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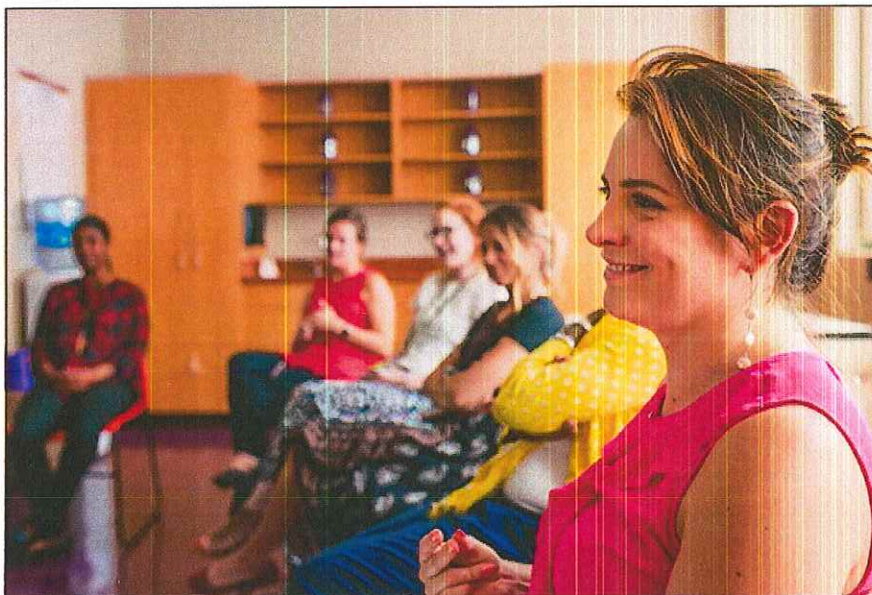
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SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING: IT STARTS WITH TEACHERS

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Happy Teachers Practice Self-Care



Danna Thomas, a kindergarten teacher at Windsor Hills Elementary School in Baltimore, and the founder of Happy Teacher Revolution, smiles and snaps her fingers while a fellow teacher shares a good moment from earlier in the day. —Erin Irwin/Education Week

By Madeline Will

June 7, 2017

Secure your own oxygen mask first before assisting children.

That saying aboard planes has resonated with Danna Thomas, a kindergarten teacher in Baltimore who founded a teacher-support group called **Happy Teacher Revolution**.

"We can't be there in our fullest capacity to teach kids if we're not in our fullest capacity ourselves," she said. "No matter how strong your lesson is, ... it could all be perfect, but I personally cannot deliver a lesson to the best of my ability if I don't get a full night's rest, if I don't eat on my lunch break."

Every Friday during this past school year (and once a month beginning next school year), around a dozen teachers from multiple school districts attend Happy Teacher Revolution

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meetings in downtown Baltimore, where they have a moment of mindfulness or guided meditation. Sometimes, they try yoga or aromatherapy.

They also read aloud **12 choices** to be a more balanced teacher. They include: I choose to make time for sleep. I choose the battles worth fighting. I choose to disconnect and detach with love. I choose to be happy.

"Self-care is not selfish. That's something I have to remind teachers because so often we put ourselves last," said Thomas, who hosts an additional monthly meeting for teachers at her school and has presented Happy Teacher Revolution as professional development for other schools.

Happy teachers lead to happy students, educators and researchers say. As schools across the country put more of a focus on social-emotional learning for their students, experts have come to realize that teachers' social-emotional competencies, especially their stress-management skills and their ability to regulate their emotions, are a vital piece of that puzzle.

"The primary way children learn social-emotional skills is through being exposed to adult behavior," said Patricia Jennings, an associate professor of education at the University of Virginia who studies teacher stress and the social and emotional context of the classroom. "If a teacher doesn't have a level of social-emotional competence to model the kinds of behaviors that he or she is hoping students adopt, then he or she is sending mixed messages."

For example: Some teachers will tell their students not to be bullies or call their peers names but then yell at a misbehaving child. Or they'll be stressed and tense during the school day, which students will pick up on.

