

# Betrayed No More

How Morally Centered Schools Reduce Educators' and Students' Distress



By Wendy Dean and Rachel Schaffer

**F**or too many educators, the idea of a morally centered school may seem like a fantasy—or be so novel a concept that it is hard to grasp. In this article, we describe such schools, which truly serve students' best interests by following a set of shared professional values, and how educators and their unions can help create them. But first, let's take a look at how things currently stand. The following four scenarios are drawn from interviews we conducted with 13 educators in five states. Although we have changed individuals' names and some key details, the fundamental truth of each educator's predicament remains clear.

## Betrayal of Trust

One fall day at a Midwestern elementary school, Jane threatened to use a sharp object as a weapon against another student, Sally, as they were standing in line before school. Other students saw the incident and reported to their teachers that they felt unsafe.

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Terry, a midcareer teacher, followed the district protocol: they accompanied Jane to the office, reported the incident, and expected that (per the policy) Jane's parents would be contacted and the school counselor would engage Jane in a series of sessions to help her apologize to Sally and change her behavior (along with determining if there were any underlying issues to address). Terry assured Sally that Jane would face consequences and that she and the other students were safe. Terry made those promises based on the clear district policies and procedures that were in place to maintain a safe environment in exactly this situation.

That day, though, all administrators and counselors were busy: addressing more severe behavior issues, gathering reading data for district meetings, filling out forms for state funding requirements, and addressing that day's substitute shortages. Because the school is under-staffed, no one called either Jane's or Sally's parents or rendered any consequences. Describing the situation, Terry cringed as they recalled their inadvertent "betrayal of [Sally's] trust because the principal was too busy."<sup>1</sup> They had assured Sally that Jane would be held accountable for her actions, and yet Jane returned to class within an hour. Terry summed up their despair: "Public education is falling apart, or it's being torn apart. I don't know what to hope for except maybe that we can piece it back together."<sup>2</sup>

## Partisan Polarization

Alex, a teacher in the Deep South, has felt in recent years as if his state school board has been working against educators. After adopting partisan state school board elections several years ago, voters have seemed to care more about the candidate's party than their expertise in education. As Alex explained, "I was a state delegate at the party convention a few years ago. Candidates for the state school board called me daily. I remember when one of them launched into talking about their platform: getting groomers out of education, supporting vouchers, parents' rights.... The usual extremist conservative talking points. When I shared that I am, in fact, a teacher, the candidate hesitated for only a moment before continuing to bash my profession. I asked for any proof of her claims, and she could not offer anything. Just 'I hear from people.' That's it. And she won the race."<sup>3</sup>

Before partisan school board elections, Alex believes candidates were held more accountable for their claims, agendas, and disparaging comments. Now, there are extremists who have become accustomed to questioning the morality of educators. "I am working day in and day out to help students succeed," Alex said. To "have a member of the school board echo some talking point from conservative rhetoric, it feels like I am swimming upstream. Constantly. Against a waterfall. It's exhausting."<sup>4</sup>

## Scores Before Students

An elementary educator in the Mountain West, Blake, calculated that she had lost at least 24 instructional hours each year to administering tests and that students had lost dozens of hours of developmentally necessary play time (recess) in their district's push to meet benchmarks. Students may not be ready to learn certain material, but instead of taking time to build foundational knowledge, teachers must adhere to the district pacing guide. When this happens, Blake says, "students lose trust in you. I think students come in hopeful, with all this [implicit] trust in you. You build your [classroom] culture, you say, 'Oh, we're going to do this this year and you do this and then...!' But when they fail on an interim test and you have no time to help them, I think that they lose faith in grown-ups being there to help them succeed. I see it in their eyes—they just stop engaging. That's real."<sup>5</sup>

## Structural Determinants of Education

Jalen worked for many years at an elementary school in a historically redlined\* part of her district that was still severely under-resourced. She constantly felt pressure to get higher test scores, but her young students regularly came to school unprepared to learn because they were hungry and felt unsafe due to passing gang members in the neighborhood on the way to school. In addition, most were English language learners. The district pressured Jalen to increase student performance, particularly in math, but she knew that the curriculum was simply inaccessible to many of her students. When students performed poorly, they became anxious. Administrators, heedless of underlying challenges or Jalen's keen awareness of test scores,

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consistently reminded her how few of her students were proficient in math. Jalen said, "I can't do this to kids anymore. I can't teach a curriculum that doesn't meet their needs and then test them and tell them they're failing."<sup>6</sup>

After years of feeling like she was failing her students, Jalen moved to one of the highest socioeconomic status schools in the same district. Her first year, she won a district award for students' high scores in math—not because her teaching was different, but because the students came to school well prepared and were growing up in a safe, supportive neighborhood.

