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In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce teacher turnover and burnout?

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In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce teacher turnover and burnout?

by

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A capstone submitted in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is well known and mostly accepted that our public education system has its challenges and shortcomings. Even before the COVID-19 global pandemic, schools faced many issues. The pandemic brought more challenges and only came with temporary solutions (Zhao, Yong, & Jim Watterston, 2021). Schools are still experiencing the after effects of the pandemic, which expedited the amount of teachers leaving the profession.

As rewarding as teaching can be, there are many underlying factors that cause educators to become drained and lose their passion for the job. Teachers show up for their students each day and are silently expected to hide any emotion that comes from an outside source. We are expected to be at our best even when feeling drained or have other personal issues going on behind the scenes. Educators put their students first and schools focus on the mental health of students more often than their teachers.

I plan to focus my research by asking, *In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce teacher turnover and burnout?* This question is important to me as it highlights what is being done by scholars, policymakers, educators, administrators, school boards and state level officials across the world to solve a crisis that our schools and students are experiencing by not having enough qualified teachers to sustain our method of schooling. The issue is only becoming more prevalent and will be detrimental to our students' learning experience if nothing is done at a higher level to fix the problem.

In this chapter, the mental health of teachers and how that correlates to teacher burnout and turnover will be discussed. I will share my own personal experience with mental health and discuss what I have seen with others in the field. Mental health is an important topic to discuss

and it needs to be addressed at all levels if we want to attract and retain teachers in the profession and have them be at their best for their students.

Rationale

Many people struggle with mental health either intermittently or throughout their entire lives. “More than 1 in 5 US adults live with a mental illness” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Our mental health is just as important as our physical health. Schools will often emphasize during staff meetings or professional development the importance of seeing and understanding the mental health of our students. We focus on the signs of someone struggling with mental health and then help find resources to support the student in and out of school. The statistic stays the same between adults and youth as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says, “Over 1 in 5 youth (ages 13-18) either currently or at some point during their life, have had a seriously debilitating mental illness” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). There is a need for mental health support for everyone, including all teachers and students. Teachers are expected to be able to support a student’s mental health or find them the support that sometimes does not exist within schools. When there is already a lack of support for students in schools, many teachers take on the job of listening and supporting the student, leaving teachers to take on more work and sometimes add a mental burden that follows them home.

Teachers are expected to show up for their students and push personal struggles aside during the day. I do find it important to hold the same temperament and demeanor around the students as it gives them a sense of calm and trust with their teacher. This is just an underlying demand of the job that is really hard to uphold and is not talked about enough.

Ever since preschool, I knew that I loved school and always wanted to be a teacher someday. When starting my undergraduate courses, I was hesitant to join the education program because of everything you hear about the job. “Heavy workloads, high-stakes accountability environments, pupil behavior and perceived poor collegial support are acknowledged stressors for state school practitioners” (Brady, J., & Wilson, E., 2022). These stressors along with low pay and lack of support from parents, administration or the community can make this career feel unattainable.

For my undergraduate research at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse in 2019, my question focused on the mental health of teacher candidates. My research question is meant to be a continuation of the work completed in my undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy course. With my research partner, we sent out a survey with two open ended questions to students in all sections of our course. The participants in our survey were all pre-service teachers in the middle of working on field experience hours in schools. The first question we asked was, “What factors or topics related to teaching and education affect your mental health?” Answers that were brought up multiple times from our over 70 responses were stress, workload, political climate, unreasonable expectations, student behaviors, school violence and safety, and being able to be there for students. This is not a conclusive list of stressors teachers experience, but it covers many of the high stress topics in our school climate that are potential reasons why a teacher might leave the profession. These responses were from teachers in the undergraduate degree program that had not yet started their career. All stressors listed were either personal experiences while completing field hours, or were heard as things to be prepared for when making the decision to go into education. Many people treat these stressors as expectations of the career just because they are normal and relevant across most schools. The fact that these issues are

normalized in the teaching profession is appalling when you compare these stressors to other careers.

The second question we asked our participants was, “As a pre-service teacher, do you feel that there are enough resources for you regarding your mental health?” The overall consensus from our respondents was there are not enough resources provided to college students within the university, or that there are enough resources and supports, but they are not easily accessible or have long wait times to get the desired support. One example of this was how my university promoted counseling and mental health services for all students, but the waitlists were extraordinarily long and not available in a reasonable amount of time when support was needed. This research was very relevant during the time period it was conducted (Fall 2019), and before we knew what was coming globally in the following months. My partner and I presented our research in February of 2020 at the Council for Exceptional Children National Conference in Portland. Less than one month later, the COVID-19 global pandemic hit the United States hard and many of these existing problems only worsened.

With COVID-19 and the temporary shutdown of schools and the start of online learning, my classmates were all sent home and really did not have access to the already sparse resources that were available regarding mental health. Universities did what they could to try to support us during these unprecedented times, but our professors were all learning alongside us with how to live through a pandemic. We were in our last semester before student teaching and there was so much uncertainty that came with the pandemic for everyone. My brother’s mental health was greatly affected by the pandemic as he was part of the high school class of 2020. The need for mental health support drastically increased with the pandemic.