"[Teachers] need a level of social-emotional competence that's way above the norm," Jennings said. "The average person, you couldn't stick them in a classroom with 25 kids and expect them to be successful as a teacher."

Managing Classroom Stress

Teachers often have Type-A, perfectionist personality traits, and they care deeply about their work, said Alison Smith, a former 4th grade teacher who now offers life coaching to teachers through her website, **A Teacher's Best Friend**.

"[Teaching is] so much more than a job. It's our identity, it's who we are," she said.

"When you have your identity wrapped up in being a teacher, but then you don't feel good at it—you feel like, 'Well, I just suck, I don't feel good enough, period.' And it really rocks your sense of worthiness."

That makes it crucial for teachers to develop social-emotional competencies, Smith said: "As great as it is to get training on pedagogy, none of it really matters if you can't cope with the realities of the classroom."

A recent report **looking at the landscape of teacher-preparation programs and social-emotional learning** notes that in only one state—Alaska—more than half of teacher

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Tia Perry, in yellow, snaps her fingers as Liz Meadows, right, and other fellow teachers smile and laugh during a Happy Teacher Revolution meeting, where moments

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education programs address self-management skills, which include managing stress. Very few

of mindfulness and guided meditation are shared among teachers at Windsor Hills Elementary School in Baltimore.
—Erin Irwin/Education Week

programs overall teach teachers how to identify their feelings, strengths, and weaknesses, or how to control and express their feelings, found the report, which was prepared for **the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning**, or CASEL, a Chicago-based organization working to advance social-emotional learning in schools.

And having those skills could help teachers stay in the profession, experts say. About 8 percent of teachers leave the classroom each year. According to researchers, retirees only make up a small share of that number. That turnover rate is even higher for new teachers and teachers who work in high-poverty schools.

"If you think about the classroom, it's a very stressful context," Jennings said. "You're in a room with 20 to 30 kids. You have a goal to deliver a certain amount of content to help these students understand and apply it. You can't leave this classroom, you have to be in this classroom for a certain amount of time. ... That can be extremely frustrating."

Those factors also make it hard for teachers to regulate their emotions during chaotic moments because many stress relievers—getting a cup of coffee, going for a walk, taking a few minutes to clear their head in privacy—aren't always available to them during class time.

"The teacher has to not only manage the situation but also manage his or her emotions in that moment," Jennings said.

What's more, students will pick up on a teacher's stress or irritation, said Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, a professor of applied developmental psychology who studies social-emotional learning at the University of British Columbia and the author of the report on teacher-prep programs.

The report recommends additional research on teacher social-emotional learning, as well as adoption of state policy efforts to embed those skills into teacher-preparation programs.

Meanwhile, in May, U.S. Reps. Tim Ryan and Susan Davis, Democrats from Ohio and California, respectively, **introduced a bill** that would require the National Institutes of Health to conduct a two-year study on reducing teacher stress and boosting teacher retention.

The bill, which has not yet been considered by a congressional committee, suggests the agency implement and analyze the results of programs that focus on workplace wellness, social-emotional programs, teacher stress management, and alternative medicine, such as mindfulness meditation.

The science and research surrounding teacher well-being is still emerging, Schonert-Reichl said, but there have been some recent studies examining the link between teacher well-being and student achievement.

Schonert-Reichl co-wrote a Canada-based study released last year that **found a possible connection** between teachers' burnout levels and students' levels of cortisol, a hormone that is released during stress. When teachers were feeling burned out or exhausted, students were more stressed.

It's not clear whether students' stress was causing teachers' stress or vice versa, but Schonert-Reichl said she suspects it goes both ways.

"How could teachers teach and kids learn when they're highly stressed?" she said. "They can't. You're sort of in survival mode."

Smith, the life coach, said she once worked with a teacher to develop a weekly self-care habit. After a few weeks, one student told her she seemed different—she seemed happier.

"She noticed that she started bonding with her students so much deeper, her classroom management got so much better," Smith said. "She was more responsive, rather than reactive."