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What do these examples have in common? They are all situations that contribute to not only burnout but also moral injury. Burnout is no doubt familiar to all educators, but moral injury may not be. Let's examine each—and how they are related.

## Burnout

Occupational distress, including educator distress, has been characterized as burnout for the last half century. Burnout often refers to that feeling of being overwhelmed and exhausted—and unable to do or be enough, no matter how hard one tries. But the concept of burnout is fraught with problems, beginning with a lack of definition discipline. One 2018 study reviewed 182 research papers and found at least 142 definitions for meeting overall burnout or burnout subscale criteria.<sup>7</sup> So, although there is much discussion of "burnout," it may not all be about the same thing. Secondly, many scholars and people in the workforce object to the label, rejecting its implication of individual frailty. And finally, there is often a qualitative dissonance with what workers feel.

It is time to rethink teacher distress to get to better solutions. As one workplace expert recently pointed out, "We tend to think of burnout as an individual problem, solvable by 'learning to say no,' more yoga, better breathing techniques, practicing resilience—the self-help list goes on. But ... applying personal, band-aid solutions to an epic and rapidly evolving workplace phenomenon may be harming, not helping, the battle."<sup>8</sup>

## Moral Injury

Moral injury was first defined by a psychiatrist working with combat veterans from the Vietnam War. Originally conceived as "betrayal by a legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation,"<sup>9</sup> it was later expanded to connote a transgression of one's deeply held moral beliefs<sup>10</sup>—for example, that all children deserve to feel safe and welcome at school, even if they are undocumented migrants or don't identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. These two elements—betrayal and transgression—are often viewed as

\*To learn about redlining, see "Suppressed History: The Intentional Segregation of America's Cities" in the Spring 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ael-spring2021/rothstein](http://aft.org/ael-spring2021/rothstein).

the external and internal sources of moral injury, respectively, but it may be more helpful to view them as having a stimulus and response relationship: a betrayal to which one acquiesces, resulting in transgression of one's moral beliefs. In teaching, those beliefs are grounded in a commitment to meeting students' needs.<sup>11</sup> As the opening vignettes make clear, teachers are deeply committed to their students—but as constraints increase on their ability to teach in ways that will help their students thrive, the situation is becoming untenable. For one educator, "Becoming a teacher to help students, only to be forced to participate in a system that fails them at every turn, creates moral injury."<sup>12</sup> Another teacher said that he "could not participate in a system that requires me to ignore student needs (recess and play) in the name of better scores."<sup>13</sup>



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Distinguishing moral injury from burnout helps us better understand each. Burnout arises from demand-resource mismatches or operational challenges—like excessive class size, too much administrative burden, or too little lesson prep time. Moral injury stems from relational ruptures of broken trust, values conflicts, and unresolved miscommunications—like devoting instructional time to test preparation instead of joyful learning. Burnout and moral injury are best viewed as independent drivers of distress, though they often co-occur.<sup>14</sup> Early data suggest they occur concurrently often enough that when one is present, the other should be queried.<sup>15</sup>

Moral injury is not an easily compartmentalized experience—making it difficult to study—and research on job impacts is embryonic (even within the military, where the phenomenon has been studied for three decades). Based on our understanding of this limited literature and our experience studying moral injury in healthcare and education, we posit that impacts on students and teacher job performance may include disengagement, errors of judgment with student discipline or curriculum, reduced effectiveness in the classroom and in collaborative

work, and lower perceived agency. This is an area in urgent need of empirical study.

But even without a clear understanding of the impact of moral injury, awareness of moral injury and how it differs from other conditions is crucial. In discussions of workplace well-being, concerning trends have emerged related to (1) folding distress of all types into the encompassing category of "mental health" and then (2) "reducing the stigma" of that mental health issue. We find this concerning because pathologizing a normal response (frustration, anger, withdrawal) to an abnormal situation (betrayal) harms individuals and weakens systems. Labeling educators' appropriate distress a "mental health" issue, rather than a workplace issue that causes moral injury, fragilizes the professional workforce.

Similarly, focusing on "reducing the stigma" of what is actually moral injury effectively lets education systems off the hook for creating the conditions that elicit these normal—albeit unideal—responses to problematic environments. "Stigma" shifts the problem and the responsibility for fixing it onto society, rather than holding the systems that created those conditions responsible for improving them. While mental health care and supportive well-being programs should be viewed as baseline conditions for the difficult work of being an educator, moral injury won't be fully addressed or solved in a therapist's office; it depends on reshaping education systems into supportive, empowering, resilient environments and reshaping our society to value working families.

