

The Case for Investing in Teacher Wellness

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ISSUE

Health and wellness are critical elements of teacher performance, attendance, retention, and ultimately, student achievement. While teacher wellness and stress is a nation-wide concern, data suggest that Oakland Unified School District has particularly high levels of teacher stress and a gap in wellness. While there is a growing understanding in the field of the importance for teachers to be well in order to be effective, less research has been conducted about the personal costs to teachers, and the financial costs to the district, when teachers are unwell.

Teacher wellness goes far deeper than physical fitness and mental preparedness for work. While these are critical components of a healthy lifestyle and professional success, research on teacher wellness suggests that workplace culture elements like professional development, supportive school administration, decision-making power, and consistent school policies also are large contributors to teacher wellness. Finally, providing individual-level support to teachers to support them emotionally and professionally can help teachers manage their classrooms and students' needs as well as their own health.

This report examines:

- What are the opportunities to improve teacher wellness?
- How much does the lack of teacher wellness cost the district?
- What is the impact of teacher wellness on retention and attendance rates?

METHODS

This report used a mixed methods approach to understand the opportunities, scope, and costs relating to teacher wellness issues in OUSD:

- A literature review of relevant research and practices to understand the opportunities.
- Data analysis using Excel of district teacher retention rates; rates of substitute teacher employment and need; rates of teacher absences; rates of workers' compensation; OUSD staff retention survey; and teacher responses to the California Healthy Kids survey.
- Informational interviews with subject matter experts in OUSD, including the OUSD Health and Wellness Committee.

FINDINGS

The Gap in Teacher Wellness Costs OUSD

When the financial costs of teacher absences, turnover, and compensation claims for workplace injury are combined (not including potential higher healthcare costs), OUSD spends roughly \$18,248,570 per year.



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Using the comparison data available, OUSD spends \$2,161,210 more than comparison districts on workplace medical claims, and approximately \$1,438,392.9 more than the average district in the US. These numbers represent estimates, and should not be used for specific benchmarks; however, they demonstrate the dollars lost to a *lack of teacher wellness*.

The Effects on Schools

In addition to the financial implications of teacher absences, retention, and medical claims, schools, teachers, and students all feel the effects. For example, on average the district is 67 substitutes short per day; in the event that an absent teacher's classroom does not have a substitute assigned, a school administrator must either teach that day or disperse students among other classrooms. This challenge compounds the disruption in learning already created by an absent teacher, and puts stress on the administrative staff.

The Impact on Teacher Retention Rates

Research on burnout and teacher stress has found that across the teaching profession, teachers are tied with nurses for experiencing the highest level of stress (Lever, Mathis, and Mayworm). Nationwide, 8% of all teachers leave the profession each year; an additional 8% change schools. These rates are indicators of teachers' response to stressful work environments, and the impact on retention. In Oakland, the 2017 Staff Retention Survey results offer a window into some of the reasons that OUSD teachers move on, or are thinking about transitioning out of the district. Four top reasons that teachers indicated they want to leave the district include lack of adequate resources/supplies; level of work-related stress; systems and processes that support them to do their job; and meaningful professional development opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Use this Report Complement Health and Wellness Theory of Action

The OUSD Health and Wellness team is currently working on a Theory of Action for staff wellness in the district. This report should be used to substantiate and complement the needs identified through staff engagement and planning to make the case for spending currently-scarce resources on teacher wellness.

Direct Funding to Evidence-Based Programming and Policies

Pending new funding sources, OUSD could implement many of the evidence-based programs and policies outlined in the full report. Changes drawn from other districts' practices should be adjusted considering school and district needs, priorities, and culture.

Collect Specific Data on Teacher Wellness Needs

While this report pulls together the existing data sources available on the state of teacher wellness and associated costs in OUSD, future data collection efforts (through either adding survey questions to existing instruments or conducting interviews or focus groups with teachers) should seek to understand teachers' specific asks and needs.



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