In the fall semester of 2020, my classmates and I started our student teaching semester. At the time, the decision to hold school in person or virtually was a week by week decision based on the number of COVID-19 cases within our county. Most schools started the year in person, but within a couple of weeks many were moved to online learning and instructing due to an increase in COVID-19 cases. I ended up moving back home and then continued student teaching virtually for the remainder of the semester. Nothing about the pandemic was ideal for anyone, but having my student teaching experience be virtual was very stressful and I learned alongside my cooperating teachers how to deal with the new circumstances.

During college was when I really started experiencing symptoms of depression and during student teaching was when I struggled the most. I was hopeful that things would change for teachers after the peak of the pandemic. People seemed to appreciate teachers more and said we deserved better. There was a glimmer of hope that things would change, but it seems that many parents put blame on the teachers for the lack of student success during the pandemic, or the world expected us to fix this global problem which added more to our already overflowing plate of responsibilities.

The most important point I can make is that educators are people and need to be treated as such. Our work does not stop when we leave for the day. The struggles that students are facing come home with us and take a toll on our mental health.

I am currently in my third year of teaching and my second year of teaching was significantly more difficult than my first. As a special education teacher, I work with students with already identified high needs. My class size was almost double what it should be and this heightened student behaviors. Some student behaviors led to having to call for emergency services multiple times throughout the school year. I constantly felt as if I was failing my

students when in reality, I was put in an impossible situation and expected to succeed. I felt that my school and administration were quite supportive in trying to find a solution for the countless issues we experienced in my classroom. When we tried to hire a teacher to take half of my caseload, it took nearly seven months to get someone into the position. I would not be teaching this year without my supportive colleagues and administration. I fear for the teachers that are not getting the support they need.

There were days I would get home from school and go straight to bed. I could feel the burnout and constant weight on my shoulders already in my second year of teaching. On top of student behaviors, my team called Child Protective Services three times during the school year for one student and two times for another. Knowing that we are sending kids home to possibly unsafe environments is not something that we can detach from as we go home. I want to be clear that I think there should be more mental health support available for all students and that schools are lacking the amount of counselors and mental health support workers needed to meet students' needs. Even though student mental health is also a prominent topic of discussion, my research question and project will solely focus on the mental health of teachers and how that correlates with teacher turnover and burnout.

Context

The first focus area of my research is to look at the mental health statistics of teachers and see what factors are causing burnout and turnover within schools. There is a need to keep teachers and help them, otherwise our school systems will fail. Looking at what the term "mental health" encompasses and how that correlates to teacher burnout and turnover will be outlined.

Mental health affects everybody at different times in their lives. According to the CDC, "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being" (Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). There are various ways that your mental health can be strained and times when people should seek help. Our students rely on us to be there for them and that becomes more difficult and makes teaching harder if our own mental health is suffering. It is not the responsibility of schools to solve every problem for their staff, especially when everyone faces outside personal stressors. The teaching career has many demands that are sometimes incredibly hard to manage. If leadership teams and states can find ways to reduce the stress put on teachers, less teachers will be leaving our schools because they will feel more valued and supported.

We are seeing a drastic increase in recent years in the number of educators who are leaving schools. The National Education Association stated that in February of 2022, 55% of teachers were considering leaving the profession early compared to 37% in August of 2021 (Walker, 2022). A person's mental health will be negatively affected if they are not given the resources needed or properly provided strategies to cope with their stress (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). High expectations are one thing, but the incredible workload of the teaching profession affects the mental wellbeing of teachers. There are six main job demands that negatively contribute to teachers leaving the profession. These include workload, uncertainty of the everyday expectations, negative views and perceptions of the profession, concern for others' well-being, personal health, and having multiple roles required of you (Kim, L. E. et al., 2022). Alongside the six listed struggles among teachers, the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected many teachers. Teachers felt like they would finally be seen and appreciated, yet not much has changed. With the lack of appreciation from multiple parties and the demands of the job, the work becomes unmanageable while having outside obligations in addition to the teaching career.

The second focus area of my research is to see what schools and states are doing to proactively support their teachers and address the shortage of teachers across the nation. Many schools and administrators do a good job of trying to prevent teacher burnout and support the mental health of their staff. There is only so much that a school can do to help if the system itself is flawed. “Only a third of district and school leaders say they have made counselors or mental health services available to staff since the start of the pandemic or added to the mental health services already offered” (Will, M. & Superville, D. R., 2022). Teachers are taught how to identify and help the mental health needs of their students. Why are schools, districts and states not providing the same for teachers? The education system needs to be looked at closely and we need to understand why it is so inconsistent and flawed in order to facilitate change and foster an acceptable and desirable work environment.

The CDC shared ways that public health workers and other health professionals are being serviced for their mental health during and after the pandemic. Training around self-care and resilience can potentially help employees who are struggling, but the most effective way to see change is by addressing the policies in place within the company, organization, or school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). This is true for educators, yet not many outside sources seem to recognize the need for mental health support for teachers. Some articles state that it is not entirely conclusive that the mental health struggles of teachers are any different than those in other professions. Looking into the systems and expectations of being a teacher and what the structure of a school looks like is imperative to understanding what change is needed for those changes to happen in the near future, and hopefully before we have an even more severe shortage of qualified educators and it is too late.

Something that is very common within my own school district and across the United States is hiring unqualified teachers into teaching positions with little education on best practices. Some of these teachers have a four-year degree in something other than education and are given temporary licenses to fill the gaps. This was intended to be a temporary solution for the impending teacher shortage, but it seems to now be common practice. In Minnesota, anyone with a four year degree in any area is able to obtain a Tier 1 teaching license from a school district to temporarily fill open teaching positions as long as their intention is to go back to school to get their certification.

