



**NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

## **SUPPORTING TEACHERS' ABILITY TO TEACH IN STRESSFUL TIMES**

### Tips for Administrators and Teachers

The current economic crisis is affecting many schools across the country. Families and staff are experiencing increased stress and decreased stability due to lost or reduced incomes, unemployment, home foreclosures, and forced relocation. Students are coming to school with greater needs, social-emotional difficulties and, in some cases, behavioral problems. At the same time, school budgets are being cut, class sizes are increasing, support staff and services are being reduced or eliminated, and educators are being asked to do more with less. All this puts significant pressure on teachers; therefore, it is critical that teachers are provided support in these tough and challenging times. The following suggestions can help provide that support.

**Validate the current feelings of teachers.** One of the most powerful tools to helping someone through a tough time is to validate how he/she is feeling and to acknowledge how challenging things have become (i.e. "Teaching is becoming more stressful as you are being asked to do more with less; and the student needs are becoming greater.") This opens the dialogue for teachers to feel comfortable discussing their concerns and challenges. It is important to avoid comparing situations (i.e. "Yeah, we all are stressed out and what you are going through is no different than what anyone else is going through") as this can halt a conversation and sends the message you are not truly listening.

**Provide emotional support.** It may be unrealistic to bring back eliminated positions; however, you can help provide emotional support to teachers. Listening, validating concerns, highlighting successes (e.g., recognition in a staff meeting), providing mentors for teachers, providing positive parent feedback, or saying a simple "thanks for all you do to make a difference" can help teachers feel validated and appreciated. When asked to serve as a reference or to provide a letter of recommendation, respond quickly and within timelines if teachers need to apply for other positions. Remain positive and supportive and understand that teachers may not be comfortable "waiting" to see if their pink slip will be rescinded. Your school psychologist can be extremely helpful in meeting the needs of staff who need more individualized support.

**Emphasize the importance of maintaining consistent classroom schedules and routines.** Consistency promotes a sense of safety and security. When someone is struggling through tough times, we may rush to lessen expectations or create new systems to help accommodate current stressors. While there may be a need to be flexible in how expectations are met, completely modifying or eliminating routines can be unsettling and lead to further feelings of insecurity. Instead, provide physical support as necessary to help teachers maintain these routines. This can include offering to cover a class, walking students to lunch, or asking your school psychologist to work with a difficult student or observe a class and make recommendations. The overall mission of teaching and student learning is paramount; consistent schedules and routines are critical to achievement.

**Maintain behavioral expectations.** In addition to consistent classroom schedules and routines mentioned above, behavioral expectations need to remain consistent within a class and school. Validating concerns of students is critical and allows them to be heard. Focus on positive behaviors that maintain a caring and supportive school environment and facilitates feelings of safety and security for staff and students.

**Managing behavior with larger class sizes.** Many teachers are experiencing an increase in class size. Managing behaviors with larger class sizes can be challenging. School psychologists or other staff with expertise in understanding behavior can provide guidance as needed. The most powerful behavior management tool is the positive connection the teacher has with his/her students and engagement in the academic task. If a teacher continues to struggle with classroom management, your school psychologist can provide consultation and establish an effective classroom behavior management plan. Specific classroom management strategies to help manage behavior include:

- using multi-modal teaching techniques to engage students in the lesson (e.g. auditory, visual, and kinesthetic);
- linking the lesson to real-life experiences;
- relating the lesson to an interest area for that particular age group;
- managing time well by having effective transitions between activities to promote continual student engagement;
- offering students choices with regards to specific topics or types of assignments (this gives them some control at a time when they may not be feeling much control over their life);
- ensuring that homework assigned is meaningful and supports skill development (in some situations family members might move in with relatives to help with cost-sharing which makes finding a quiet time and space for homework challenging for many and “busy work” is not what students and families need right now);
- focusing on positive academic growth and providing positive reinforcement for any gains that are made, no matter how small; and
- linking lessons to current events and highlighting how this country has been through tough times before and has persevered, as developmentally appropriate.

**Help teachers focus on the positive accomplishments.** Even though class sizes are increasing, many positive accomplishments are occurring daily in every classroom. Encourage teachers daily to highlight one positive accomplishment of themselves or a student in their classroom. Foster resilience by encouraging students to participate in “helping” or mentoring activities. Post these accomplishments on a classroom bulletin board or common area bulletin board.

