

## Supporting Teachers Through Stress Management

School psychologists can help promote healthier schools by providing stress reduction programming for teachers, which helps reduce teacher absenteeism, turnover, and burnout.

*Debi Kipps-Vaughan*

**A**fter listening to frequent complaints from teachers in his building, a secondary school principal became concerned about their negativity. Although comprehensive plans were in place to improve school climate by addressing the needs of the students and promoting school spirit, the teachers had limited opportunities to experience supportive activities and to gain new knowledge and skills for managing the increasing demands and stress in their roles. The principal shared his concerns with the school psychologist, who explained that she was trained to provide services to support teachers as well as students. Pleased to learn that there was a resource available to provide services for teachers, the principal made plans to initiate a stress management program for teachers.

The school psychologist conducted a needs assessment with the teachers to gauge their receptiveness to a stress management program and found that the need and the interest were high. She began to provide stress management sessions after school with positive outcomes; teachers felt supported by the principal and appreciated him

being attentive to their needs. Teachers were also excited about participating in training that was designed for their well-being. The principal also attended the sessions and benefited from new knowledge and skills for managing his own stress.

### Academic Impact

Studies have found that 20% to 25% of teachers frequently experience a great deal of stress (Kyriacou, 1998). *Teacher stress* is defined as the experience by a teacher of negative, unpleasant emotions (such as tension, anger, or depression) as a result of some aspect of their work (Kyriacou, 2001). It's not uncommon, and it appears to be universal across cultures (Harney, 2008). Principals should be particularly concerned about the effect of teacher stress on the academic

outcomes for their students. As most principals would expect, the effects of stress on individual teachers affect the classroom environment and learning (Travers & Cooper, 1996). Stress among teachers is related to absenteeism, turnover, and early retirement, which negatively affect the climate of the school and lead to poor student outcomes, both academically and behaviorally.

Because teacher stress may be a barrier to learning for students, it is relevant to consider programs that reduce stress among teachers when designing school improvement plans and staff development. Although issues related to teacher stress need to be addressed at the broader systemic level, intervening through more direct service efforts, such as stress management programming, is also an important component.

### Student Needs

For secondary school principals, especially those at the middle level, there is an additional concern because young adolescents derive much of their academic motivation from perceived support of others, especially

Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).

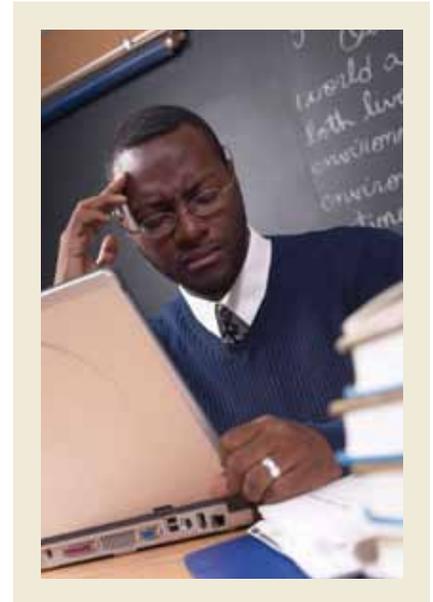
teachers (Goodenow, 1993), and often seek out and rely on meaningful relationships with teachers for support. When teachers are stressed, they are often irritable, impatient, and easily frustrated by their students (Brock & Grady, 2000) and, thus, are unable to provide the necessary support to help students succeed in the classroom and beyond. The middle school environment varies significantly from elementary and high school settings because of the students' physical, emotional, and social developmental needs, which present additional challenges because students are becoming more independent in schooling and are experimenting with new behaviors.

### **Psychological Support**

Although teacher stress management is not a traditional area of service delivery, school psychologists are trained to provide supportive services to all members of the school community, including students and adults. A teacher wellness program focuses on promoting healthier, happier teachers who in turn promote healthier, happier, and more productive classroom experiences for students. Effective stress reduction programs include such interventions as stress awareness, physiological training, environment adjustment, and cognitive coping strategies (Brown & Uehara, 1999).

Those interventions can be incorporated into workshops for teachers, but successful implementation of a stress management program is contingent on teachers' perceived needs and interests. In the context of the school day, teachers may feel their schedule is so demanding that the idea of devoting time to a stress management workshop causes additional stress. Therefore, planning a school-based stress management program requires attention to the specific needs of the teaching staff.

A needs assessment is a valuable tool for identifying the need for health and wellness services and ensuring that responses display sensitivity and responsiveness to staff members' needs. It can serve as the foundation for improved communication and cooperation (Nardi, 2003). School psychologists are well-trained in conducting needs assessments and have access to resources for surveys developed for those purposes. The school psychologist can develop, administer, and analyze a needs assessment that focuses on teacher stress. This is an important initial step in introducing a stress management program to staff members. It's also important to let teachers know that they have input into the scheduling and topics that will be addressed in the stress reduction program and that the emphasis



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### Communication

Studies have indicated that one factor of stress is intra-school communication (Skillern, 1990). With the challenges of working with pre-adolescents and adolescents, teachers need to feel supported, and communication is a primary means of support and stress reduction.