Another common reason for teachers leaving the profession is due to pay and benefits. As someone who grew up privileged, but still in the middle class, the salary for a new teacher is not supportive for most people to live independently. With car payments, utilities, student loans and unexpected expenses on top of rent or mortgage, the salary of a single teacher has an individual living paycheck to paycheck and in an immense amount of debt. When you add the expenses of your own children and daycare, the teaching career is not feasible to sustain and make ends meet without being codependent. It is common for schools to provide health insurance coverage and benefit programs for teachers, but again, this is inconsistent from state to state. There are fewer young teachers graduating from college preparation programs for teaching for many reasons, but pay and the state of inflation are huge variables that are able to be fixed if the majority of district and state leaders prioritize this need.

Chapter Summary

There is work to be done by multiple parties if we are ever going to see a change for teachers. I worry for our students and our schools if nothing changes in the near future. As the job stands, it is not sustainable for those already in the profession and it is not desirable as a

career path for current college students. This issue will be a global crisis if our schools, districts and states do not work together to find a common solution and ways to support teachers.

Within this chapter, I introduced my research and focus question, *In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce teacher turnover and burnout?* I explained why teacher turnover and burnout are pressing topics in the field of education. Struggling with mental health is a very common issue that many people face, and I was able to use statistics from the CDC to back up my claims. My connection to my undergraduate research regarding the mental health of teacher candidates was the spark for this question to be explored further. Further in the chapter, I discussed my personal experiences with mental health and how the COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected myself and others, leaving schools short of teachers and support for students. Throughout the chapter, I list the demands that teachers are facing that make the job feel impossible at times, especially when time and resources are sparse.

In Chapter 2, I will look into the literature and sources available to support my question and claims from Chapter 1. I outline several topics including mental health, mental health statistics, teaching demands and the long term effects of COVID-19 on our schools. I also provide resources to support educators, leadership teams, school districts and states that educate all and provide a starting point for action and discussion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There is an extensive amount of research done regarding the mental health of students. Even more research is available surrounding how to help our students in need of mental health services and intervention from the adults at school. Schools also take priority in providing professional development to guide teachers in supporting student mental health. Finding research done specifically on how schools support the mental health of teachers was more challenging as the focus around this sort of research usually revolves around the students. The following literature was analyzed to help answer the question: *In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce teacher turnover and burnout?* I will review a culmination of resources regarding the mental health of teachers, teaching demands, statistics of teacher turnover, and effects of COVID-19 and how these topics all have a hand in teacher burnout and turnover.

Mental Health of Teachers

It is important for us to first look at what mental health is and how it affects people differently. Mental health can affect each person individually and in different parts of life. It affects how we think, feel, and act (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Teachers will most commonly face side-effects of anxiety and depression. Having high levels of anxiety can affect your physical health and can lead to panic attacks and other heart problems (Noonoo, 2022). Depression is another well known mental disorder. Depression can affect your willingness or ability to start, carry out or enjoy life events (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Many careers are stressful and it is widely believed among teachers and those studying

their behavior that teaching is a highly stressful occupation and teachers suffer from more mental health problems than other professions (Van Droogenbroeck, F., & Spruyt, B., 2015).

Struggling with mental health can be seen in different ways and can be conceptualized as more than just the absence of symptoms or clinical disorders and diagnoses (Beames, J. R. et al., 2023). Outside stressors and the state of our mental health determines how we handle stress and make healthy choices for ourselves and others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Teachers face burnout when they lose self-esteem from expectations of the job that may be unexpected. For example, if a teacher is qualified to teach science and is assigned to also teach sections of math, this causes stress if this is not their expertise area (Razal, 2020).

The results from job level stress are often reflected at home when teachers return tired and defeated. Teachers facing burnout also will oftentimes experience physical symptoms such as exhaustion, headaches, stomachaches and other illnesses (Tiffany Sauber Millacci, Ph. D., 2023). If a teacher is struggling with mental health, it is going to impact how they come to school each day and could make the career more difficult, especially if they are feeling unsupported in their career or personal life. Without proper management, the state of your mental health can get in the way of work, school, and all relationships including friends and family. (World Health Organization, 2023). Improvements in everyday career expectations will also help increase personal relationships and quality of life for teachers (De Carlo et al., 2019) “When teachers are unsatisfied or lack self-efficacy, they are not only less capable of creating a learning environment that is warm and welcoming for students, but students absorb and mirror the negative physical and emotional reactions that such teachers express during instruction” (Pap, Z., Maricuțoiu et al., 2023). The amount of stressors that teachers face not only affect themselves, but it affects their students as well.

Teaching Demands

Many would agree that there are high demands and expectations put on teachers. One source states that client-centered occupations almost always involve a high level of stress when put in face-to-face interactions that require a level of professionals to ignore their inner emotions and restrain from showing those emotions to their clients (Van Droogenbroeck, F., & Spruyt, B., 2015). Within this career, teachers have to be physically and emotionally available at all times for their clients, which are their students. A teacher's job is to support their students. On top of the lesson planning and instruction, there are other factors that take a toll on a teacher's mental health. Many teachers will admit that the amount of stress experienced at school comes from a lack of support regarding issues like high workload, minimal resources provided, school violence, and help from administrators (Ferguson, K., James, Y., & Bourgeault, I., 2022). Inadequate pay for many teachers is also a contributing factor (Gold, 1987). When a teacher is unhappy with their working conditions, they are not able to create a positive learning environment for students (Pap, Z. et al., 2023). Students will pick up on the negativity or minimal emotion from teachers and this will in turn affect the effort of students (Pap, Z. et al., 2023).