**Support teachers in being flexible and knowing limitations:** When class sizes increase and/or support services are decreased, the workload for teachers becomes even more demanding. Teachers must reflect on what they are reasonably able to accomplish. If they are not realistic, two consequences are possible: 1) they may overcompensate and reach burn-out, or 2) they may give up. One example of flexibility is to consider how the teacher is accessing for student mastery. For example, with only 22 students, a teacher might have administered an essay exam. Now with 30 students, grading an essay exam can take considerably more time. One alternative is to combine multiple choice and essay questions; this still maintains high academic rigor and the same level of content mastery, but also provides for more realistic grading requirements. Encouraging participation in professional learning communities will also allow teachers to formulate common assessments which will help reduce some of the work load in regard to testing competence in subject areas.

**Provide activities that allow staff and students to connect with each other:** Often times when persons are stressed or overwhelmed, they tend to disengage from those around them. It is these times that connections and relationships with others are even more important. Ask parents to donate dishes for a staff breakfast to promote staff togetherness. Organize a staff activity (tennis game, bowling, bike ride, after school hors d'oeuvres, etc...) that allows staff to relax and enjoy each other outside of the stresses of the school day and build camaraderie. Within their own classrooms, increase cooperative learning activities and/or facilitate an activity where students can help each other during these tough times (e.g. food drive for local food pantry). These activities help to facilitate a sense of control, belongingness, and empowerment.

**Focus on directed and realistic expectations:** When asked to do more with less, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Often time's teachers are pulled in so many different directions, they feel like they are “doing multiple things, but not doing anything really well.” Help them prioritize 3-5 things that are of

most importance and to focus on these. Validate that our “to-do” list more than likely will never be done but more is accomplished by doing a smaller number of things well.

**Create opportunities for teachers to support each other:** More students in the classroom may lead to an increase in the variety of learning and/or behavioral needs, in addition to workload. Many schools are moving to a team-based system of teaching, planning, and problem solving. This can be accomplished through “partner teachers”, where two teachers actually share students and divide up the work by groups based on learning needs. Partnering can reduce the preparatory work for each class and allow teachers to focus on teaching level-appropriate skills. Another effective approach is to establish “professional learning communities” (PLC) among teachers. These are teams organized around grade and/or subject area that collaborate on everything from the difficulties of one student to school improvement planning and initiatives. PLCs help with communication about specific students or issues; improve problem-solving and shared responsibility for student success; reduce isolation of teachers; support professional learning that informs good teaching and classroom practice; create new understanding of teaching and learners; help staff to identify issues that may be affecting multiple students and/or require class- or school-wide attention; increase morale and job satisfaction; and create stronger commitment to making significant and lasting changes and higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change. Your school psychologist can be an important member of a PLC. They are trained to help teachers identify specific strategies and opportunities to reduce behavior issues and increase learning time.

**Find creative means for funding activities:** When school budgets are frozen, extra activities including fieldtrips and music programs are frequently cut. There are a number of local, state, and national grant resources that may be underutilized. There may also be new resources available as a result of the economic stimulus package. Students can fund trips through activities like school-wide recycling projects. This engenders a sense of community and helps students to practice goal setting and planning. Students also can help think of creative trips that are local and within walking distance.

**Remind staff and students about resources:** Remind teachers that you care and there are additional resources available to them including employee assistance programs. Remind them that in difficult and stressful times, it is common to seek extra support and having an objective listener can be quite helpful. For students, reiterate the support available at school through the school psychologist and other student service providers who also maintain a list of community counselors who work on a sliding scale, accept Medicaid, or other types of insurance.

**Provide training and parent support networks:** During stressful times, there is often an increase in domestic violence and child abuse. Forming strong and positive connections with parents and giving information about resources (parenting classes) and services (mental health, respite) will remind parents that they are not alone. Getting parents involved in helping activities at school can be important as well. Ask the PTA to organize a weekly lunch for staff in the teachers lounge or support students fundraising efforts. Just as with students, parents under stress can feel better if they are connected to and helping others.

For further support strategies to support teacher’s ability to teach during stressful times, talk to your school psychologist. They have specific expertise in this area and can be a valuable resource.

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