



TEACHER MENTAL HEALTH AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

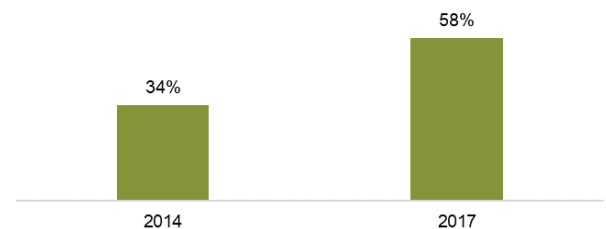
A CSCH Brief by Lisa Sanetti, Jennifer Cavallari & Alicia Dugan

Background

Although teaching is commonly recognized as a stressful occupation, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges. The 3.5 million U.S. teachers deemed “essential workers” in most communities are reporting to work and adapting their methods to provide the best education they can via remote, hybrid, and in-person learning. Professionals who have committed their careers to building close and supportive relationships with students are required to keep their distance behind screens and masks. While doing all they can to keep their students safe and healthy, they can’t control their exposure to risk factors in their students’ physical and psychosocial environments. They are committed to engaging and challenging students’ minds, but now have to compete for that attention with concerns about internet availability, social unrest, food insecurity, and fears for their loved ones’ safety.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were experiencing high rates of poor mental health. Data from both a 2014 Gallup Poll and a 2017 report from the American Federation of Teachers indicated teachers’ poor mental health has been increasing in prevalence.^{1,2} This increase spiked in 2020—and recent data suggest mental health issues have *doubled* among some teachers. Poor mental health results in teachers experiencing high levels of burnout and leaving the field.³ A recent survey indicates stress was the most common reason for leaving teaching before retirement—almost twice as common as insufficient pay.³ Approximately 17% of teachers left the profession annually prior to the pandemic, costing the U.S. \$7.3 billion annually.⁴ A recent report indicated 27% of teachers are considering leaving the field due to the pandemic, at least temporarily, which could cost an estimated \$11.6 billion in retraining.³

Teachers reporting their mental health was “not good” at least 7 of the past 30 days



COVID-Related Contributors to Teachers’ Poor Mental Health

Available data from early evaluations of teachers during the COVID crisis point to stress arising from pandemic-related changes to their work as well as concerns over inadequate compensation and benefits from their employers. These data are briefly summarized below.

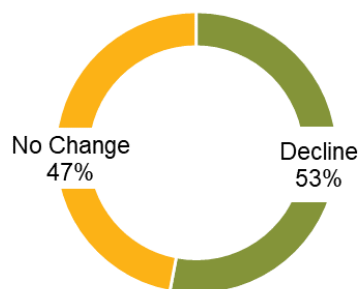
Decreased Student Engagement and Teacher Sense of Success

- Teachers estimated that, on average, **only 60% of students were engaged in remote learning on a regular basis**, with wide gaps in perceived engagement along racial and socioeconomic lines, mainly due to resource disparities.⁵

- **Teachers working in high-poverty schools and in schools reported that their students were less likely to have the technology required to access online learning resources and, consequently, less likely to regularly engage in remote learning activities.**⁵

Change in Sense of Teaching Success
During COVID-19

Obtaining and maintaining student engagement is essential as it is a predictor of both short-term academic achievement and successful school completion. As such, it is not surprising that a majority of teachers experienced a decline in their sense of teaching success during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Increased Workload and Decreased Engagement

- As compared to the year before the pandemic, **77% of educators indicate an increased workload.**⁶
- **More than 60% of educators enjoy their job less** during COVID as compared to a year ago.⁶

Increased Concerns about Employer Benefits and Health Insurance

- **66% of educators are concerned their employer benefits may not cover unplanned time off** stemming from a COVID-related medical issue.⁶
- **44% of educators expressed concerns that their health insurance will not adequately cover COVID-related illnesses and health issues.**⁶

Financial Stress from Inadequate Pay, Compounding Debt or Reduced Savings

- **A recent survey indicates “insufficient pay to warrant the risks of COVID-19” was the number one reason teachers left the profession during the pandemic.**⁶ Evidence of the impacts of this insufficient pay and general financial instability during the pandemic are evident in educators’ reports of their personal finances. Specifically, data suggest that many educators are not paying their bills and contributing to saving at pre-COVID levels.
- 1/3 of teachers in a recent survey held a second job in addition to teaching.⁶

Implications

Teachers’ mental health has a direct impact on our teaching workforce as well as the students and communities they serve. Teachers who are well are more effective as instructors, behavior managers, mentors, and role models. Teachers who are well show up more consistently for students, who are then more likely to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Communities in which school leaders attend to teacher well-being

- **retain teachers longer**—saving money on retraining and increasing numbers of veteran teachers,
- **spend less of their school budget on health care costs**—freeing up funds for other initiatives,
- **have improved school climates and teacher-student relationships**—improving student retention, and
- **have improved student academic outcomes**—the core mission of schools.

As was the case prior to the pandemic, many of the new contributors to teachers' poor mental health due to COVID-19 are at the systems-, not teacher-level. As such, it is imperative for school leaders to consider systems-level, teacher-led approaches to identifying and addressing contributors to teachers' poor mental health. Total Worker Health approaches, such as the Healthy Workplace Participatory Process, offer a feasible and effective way to identify school-specific areas for improvement.

Additional Resources

Safeguarding the Mental Health of Teachers

An interview investigating how school communities influence educator well-being.

Centers of Excellence for Total Worker Health

Supported by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and provides free resources and training on improving worker and workplace well-being.

Center for Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW)

A CDC National Center for Excellence of the NIOSH Total Worker Health® program and provides resources on the Healthy Workplace Participatory Program, which has been effectively used to address educator well-being.

National Center on School Mental Health

Provides resources for schools and educators specific to stress management and self-care during COVID-19.

¹ Gallup (2014). *State of American Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/services/178709/state-america-schools-report.aspx>.

² American Federation of Teachers. (2017). Educator quality of life survey. Retrieved from: https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017_eqwl_survey_web.pdf

³ Dilberti, M. K., Schwartz, H. L., & Grant, D. (2021). Stress topped the reasons why public school teachers quit, even before COVID-19. Retrieved from:

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1100/RRA1121-2/RAND_RRA1121-2.pdf

⁴ Greenberg, M. T., Brown, J. L., & Abenavoli, R. M. (2016). *Teacher stress and health effects on teachers, students, and schools*. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center. Pennsylvania State University.

⁵ Herold, B. (2020). The disparities in remote learning under coronavirus (in charts). EdWeek. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/technology/the-disparities-in-remote-learning-under-coronavirus-in-charts/2020/04>

⁶ Horace Mann (2020). The Hidden Impact of COVID-19 on Educators: Rising Health Concerns, Lower Risk Tolerance and Benefit Gaps. Retrieved from:

<http://www.horacemann.com/~media/documents/supplemental/The%20Hidden%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Educators.pdf>

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