Teaching is often seen as a very nurturing profession as they help shape the minds and lives of their students. Teaching is traditionally and historically a very common career of women. Some sources say that this nurturing role relates to being an excellent and effective teacher which can lead to stressful situations when students are experiencing outside stressors that a teacher can't control (VanSlyke-Briggs, et al.). One teacher reports, "I found myself with high stress levels and believed it was a result of not being able to "fix" the problems my students had in their lives" (VanSlyke-Briggs, et al.).

Teacher Mental Health Statistics

Quality mental health and monitoring your mental health are crucial during all stages of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). The amount of teachers leaving the profession due to burnout is alarming and needs to be addressed. From a study done by the Leadership Department, “Among K-12 educators in the U.S., 44% describe being “always” or “very often” burned out at work, which is higher than employees in any other industry” (Stand Together, 2023). The statistics are very similar across the United States and with other countries. “About 1 in 4 teachers said they were experiencing symptoms of depression in an early 2021 survey” (Will, M. & Superville, D. R., 2022). Teachers are leaving the profession at a rate faster than any other profession. An alarming statistic in schools across the United States, England and Australia is that one third of teachers are leaving the profession within the first five years of being a qualified teacher (Brady, J., & Wilson, E., 2022). Consistent with the last statistic, “Between 30% and 50% of teachers leave the field within their first 5 years” (McLean, L. et al., 2017). This statistic was level across multiple references, and our schools are experiencing and witnessing this each year. Teachers who are leaving the profession due to high work-related stress are most likely to leave the profession within 5 years (Beames, J. R. et al., 2023). The teachers who do stay and are experiencing these high levels of stress report they are less committed to their profession, and are less capable of supporting students emotionally and academically (Beames, J. R. et al., 2023).

Other sources state that when a teacher chooses to leave teaching and embark on a new career path, they are overall happier with their work, but their mental health does not in turn improve in all cases (Jerrim, J., Sims, S., & Taylor, H. (2021). “We hence caution those middle-aged teachers who are thinking of leaving teaching that the grass may not necessarily be

greener on the other side” (Jerrim, J., Sims, S., & Taylor, H. 2021). This is not true for all who leave the profession, but for many, the detrimental effects to the mental health of teachers, whether short or long term, do not always improve with a career change. “Some teachers are leaving the profession altogether because of the stresses of the job, while many others are pushing through—which experts say is bad for both their own mental health and that of their students” (Will, M., 2023).

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all students and staff within schools to a certain degree. “The social/emotional impact this had on us and our students was longstanding and unpredictable” (Ebersole, L, 2023). Due to the unprecedented events schools experienced during the pandemic, teachers faced many adversities that made the job stressful. This created a tough environment with uncertainty that caused an increase of psychological distress, anxiety and depression for students and staff (Mordeno, I. G. et al., 2023). The crisis teachers are facing with their mental health did not start when the pandemic did (NEA, 2023). Now that we are past the peak of COVID-19, schools require changes that help both synchronous and asynchronous learning including developmental curriculum, student-centered pedagogy, and purposeful instruction that meets students where they are at (Zhao, Yong, & Jim Watterston). These changes need to be supported by schools, districts and states to ease the stress put on teachers.

What Educators Need

Another concern for teachers is that mental health information and benefits should be shared in equitable ways (Will, M. & Superville, D. R., 2022). Mental health supports should be open to all and teachers should be made aware of the support available. Creating peer-support programs is a beneficial way for employees to learn to be allies in this issue (Will, M. &

Superville, D. R., 2022). A group is more likely to make change over an individual alone, so by promoting colleague interaction and conversation should be promoted and accepted by school leaders. Union leaders are also able to bring teachers together from schools across a district to discuss issues and create focus groups. Educators will benefit from more support groups like *Empowered*. “*Empowered* is supported by Stand Together Trust, which provides funding and strategic capabilities to innovators, scholars, and social entrepreneurs to develop new and better ways to tackle America’s biggest problems” (Stand Together, 2023).

Leadership

Administrators and leadership teams have the most impact when supporting teachers within their own schools. Most administrators recognize that supporting the mental health of teachers is important to keep teachers in the position, but many are struggling and state that a big obstacle in their own career is supporting teachers’ mental health and well-being effectively (Will, M. & Superville, D. R., 2022). They see firsthand what is happening in their own building and have the power to support all staff.

From a past study asking for input from administrators, 44% say that they have offered professional development regarding mental health and self-care to their staff (Will, M. & Superville, D. R., 2022). Many teachers report this is not enough to facilitate change and address the underlying issues and the clinical mental health needs of staff. While some may appreciate the time dedicated to this sort of professional development, some feel that it is a waste of time to be told how to address your personal mental health if no systemic changes occur. Examples of professional development sessions given regarding mental health include mindfulness practices, stress management skills, social-emotional management and psychoeducation, which again, does not solve the underlying issue and only reactively addresses the issue (Beames, J. R. et al., 2023).

Mental Health for Leaders provides professional development for leadership and Human Resource teams. *Mental Health for Leaders* offers a podcast, certificate training and a subscription package to provide resources to all leaders within any school or business (Mental Health for Leaders, 2022). Conscious Discipline is another national organization that offers workshops that promote transformation. They provide on occasion and in person workshop training that empowers your ability as a leader to support your staff and students (Conscious Discipline, 2023).

