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Issues Surrounding Teacher Burnout:
Questions and Possible Answers to an Increasing Problem

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Teachers today are on the front lines of stress, exhaustion, and burnout. Few other professions experience the mass exodus of staff as does the teaching profession, with stress-related burnout cited as the most common cause. Stressors include feelings of little input, lack of support, changes in teaching assignments, low self-efficacy, and failure to team-build. Addressing these stressors has potential to reduce the number of resignations due to burnout.

Feelings of Little Input

Just like the children in the classroom, many teachers feel unimportant because they have little input into the decisions that affect them. Their interactions with students, parents, other staff, and administrators are often based on policies that they had no part in creating, such as disciplinary measures. If the teachers do not feel in control of the process, they are apt to withdraw and become discouraged. Their feelings of being undervalued may turn to fear, and a perceived threat takes on the spectre of something larger (Chang, 2009).

To combat this stressor, teachers need first to be involved in policy-making and other decisions. Even if they do not agree with the final decisions, they need to know that they were part of the process, and were heard. Then, particularly in relation to student discipline, they need to recognize their own emotions and learn appropriate coping strategies (Chang, 2009). When teachers understand that that not everything a student does is intended to be an attack against them, they are better able to take control of the situation, instead of feeling threatened.

Lack of Support

Lack of support also generates feelings of frustration and helplessness. The further teachers are from direct supervision, the more apt they are to feel job stress, conflicts, and uncertainty (Wachter et al., 2008). Resource teachers and school counsellors are particularly affected because they hear stories about students' home lives and complaints about teachers. They may feel helpless to make positive changes when they must keep this information confidential, and they may feel isolated from the supportive channels of communication that they think are in place for other staff members.

School leaders can support teachers by building collegial relationships, providing avenues for dialogue among all staff members, and addressing harmful teacher attitudes (Cheung, 2009). Sometimes all it takes is for an administrator to acknowledge a teacher's negative feelings while explaining that the attitudes are not conducive to the school as a whole. Reducing teachers' supervision duties (Brock & Grady, 2008), in order to give them more time to collaborate, will also boost staff morale and make the teachers feel that they are supported.

Changes in Teaching Assignments

Individual teaching assignments change over time. When teachers have a high interest in the new assignment, they feel more in control and are less prone to burnout (Retelsdorf et al., 2009), but when they have little interest in it, they feel less in control and are prone to helplessness (Cenkseven-Onder & Sari, 2009). Depending on the amount of mental energy

required, and the degree of input that a teacher has had in the decision to change assignments, the teacher may feel positively challenged or negatively stressed.

If teachers are given an opportunity to provide input into the changed teaching assignments and are not just told that they must teach a new subject area, they feel that they have some control in their professional lives. In many cases, the teachers may be able to suggest a subject that fits better with the school's needs than if they were not brought into the decision-making process. These teachers will feel rewarded, instead of trodden upon, because they are trusted for their professional abilities (Cenkseven-Onder & Sari, 2009).

Low Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy means feeling competent in meeting goals. When teachers feel inefficient or incapable of accomplishing tasks, they may develop low self-efficacy (Chang, 2009). Similarly, when teachers are unsure of the goals, or feel unrewarded or that the job is too demanding, they are apt to feel uncertain (Tomic & Tomic, 2008). The teachers then become preoccupied with feelings of ineffectiveness (Schlichte et al., 2005), which weakens their self-efficacy. This weakened belief in one's ability can happen at any point in a teacher's career.

Teachers who have higher levels of self-efficacy are less prone to burnout (Coulter & Abney, 2009). Teachers who have higher feelings of existential fulfillment also experience fewer symptoms of burnout (Tomic & Tomic, 2008). When teachers self-reflect and are willing to learn and improve, they gain insight into themselves, and build self-efficacy. Using teacher colleagues who are experiencing similar situations, and being open to other sources of support, teachers can increase their self-efficacy and become more positive employees (Tatar, 2009).

Failure to Team-Build

When I started teaching, teachers would go straight to their classrooms, shut their doors, and not interact with other teachers during the day. Today, however, teachers need to rely on each other (Cheung, 2009), as more of what used to be parental responsibilities are placed on teachers and other school staff. In addition to the ABCs, teachers are responsible for healthy snacks, appropriate relationships, racial and religious tolerance, and numerous other value-based concepts. Positive relationships with students are paramount, but they require emotional attachment by the teacher. When team-building is absent or insufficient, teachers may feel overburdened by the increased workload and emotional toll of the modern classroom.

Principals hold a pivotal position in team-building by nurturing social supports and positive school climates (Weber et al., 2005). Teachers feel less stressed when they can turn to peers, the principal, and counsellors for support, without fear of criticism for their mistakes (within reason). When teachers open their doors and develop relationships with each other, feelings of strength and togetherness develop, which ultimately supports the children who are the purpose of the institution in the first place.

Conclusion

Teachers can be negatively stressed by feelings of little input, lack of support, changes in teaching assignments, low self-efficacy, and failure to team-build. Unless these stressors are addressed, the effects can build to the point of eventual burnout and resignation from the profession. Principals play a key role in providing opportunities for teachers to make positive changes that will increase their feelings of having input, being supported, determining their teaching assignments, strengthening self-efficacy, and team-building, in order to create a thriving school community.

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