### The Roots of Teacher Distress

Teaching in the United States has always been very hard work for too little pay. Today's teaching crisis is about more than these longstanding problems, though. Some of today's distress has roots in the financial crisis of 2008 and the resulting state budget shortfalls, pink slips, unfilled positions, larger class sizes, and student distress. As of the 2020–21 school year, most state education budgets had not recovered: 39 states still devoted "a smaller share of their economies to their K–12 schools than they did before the 2007–09 recession."<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, college students have been shying away from the profession in part because of instability and low wages.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to what happened in healthcare, the pandemic highlighted and magnified challenges in the US education system. At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, 36 percent of K–12 workers reported feeling burned out, compared with 28 percent of other workers.<sup>18</sup> When education pivoted to online learning, most schools "lacked teacher training, appropriate software, laptops, [and] universal internet access and, in many cases, students lacked stability and a supportive adult at home to help."<sup>19</sup> In the 2021–22 school year, teachers were scrambling to make up missed learning while juggling the challenges of hybrid learning. By 2022, 44 percent of K–12 workers—and 52 percent of teachers\*—felt burned out, compared with 30 percent of all workers.<sup>21</sup>

Across the country, the stressors of the pandemic—illness, deaths, job loss, economic insecurity, rising inequality, frustration

\*Another study found a similar gap but higher overall percentages in 2022, with 59 percent of teachers and 44 percent of working adults feeling burned out.<sup>20</sup>

with mitigation strategies, and fear of the unknown—led to dissatisfaction with public services and created conditions for social unrest.<sup>22</sup> Public schools are among the most proximate and accessible representations of government in communities, and they are often the most immediate arena in which tensions play out. As Alex’s story highlighted, local and state school boards became a flashpoint as parents unleashed their frustrations about pandemic fallout in a barrage of partisan politics and occasional threats of violence.<sup>23</sup> Book bans and attacks on mask mandates, teaching honest history, social and emotional learning, and equity policies all filtered into the classroom—pulling educators’ energy and attention from meeting students’ needs. What already felt like an imperfect compromise about what and how they were teaching became a nearly impossible minefield of obstacles (many entirely fabricated, like claims of teaching the law school concept of critical race theory to children), promulgated by those without education expertise. And all of this piled on top of the longstanding lack of action on real problems regarding school and neighborhood safety, instructional time stolen for high-stakes testing (and general disregard for teachers’ expertise), and families’ needs for affordable, good-quality housing, healthcare, childcare, and nutritious food.

The United States is at an education crossroads. As of July 2024, just over 400,000 teaching positions—one in eight nationally—were either filled by teachers who are not fully certified or were unfilled.<sup>24</sup> Appropriately, effectively, and quickly addressing teacher distress is essential.

## Solutions

Getting solutions right is what professional workforces deserve. But a word of caution is required. Frequently, organizational leaders are themselves overwhelmed by obligations and suffering from moral injury and burnout. Less frequently, they think no one will notice a half-hearted effort if they message it just right. In either case, they may *carewash* (a derivative of the term *whitewash*) by dissembling their words or actions, trying to put a positive spin on a broken promise, stated claim, or unmet standard. The workforce quickly parses such discrepancies, eroding psychological safety and inciting cynicism. As one author put it, “carewashing, whether it’s used to create a falsely positive brand for the employer or is simply the result of tone-deaf leaders, inevitably leads to erosion of trust in leadership as well as a reduction in employee engagement, job satisfaction, and well-being—and eventually, to employee turnover.”<sup>25</sup> One teacher in the Mountain West stated, “They’ll send out a weekly email saying ‘Have a Coke’ or ‘Make sure you’re taking walks’ and ‘just take a break’... My version of self-care would be for you to listen to me and for you to collaborate with me.”<sup>26</sup>

Instead of carewashing, educators deserve *morally centered organizations*. A year ago, 50 moral injury scholars and leaders shared what they believed represents a “non-morally injurious” workplace.<sup>27</sup> Those experts recommended organizations with cultures predominated by a values-based framework that balances compliance-centric rules with an internalized set of shared professional values, encouraging intuitive decisions that are “right” for serving students’ best interests. Organizations with



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cultures that inspire people to excel at teaching, and operational environments that facilitate their doing so, are places where educators thrive. In such settings, teachers are free to exercise their accumulated training and wisdom as recognized professionals in their areas of expertise.