Many schools have designated leadership teams that help make change within their schools. Leadership teams are able to bring issues to their administration and start the conversation. They can serve to increase the collective efficacy of the district and school community, improving both the results and everyone's sense of belonging (Spiro & Fisher, 2023). *The New Teacher Project* encourages leadership teams and administrators to do something as simple as celebrate teachers through shoutouts or hold meetings with teachers asking them to stay (Van Cleef, 2022). Teachers want to know they are wanted and appreciated in their positions.

School Districts

Many districts are choosing to fix the underlying issue of teachers leaving the profession by putting a bandaid on it and hiring unqualified teachers to take the vacant positions. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get students into college level pre-service programs (Jerrim, J. et al., 2021). There are not enough teachers coming into the profession compared to how many are leaving prematurely or retiring. Many teachers are leaving the career within the first three to five years post graduation. (Jerrim, J. et al., 2021).

The National Education Association suggests school districts increase the starting pay for new teachers (Association, N. E.). It can take five or more years for a teacher to earn a livable wage and move up the pay scale. School districts are encouraged and challenged to work together to solve the issue. They might not have all the answers, but they can choose to work with other outside organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) to help larger groups of people. The World Health Organization supports prevention of mental illness and promotes a supportive environment for everyone's mental rights and well-being. (World Health Organization, 2023).

States

The reward of teaching is not always seen as equal to the amount of work. This is one of the top reasons that teachers leave. The trend of how many teachers stay in the profession and for how long correlates to the flawed structure of the United States' educational systems (McLean, L. et al., 2017). When compared to other countries, the average teacher salary in places like Germany is higher and has continued to increase in the past 15 years. The average teacher salary in the U.S. has become stagnant and does not compete with inflation (McLean, L. et al., 2017). Our state-level government has the power to discuss this issue, and make a change so that our schools and districts can provide mental health support. The cost of teacher preparation programs also deters college students from entering these programs (Kini, 2023). States could work to find more ways to compensate teachers either through salary or loan-forgiveness programs (Kini, 2023).

Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, I was able to back up my claim that a teacher's mental wellbeing correlates with the rate of teachers leaving the profession. The statistics shared may be alarming,

but they are only going to get worse if our schools, districts and states do not do something about it at a greater level. The citations used in this section are great resources that educators, leadership teams and higher level decision makers can utilize as a starting point for solving these issues within their own schools and districts. There needs to be more discussion and problem solving between educators and leadership teams to help bring this issue to the forefront of state level discussions.

In the following chapter, I will use the references from the literature review to create a resource for educators and leadership teams. The website will state the research questions, as well as separate resources specific to educators and leadership teams. All materials provided for educators are there to guide them to recognize the need for mental health support, find support, and connect with other educators facing the effects of burnout. The page dedicated to leadership teams will provide topics for discussion, ideas for implementation, and professional development for whole teams to better support their teachers.

Chapter 3: Project Description

Introduction

In the two previous chapters, I shared many resources supporting why teacher burnout and turnover is a pressing issue. Other topics discussed were the mental health issues affecting our teachers, my personal experience as a teacher, and the impact COVID-19 has on our schools. The problem our schools face is a high level of burnout with increasing turnover and not enough teachers to fill the roles which then affects our students. Burnout is caused by the massive and sometimes unattainable workload put on teachers. Other factors causing teachers to leave schools include workload, low salary, few resources, student behavior, school violence, personal outside stressors, and unsupportive administration and community members. This in turn affects mental health and causes stress for educators.

In this chapter, I explain how developing a resource to build awareness and identify actions schools have taken will help answer the question, *In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce burnout and turnover?* My plan is to create a website; meant to bring awareness to the issue, emphasize the need for mental health support for teachers, and to provide information and best practices for leadership to utilize when supporting their teachers. The website will be outlined with descriptions of the purpose for each page. I will further explain how this website will support creating a sustainable environment that is conducive to learning and help schools become a better place for all, including our students. The rationale behind why I chose to address the topic using a website will be addressed, along with who will benefit from using the website by defining the ideal audience. To conclude, I will talk about the means of assessment that will be used to measure the effectiveness of the website.

Project Description

My final project will be a website designed for educators, administrators, school leaders, school board members and anyone working with, leading or making decisions for educators. The website will strongly support the topics from the literature review in Chapter 2. My overall goal for this project is to bring awareness of the mental health crisis to our leaders by showing them that teachers are struggling in many ways. I want to provide useful ways that school leaders can truly support their teachers and keep them in schools.

Educators will be able to access the website and find resources to help empower them to continue teaching, as well as increase resiliency by connecting with other teachers within the articles provided. Leadership teams will be able to access the website and either read the articles provided to increase their own understanding of the issue, or use the articles as topics of discussion for larger teams. The resources provided on the website are not a comprehensive list of all mental health assistance available, but they are chosen as references to best support educators.

Project Audience and Setting

The website can be utilized independently or within small groups working towards a common goal. Anyone in the general population that faces mental health problems could use this website as a starting point for taking action and receiving mental health assistance. This website best supports educators and leadership teams within a school. When teachers are not supported by their leaders, it makes the job difficult. My hope with this project is for leaders to access the information, utilize what they can, and implement the strategies in their schools within their districts. If this information can be shared amongst larger teams and across districts, then the information will become more well known and hopefully universally initiated. Change is more

likely to happen when larger groups of people are involved and actively supporting a cause. It would be interesting to see if any of the strategies suggested are implemented and how they impact teacher retention.