April Conaway, a 4th- and 5th-grade math teacher at Windsor Hills Elementary School in Baltimore, celebrates as she remembers a positive moment from her day during a Happy Teacher Revolution meeting.
—Erin Irwin/Education Week

Building a Healthy School Climate

Roger Weissberg, the chief knowledge officer of CASEL, said many of the districts he has worked with "started with [social-emotional] programming for kids and then backed up and said, 'You know, if we did it all over again, we'd focus on the social-emotional competence of adults first.'"

Still, Weissberg said, he has also seen teachers receive the benefits of social-emotional health when they teach students the competencies, since teachers learn to model them more intentionally.

The key is high-quality professional learning, he said, which should be ongoing.

"These are not skills you hear about in a 45-minute PD [professional-development] session, it's a lifetime process to develop these skills," said Vicki Zakrzewski, the education director of [the Greater Good Science Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley.

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It also starts with the school-level leadership, she and others say. The school principal should model healthy social-emotional skills, encourage a sense of camaraderie among teachers, and cultivate a safe work environment where teachers feel free to speak their minds and take chances, Zakrzewski said.

Smith added that school leaders should help manage teachers' workloads and encourage them to set healthy boundaries for themselves. "As soon as you get overwhelmed, social-emotional health goes to the bottom of the to-do list," she said.

Zakrzewski has met with district social-emotional-learning specialists who worked with teachers to develop those competencies.

"[They said] teachers were crying because they hold so much responsibilities, [they] care so much," she said. "The fact that they were even given space to attend to their own inner lives was so powerful to them. ... It brings a sense of meaning back to the work they're actually doing in education with their students. For many of them, it relates to why they got in education in the first place, even though it's messy, difficult work."

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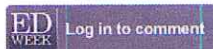
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D. Collinsworth • 2 years ago

Wow~what a powerful article. As a Instructional Para pro for an E.D. class, I am truly seeing how taking care of ourselves, aka 'Mental Health', can be so very vital to our jobs AND to the success of our students. Don't forget to celebrate what I like to call in Special Ed. our "Tiny Victories" that happen all the time. They may seem like no big deal to the average person, but to our students, it's can be a huge milestone they've been working towards for a while. Thank you for this great article~I've earmarked several phrases to do further research on for my own benefit.

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Jessica Steiger • a year ago

The topic of mindfulness has become extremely pertinent in today's classrooms considering the status of mental health, and trying to teach children it is okay to ask for help, but also providing them with the tools to combat any struggles they may have. Unfortunately, school has become a place of great stress to children and adults alike, and using social emotional learning and mindfulness has a

and adults alike, and using socio-emotional learning and mindfulness has a technique to help everyone is imperative to the future discourse of education. In particular, the central focus on teacher's in this article also establishes the significant mental health plays in the lives of adults. There are less outlets for support and aid for adults because of how mental health has become stigmatized in our society. However, discussing how "happy" teachers actually leads to happy and healthy students allows for the community to truly understand how adults deserve to find relief. As these teachers learn about how to manage and balance their responsibilities as well as their own wellbeing, then they will be able to apply what they themselves have learned to the lives of their students. In the American Journal of Education Forum, Bill Zimmerman discussed the need for mindfulness in schools because of how it causes growth and perpetuation of healthier students in future generations. They learn self-awareness and how to apply these greater ideas of responsibility of both balancing mental health and tasks through healthy practices. As well, through his research he found that "when students turn questions inward through reflective exercises it 'can promote resiliency and resourcefulness in the face of life's dynamic challenges and encourage habits of individual and collective attention and analysis' (Rogers, 2001, p. 55)." Mindfulness for students and teachers can be mutually exclusive, but they can also coexist to help one another achieve a healthier outlook on life and wellbeing. I believe that this article is essential for understanding future subjects in education that should be receiving greater recognition and funding in order to help both teachers and students, but in a way that these practices can lead to progress in the community as a whole.

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Michael Hale • a year ago

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Dr. KF-S → Michael Hale • 10 months ago

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