Morally centered organizations, moreover, accept their role in managing and mitigating the risks of moral harm. Leadership recognizes that human activities will at times result in unavoidable moral challenges and accepts that they can—and must—minimize avoidable moral challenges, like administrative encroachment on teachers’ decision-making (such as whether to spend additional time building foundational skills rather than adhering to district pacing, or how to conduct classroom debates and to define the scope of content to be considered).

Finally, morally healthy organizations welcome internal feedback as essential to continued, aligned growth and have the courage to stand up to external pressures from boards, legislators, or regulators that threaten to increase the risk of moral injury to their workforce.

## Union Voice

Teaching has long been a heavily unionized profession, which helps give a collective voice to a predominantly female workforce<sup>28</sup> at risk for disempowerment. That’s crucial for mitigating moral injury because “betrayal by a legitimate authority” puts the individual seeking mitigation in the difficult position of calling out the missteps of those in power. It takes rare courage to do that; for most, the stakes are too high, so they stay quiet. In contrast, adding to a collective voice empowers teachers. While unions typically have the strongest protections for worker voices and the most leverage at the workplace, additional formalized bodies for speaking collectively include professional societies (like associations dedicated to

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subject-matter teaching and institutional leadership groups such as the faculty senate). Ideally, all groups representing educators would band together to win the resources and conditions their students need.

How does one advocate for mitigating moral injury at the bargaining table? The following points may be useful to consider or adapt.

1. The organization must conduct audits of key performance metrics related to working conditions, such as job satisfaction surveys, retention interviews, exit interviews, and absenteeism and turnover data. Whether or not the organization conducts such audits, the union should also conduct retention and exit interviews and gather information on educator job satisfaction.
  - Yearly updates to action plans addressing the findings should be developed in collaboration with workforce representatives.
2. The organization must invest in measuring not only burnout but also moral injury.<sup>29</sup> The results must be shared with the workforce in a timely way. With or without the organization's support, the union can measure burnout and moral injury and share its findings with staff and management.
  - Risk and management strategies for moral injury must be communicated freely with the workforce and must be informed by input from educators and staff.
3. Related to moral injury is the workforce's physical and psychological safety, which the organization must assess, also sharing results in a timely way. Again, the union can do this with or without the organization's help.
  - In school environments that educators and staff deem safe, plans to review safety could be developed annually. In

unsafe environments, collaboratively developing, acting on, and updating safety plans should be a top priority. As an extension of psychological safety, and to ensure whistleblowers have appropriate support and recourse in the event of retaliation, the union should inquire about whistleblower experiences when speaking up and ensure adequate resources are available for educators. (In states or districts that are not union friendly, the union may also want to involve a disinterested third party.)

4. The organization must ensure adequate mechanisms are in place to empower workers at all levels to discuss moral and ethical dilemmas in the workplace. This, of course, is another key duty the union can take on when the organization does not (yet) recognize its importance.
  - The union may want to establish a committee to determine what mechanisms make the workforce comfortable with such discussions, then bring its recommendations to management.
5. Processes for developing solutions to prevent avoidable moral injury risks and mitigate unavoidable risks must have meaningful engagement from all levels of the workforce (e.g., through labor-management partnerships or other similar mechanisms). Solutions development must be appropriately resourced to support strategy development, implementation, and sustainment.
  - Ideally, the community would also be fully engaged in addressing moral injury. Whether creating a community school,\* voting to increase funding for schools, or advocating for legislative changes, the community is essential for meeting students' needs and thus addressing educators' challenges.

The occupational distress described by the teachers whose concerns open this article, sadly, reflect the moral injury that is all too common in education. These educators knew what their students needed. They had the education, experience, and expertise to provide it. But constraints outside their control prevented them from teaching in their students' best interests. This was more than being asked to do too much with too little. It was breaking their promise to the students entrusted to them every day.

We can and must do better. Our students deserve excellent schools where they learn joyfully, solve problems collaboratively, and experience the wonders of the world—and their local communities—through a rich, well-rounded curriculum. And our teachers and school staff deserve to have their voices heard, their calls for adequate resources heeded, their expertise respected, and their safety protected. Together, we can fight for morally centered organizations where all these conditions are met—giving students, families, and educators the freedom to thrive. □

**For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2024-2025/dean\\_schaffer](https://aft.org/ae/winter2024-2025/dean_schaffer).**

\*For several articles on community schools, see *American Educator's* subject index: [aft.org/ae/subject-index#community-schools](https://aft.org/ae/subject-index#community-schools).