Project Framework

The website contains an outline designed to highlight four different content areas: Mental Health, Common Concerns, Educators and Leadership. Below is a visual to show the design and focus of each web page.

Website Page	Content
Home	- Includes hyperlinks to pages on the website and corresponds with the title page of the capstone research paper.
Focus Question	- States the research focus question.
Introduction	- Introduction of myself and reason for creating the website.
Mental Health	- Includes general mental health statistics and resources.
Common Concerns	- Defines the issue of teacher turnover, burnout and mental health.
Educators	- Provides resources for teachers to feel supported.
Leadership	- Provides strategies relevant to leadership teams to implement.
References	- A reference page organized by each page of the website.

The homepage is used as a way to organize all information on the website into one common space. Included on the home page are buttons for each content area, as well as

navigation to my focus question page, introduction page, reference page, and a link to a PDF version of this final research paper. After deciding the major content pages included on the website, I decided to add a page with the focus question highlighted. This page is immediately following the home page so it stands out. I felt that it was important to add an introduction page so the user can see where this information is coming from and possibly make connections with myself as the creator and as an educator. The page includes a picture of myself to further the connection between the user and creator. Information about myself is listed as follows on the web page:

Introduction Page

My name is Lauren Meyer and I created this website as a partial requirement towards completing my Masters in Education program from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota in December of 2023.

I am currently in my third year of teaching Special Education to 5th and 6th graders at a middle school in Minnesota. I graduated from the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse in December of 2020 and started my Masters program at Hamline in January of 2021. As part of the undergraduate class of 2020, I experienced teaching and specifically student teaching during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a difficult time for many people around the world and was a challenging time for all teachers and students.

I was just entering the profession at the start of the pandemic and during a time of so much uncertainty. I saw and experienced first hand how a global crisis could take a toll on your mental health. Just as I was starting my career, so many teachers were leaving schools.

Most teachers I knew that left were finding jobs outside of schools, which leaves many crucial positions open in our schools. Finding and keeping qualified educators is a challenge across the world.

The goal of this website is to provide a space for educators and leadership teams to have resources available to them in one place. Educators need resources to connect them to others going through similar issues and to know that it is ok to ask for help. Leadership teams need to find ways to keep their teachers and foster an environment that makes teaching possible while also creating a place that encourages personal mental well being.

Mental Health Page

The mental health web page has information for the general population to reference when looking into mental health concerns and supports. Each source provides statistics and crucial information to help people know they are not alone when experiencing poor mental health. “More than 1 in 5 US adults live with a mental illness” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). There are links to powerful organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Mental Health America (MHA). These resources will serve anyone needing mental health support.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is a resource for anyone facing mental health concerns. Their main web page provides resources to help support those with anxiety or depression. They also have a vast amount of resources regarding grief, trauma, suicide prevention, substance use disorders, and self care practices (Mental Health Resources. ACA).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers similar mental health resources as the ACA. They have a mental health quiz available on their website for those who are not sure if they should be more concerned about their mental health. The CDC also has more materials listed for children and teenagers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Mental Health America (MHA) provides mental health resources to all, but specifically has a page dedicated to what teachers should do to improve their own mental health. There is a section referencing ways to get help for yourself and ways to help other teachers. Some of their suggestions include setting boundaries, moving your body, maintaining your expectations and taking time for self care (Teachers: Protecting your mental health).

Finally, the National Library of Medicine has a page surrounding mental health support. A study was done sharing how and when a teacher's work is interfering with their personal life. Throughout the study, they conclude that the amount of work expected of teachers oftentimes follows them home, which in turn affects personal relationships. Their goal is to get schools to focus on balancing job demands and job resources available. (De Carlo et al., 2019).

Common Concerns Page

The second page of the website has a compiled list of concerns for why teachers are experiencing burnout and leaving the profession. It includes many stressful events and experiences that our teachers are facing. There are statistics listed and emphasized as a page that highlights the problem to higher level administration and leadership teams. “Between 30% and 50% of teachers leave the field within their first 5 years” (McLean, L., Abry, T., Taylor, M., Jimenez, M., & Granger, K. (2017). This page serves as the problem page and includes examples of things that need to be addressed in order to keep teachers in their positions.

The concerns listed on the website include: high rates of teacher turnover, lack of qualified educators, lack of substitute teachers, many open positions, hiring unqualified teachers to fill positions, high demands of the job, not enough time or resources provided, high student needs, teachers feeling unsupported in their positions, ability to take mental health days, student behavior not being addressed, school violence, salary, lasting effects of COVID-19, lack of mental health supports available for staff and students, and all other outside factors affecting mental health.

Educators Page

The third page of the website is designated for educators who are struggling with their mental health or for those who are facing burnout. This page includes resources to help teachers find a better balance between school and their personal lives. Educators need less demands put on them and for many of the common concerns to be diminished. They need supportive administration, peer support groups, less job demands or more reward for the work done. Teachers need to know that it is ok to need help, especially when put into impossible situations and expected to succeed.

