerable	Provide resources: Funding Request Form	

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Put Your Own Mask On First

You are the face of hope in a school, even when it feels like hope is lost. But maintaining that face is physically and emotionally draining. Be careful that you don't exhaust the emotional energy you need to support those who need you most. Get enough sleep. Talk to other administrators. Plan fun things that take your mind off work. And cut yourself some slack. You were trained to develop and maintain school budgets and schedules, as well as to be an instructional leader. But you were not trained to attend to the emotional demands of leading students and staff through the trauma of teaching and learning in a pandemic.

Just by reading this article, it's clear you care about your teachers and recognize how important their well-being is to the success of your school. Thank you. Together, we can weather this storm and come out better on the other side. We must value teacher time, show them respect, provide them support, and express gratitude. With those four things in place, we can retain the expertise of our veteran teachers and attract the innovative ideas of a new generation of educators. I look forward to that day.

[Click here if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:](#)
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Value Time	Flexible delivery options with purposeful in-person workshops and/or convenient online learning sessions
Show Respect	Customized needs analysis ensuring topics teachers actually want
Provide Support	Practical tools and strategies , including on-demand teacher requests
Express Gratitude	Whole-teacher approach with embedded mental health strategies and built-in teacher appreciation

Get started with a [customized needs analysis](#).
Or contact Aaron.Braunschneider@vaei.org to learn more



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