Principals can be attentive to increasing the infrastructure for communication throughout the school. When teachers are stressed, being informed, having effective two-way communication, and being included in decision making increases their sense of control.

**Source:** Skillern, P. A. (1990, November). *Stress factors of middle school teachers*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

of the program will be on well-being. That message must be communicated clearly by the principal and the school psychologist.

#### Positive Outcomes

Providing stress management for the teachers addresses individual teacher needs and creates a culture of caring and relatedness that has a positive impact on the education process. Brown and Uehara (1999) found that stress management intervention programs have a variety of outcomes, such as improved peer support, reduced levels of somatic complaints, decreased work pressure and role ambiguity, enhanced feelings of personal accomplishment, and improved job satisfaction. A principal who addresses the needs of the teachers promotes an environment in which teachers can more readily address the needs of the students.

#### Program Topics

The structure of a stress management program typically consists of several sessions. Activities are selected on the basis of results from the needs assessment, reported school climate concerns, and the school improvement plan for the school building. A stress management program can be designed to cover a variety of topics, such as positive thinking, relaxation techniques, well-living strategies, communication skills, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills. The overall goal of each session is to help participants increase their awareness, develop new stress management strategies, and develop new skills.

In my experience, one of the challenges in offering a stress management program, particularly at the middle level, is getting teachers to commit to participating in something for themselves. Given that teachers frequently identify themselves as caregivers, they may need encouragement and incentives to participate in activities that are directed at self-care. One incentive and additional benefit for teachers who participate in such programs is that stress reduction programs for teachers have been acknowledged as meeting the criteria for recertification points for licensure.

Specific objectives for a program include:

- To increase awareness and skills in improving stress management

### At a Glance

- Teaching is one of the most stressful occupations, and teachers need to be supported through specific efforts.
- Teacher absenteeism, turnover, and burnout are all symptoms of stress that can be addressed and alleviated.
- School psychologists are a great resource for promoting healthier schools by providing stress reduction programming for teachers.

## What Next?

School leaders who are interested in addressing the stress levels and needs of teachers should discuss the current status of teacher morale and observations of teacher behavior with the school psychologist. Some questions to consider are:

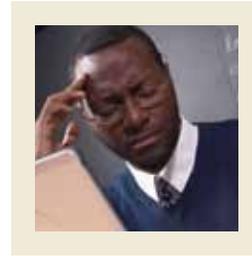
- Are the teachers experiencing any stressors beyond the norm of an educational work place?
- Is there a level of teacher stress that is affecting the classroom learning environment?
- Will a teacher wellness program communicate to staff members that they are valued and help promote an environment of social support?

Introduce the idea of offering an after-school stress management program to teachers by having the school psychologist administer a needs assessment to determine level of perceived need and interest. The results of the survey can direct the planning from that point and begin a new stress-free initiative for the staff.

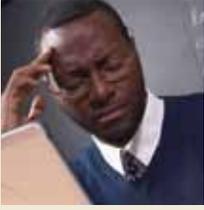
- To recognize common themes to illustrate that many problems are universal
- To improve communication skills through the use of effective listening skills
- To develop group cohesion through mutual support and understanding
- To achieve interpersonal learning
- To respond to the needs and concerns of others
- To promote self-improvement as a positive consequence of recognizing weaknesses
- To develop strategies for applying healthy interpersonal and intra-personal behaviors in the classroom setting.

Although many training needs must be addressed for teachers, a stress reduction program has the benefit of helping teachers apply newly learned information and implement new programming more efficiently because personal potential is maximized. Similar to any training offered to teachers, the success of participation and implementation is dependent on the principal's attitude, support, and communication about the program. Stress management should not be offered because teachers are stressed and need help, but because teaching is one of the most stressful occupations and there are helpful techniques and strategies available.

The school psychologist may also



Stress management is not offered because teachers are stressed and need help; it is offered because teaching is recognized as one of the most stressful occupations and there are helpful techniques and strategies available.



A principal interested in addressing the stress level and needs of teachers may first want to discuss the current status of observations of teacher behavior with the school psychologist.

be a valuable resource for presenting the program in a positive manner that entices teachers to participate. If a school has access to a qualified school psychologist and the program is offered as a voluntary after-school service, then the question is, Why would you *not* put a stress management program in place for your teachers? If the answer is that there are already more than enough things to attend to, be aware that the most important time to attend to the stress of your teachers is when you don't have time for it. **PL**

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