Educators can use these resources to: connect with organizations that support mental health, feel empowered to follow what other teachers are doing, find ideas to help limit personal burnout, and complete professional development to reduce personal burnout and find new strategies to support personal mental health. Elmhurst University recommends to educators to use the “Big Five” which means identifying things to do to connect to your five senses when feeling overwhelmed or stressed (Ebersole, L., 2023).

One link provided on the website is a professional development designed for educators and employees of all businesses through the organization LEAD, which stands for, “Let’s

Educate, Advocate, and Do!” LEAD has e-learning and webinar based sessions as well as workshops for teams to attend. “LEAD empowers employees with no-fluff mental health and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training, coaching, and consulting to proactively prevent burnout, maximize productivity, and foster psychological safety in the workplace” (Let’s Empower, Advocate, and Do Inc.).

Leadership Page

The final page is dedicated for leadership teams and administrators to reference when searching for ways to support their teachers. The articles listed are meant to illustrate the common problems schools are facing and then provide topics to facilitate discussions. These discussions can hopefully lead to change in systems within a school. Other groups such as the school board or state level education teams can also reference these sources to see what other organizations are doing to retain teachers and support mental health.

There are two professional development opportunities listed on the website. “Conscious Discipline for Administrators will empower you with the skill set and mindset necessary to be confident in your ability to meet the needs of your staff, your students and yourself” (Conscious discipline for administrators Cincinnati, OH, 2023). The other professional development offered is through Mental Health for Leaders. This resource can be used by any leader in any profession and the website provides a certification program, a podcast, and a subscription service for new and relevant information for leadership teams (Mental Health for Leaders, 2022).

Within the leadership page are four additional links to articles that leadership teams are meant to either read independently, or read and discuss as a team and take ideas to implement at their schools. Hanover research provides an infographic for K-12 educators to reference and use their engagement strategies to improve teacher retention (Jacques, 2022). Elmhurst University

provides an article telling schools and administrative teams that teachers need to be part of collaborative processes and help lead innovation at school (Meyer, 2023). Teachers want their voices to be heard and new teachers are not always given the same equitable opportunity to do so. Two scholars from the University of Missouri - St Louis, conducted research about improving teacher retention. They state that retention can be obtained by better support, development and policies put in place (Shuls & Flores, 2020). Their research would be good for teams to review and discuss as they provide good ideas to implement while addressing the need. The last resource linked to my leadership page comes from a group known as The New Teacher Project. The blog post provides four talking points and suggestions for retaining teachers. One suggestion they have is that administrators simply hold meetings to ask teachers to stay after each year and survey teachers frequently (Van Cleef, 2022). Celebrating great teaching and supporting teachers so they are not alone in the classroom are also easy and cost effective ways to help retain teachers (Van Cleef, 2022). These solutions will not fix everything, but letting teachers know that they are valued could be all it takes to save some of them.

Project Rationale

When choosing what my final artifact would be for this capstone project, I first considered creating a series of professional development sessions. The original plan was to have a two or three day workshop planned out and designed specifically for leadership teams to attend. As a newer teacher, I felt uncomfortable creating professional development for colleagues and administration who have more experience than myself.

After more consideration, I chose to create a website designed to provide resources that are already available and incorporate them into one page with corresponding resources. When creating a capstone project, collaboration is key (Washington, 2022). The final website can be

used by leadership teams to review the resources and collaborate on new strategies to implement. The resources can also simply be used as topics of discussion for these teams. Having an online platform for the final project makes the information more accessible to a larger audience. Southern New Hampshire University says that online learning, including online degree programs, will offer a more individualized approach to learning (Bogle, S). Our school teams can use the resources how they see fit and really take an individualized approach and interest to the topic. It is extremely common for adult learners to enter online degree programs when going back to school. “Adult learners typically have families and other work responsibilities or obligations, and they often choose online programs to earn their degrees” (University of Minnesota Online). This final project allows for individuals and teams to approach the content on their own time and as needed, since a website will always be available.

Project Timeline

This project took about six weeks to create and complete. I started by looking into multiple platforms to create a website and compared them for being user friendly and can make the final product seamless. Canva is a great platform to create a website, because I use it for other school resources in my classroom and I am very familiar with this platform. After choosing to use Canva, I took the time to decide how many pages were necessary to get my message across. It took me about three weeks to finalize the outline, and find the resources to add as hyperlinks on my website. The website will be published in December of 2023.

Project Assessment

My plan is to share my website with my leadership team at school. I know that my leadership team meets weekly, so I would like to see if they could use this as part of a discussion. I will promote the resources to others at my school and surrounding schools within my school

district through connections I have made with other teachers. There will not be a clear assessment that this project is entirely effective, but I hope that my leadership team at my school will utilize at least one resource and implement a new strategy. Exposing the website to as many people as possible will help me gauge if this resource is beneficial to educators and leadership teams. I hope to hear that someone partakes in the professional development opportunities listed. It would also be wonderful to see a group of educators come together and take ideas from the articles to support their mental health and support other teachers in their schools.

Chapter Summary

Within this chapter, I was able to share the process of creating my website. The resources in the website are outlined and shared throughout the chapter. This website was created with the goal of being shared with many educators and leadership teams and is meant to be a reference to already existing information that could be impactful to how our schools operate.

In the final chapter, I will share what I learned throughout the entire process of my capstone project. Information from the introduction and literature review will be revisited as I discuss what sources helped frame my research topic. Implications and limitations of the research and project will be discussed alongside what my next steps are for this project in the future.

