



*The recent publication of a research brief titled *Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students and Schools* has drawn attention to the challenge of teacher stress and its impact on student learning. The brief showed that educators' stress levels are at an all-time high, driven by many factors including an excessive focus on test preparation and inadequate attention to creating positive, nurturing school cultures. We spoke about these issues with Mark Greenberg (CASEL co-founder and board member and Bennett Chair of Prevention Research at Pennsylvania State University, top image), the report's lead author, and Marc Brackett (Director, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and Professor, Yale Child Study Center, bottom image).*

How big a problem is teacher stress?

Mark Greenberg: It's a major concern. Teachers report stress levels that are the highest of all occupations. The most recent Gallup poll showed that only one-third feel positively engaged with their jobs, which leads to low retention rates—30%-40% of teachers leave in the first five years. And it's gotten worse. More teachers are reporting lower levels of autonomy and little sense of control over what they do in the classroom or in decision-making in their schools.

Marc Brackett: Autonomy is big concern. Teachers are obligated to teach lessons that are designed to help students pass state tests. Many teachers report feeling more like machines than creative thinkers.

I work with lots of new teachers and have noticed challenges especially in urban public and charter schools. Many school leaders in these schools report that teachers are dropped into classrooms with insufficient training in classroom management and climate. Inadequate preparation leads to disenchantment, which can lead to leaving the profession at much higher rates.

What is the impact on students?

Greenberg: New research shows that teachers who have higher levels of burnout have children with higher rates of disruptive behavior. New research at the University of British Columbia shows that teachers' stress even gets "under the skin" and affects children's physiological level of stress (higher cortisol levels). Thus, we now know that teachers' stress gets transmitted to students in terms of their behavior and academic achievement.

Brackett: Like most of us, teachers' fuses often get shorter and their language and discipline policies become harsher when they are stressed and burnt out.



What is the role of principals in helping to create school climates where teachers are not so stressed about test scores, for example?

Greenberg: Principals and assistant principals are key. Small everyday things matter: chatting with teachers in the hallway, seeking their input, providing healthy feedback, encouraging them to take time to help kids explore their development, creating a culture of family in the school. Principals who actively support teachers to focus on building positive social and emotional climates are more likely to see engaged teachers and more engaged learning in their classrooms.

Brackett: When teachers feel they are just responding to district and principal mandates—on zero tolerance discipline or suspension policies, for instance—they are in a bind. They may morally disagree with what they are required to do.

What do you recommend?

Brackett: Teacher training and ongoing support. We've learned over the past two decades that teachers are like the rest of the world—not trained in the skills of SEL. When teachers have effective strategies to manage their own emotions, including stress, they are better equipped to teach and model the skills for students. Importantly, training is just one piece. They also need to be in an environment where SEL is welcome – where their school has built in positive and structured ways to deal with stress and promote an emotionally supportive school climate.

Greenberg: We need to intervene both at the organizational level and the individual level. New teachers who get quality mentoring in their first few years, for instance, are more satisfied and less likely to leave the profession. But teachers also need to focus on their own awareness. Teaching is an incredibly demanding job. Greater self-awareness in teachers leads to quality classroom environments for kids.

There are a wide variety of well-conducted randomized trials showing that teachers can learn to manage their stress and improve their attentiveness to children's needs. Most of these go under the banner of mindfulness, and we know that emotional well-being and physical health can affect the quality of their teaching. But I don't want to blame the teachers. The system we have created is the primary problem.

Brackett: We work with a lot of schools, and have noticed that most professional development for teachers is focused on enhancing instructional quality, doing a better job of teaching math, science, and literature. It's rare for schools to have professional development for teachers' self-care, for how to build and maintain positive relationships with students and colleagues.

Can you point to models where good professional development is happening?

Greenberg: Through CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), lots of districts are making intentional attempts to improve SEL at all levels—accountability, data, principal



behavior, and the like. Cleveland and Austin are examples of districts seeking to develop comprehensive professional development programs focused on SEL.

Brackett: Our team is working in a wide range of large districts, including New York City, where we started with coaching regional superintendents and principals to develop their own social and emotional skills. We've learned that superintendents are much more motivated to bring SEL approaches to their schools after they've been through the process themselves.

Greenberg: Sometimes the work is top down, when the district makes a commitment. But more often it bubbles up from the bottom, with a principal or two, or a social worker or counselor who can explain the benefits first-hand. We need many more model schools that people can see for themselves.

What about sustaining good programs?

Brackett: As a field, we need to demonstrate that an SEL approach has sustainability in a school or district for three to five years. There's always a dip in implementation. It's a never-ending process to infuse SEL into the DNA of a school, including the curriculum, behavior support policies, and overarching mission.

Greenberg: That's where the CDI fits in. It's an incredible opportunity to work with large and challenging districts. They're showing that even with changes in leadership, SEL can take hold at all levels, with more focus on systems issues, including adult SEL.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Report

[Teacher Stress and Health](#)

Effects on Teachers, Students, and School
Greenberg, M., Brown, J., and Abenavoli, R.

Books

[Mindfulness for Teachers](#)

Simple skills for peace and productivity in the classroom

[The Dimensions of Engaged Teaching](#)

A practical guide for educators

Websites

[Greater Good Science Center](#)

[Care for Teachers](#)

[Center for Teaching Quality](#)

[Center on Great Teachers and Leaders](#)

[inspirED](#)

[New Teacher Center](#)

[Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#)