Chapter 4: Project Conclusion

Introduction

This project helped me find answers to the question, *In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce burnout and turnover?* I started by discovering why the topic of mental health is important to me through writing and researching information relayed in the first three chapters. As a result of the research, I was able to answer more questions and find support for different groups of people. After doing research and finding credible sources to support the cause, I created a website that is accessible to use and organized by topic and user category.

In the final chapter, I will discuss what was learned throughout the research, writing, and creative process. Further in the chapter will focus on why I chose this topic and connect it to my experience doing undergraduate research. Lastly, the final results, implications, limitations and next steps following the completion of this project will be outlined.

Overview

The research, writing and creating process of the capstone project was very educational. This entire project from start to finish took a lot of time and thought and I am proud to finally see a final result. Throughout the research process, I learned what resources are out there for educators and leadership teams. I was able to understand the issues leading to the problem of teacher turnover and from my literature review, it is interesting to see that there are less results for what school districts and states are doing about this issue. It worries me to think that the issue of mental health relating to teacher burnout may not be discussed often enough by the people and groups who can affect it most.

When first creating the website, the website platform was meant to house all of the information learned and gathered. After finishing the research and creating the final product, I can use this website to help influence others and express the issue to large groups of people. Presenting my undergraduate research at the Council for Exceptional Children National conference in 2020, helped me having information from both my undergraduate and graduate research. I could take this even further and promote my findings to an even larger population. Overall, I have learned that I am capable of starting a conversation that could lead to change.

Topic Influence

The topic of mental health is very personal to my more recent experiences. As also mentioned in Chapter 1, my undergraduate research revolved around the mental health of teacher candidates and how students in their student teaching or field hour placements were feeling before even starting their careers. The research was more to promote their voice and share what are their worries or fears about entering this profession. This research offered a unique perspective as the participants were both students and teachers at the time. Many felt that our university did not offer enough mental health resources for students due to long wait lists or limited time to meet with students.

Shortly after this research was presented, the COVID-19 pandemic started. I was in my last field placement where I was required to complete 100 hours within a semester working in a classroom. My hours were cut in half as everyone was sent home for spring break and we did not return for the rest of the semester. Online learning was not an ideal method when we were not prepared how to teach this way. By the fall of 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases went down so my student teaching semester started in person. After three weeks, our school was shut down, because the county I was teaching in had the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin at

the time. The rest of the semester was spent teaching from home and I could see how this was affecting both students and teachers. Multiple teachers quit in the middle of the school year. My cooperating teacher ended up with 32 students on her caseload so we were planning and differentiating for that many students each day and on an unfamiliar platform.

As an educator now in my third year of teaching, I have seen many teachers leave my school within the past three years. We had fourteen new teachers start this year, which meant at least that many left last school year. Mental health can affect each person individually and in different parts of life. It affects how we think, feel, and act (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). This project and topic are important to me, because I hope they can help someone somewhere who is struggling with finding support, or for schools to feel the need to make a change in their systems and management. Teacher turnover is still a pressing issue and is only getting worse nationally. Something needs to be done at a greater level if we will ever be able to see change.

Results

Following all of the research and work put into this project, the final product is a professional website that is easy to navigate and includes links to all resources described in Chapter 3. Some of my colleagues at my school have already tested it and say that the information is very relevant and useful. My hope is that many leadership teams across the state could reference my website and make plans to improve the school climate.

Implications

The research question for this project asked specifically what schools, districts and states are doing to retain teachers and prevent burnout. Following the literature review, I reflected on the information I was able to find regarding teacher mental health and how that relates to

turnover. Most schools and administrators are doing the most of what they can to support their teams each day. Administrators and leadership teams are the ones on the sideline cheering teachers on every day. Our districts and state level policymakers are the ones further away from the issue, but are the ones with more power overall to make a difference. A next step in the research process would be to contact local and state officials and learn more about the conversations they are having to improve our school climates and keep qualified educators in the crucial positions within schools.

Limitations

There are minor limitations I am facing as I am concluding the research and website design process. I have created this wonderful tool and website that could be used by many people, but there are limitations with how the website will be shared. Some ways I could share my research are through direct link shares through email or social media. The research will be available through Hamline University's digital platform, but beyond that, I have to find creative ways to push the information to groups of people nationally or even globally.

Another limitation of the website specifically is that everything is constantly changing. New information and professional development opportunities will be released in the future. I have to find a way to keep my website up to date with information that is factual and timely. This requires more work and research, but will be beneficial to more people if I can keep it updated and filled with new ideas and resources.

Future Research

A website gives me the ease of sharing this resource with anyone by copying the link. The website has a final address that is easy to find, navigate and share. I plan to start by sharing this resource with others at my school and within my district. From there, the information can be

shared by anyone who finds it important and beneficial. In the near future, I would like to explore more of what the state level leaders can do to make change for our schools. Surveying teacher voices and sharing that with people at the district and state level will show a greater need for support. This project helped me develop my research skills and my ability to analyze references to find their purpose. These skills will only help me more in the future as more issues arise.

Chapter Summary

In this final Chapter 4, I shared my experience researching, writing and creating this final capstone project. Throughout this paper I attempted to find answers to the question, *In what ways are schools, districts and states proactively supporting the mental health of their teachers to reduce burnout and turnover?* The final website provides resources to help leadership teams and administrators address the issues within their own school and discuss what needs to change after reviewing the resources. There is hope for educators and schools, as long as educators can stand together and fight for this change before too many leave due to burnout.

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