



ADVANCING EQUITY

Practice Brief: Teacher Wellness



Learning Objectives

After reviewing this practice brief you will be able to:

1. Describe the importance of collective care and teacher wellness in advancing equity in education.
2. Reflect on your personal and professional wellness, experiences of support in your communities, and current practices of self/collective care.
3. Identify general strategies for practicing collective/self-care, self-awareness, and wellness while engaging in equity work.
4. Apply specific strategies for wellness/collective care to your own classroom/school context.

Background

Equity work is challenging, slow, exhausting, and often discouraging due to lack of systemic support. This makes burnout more likely if equity leaders don't intentionally center their own and others' wellness in equity movements. This is especially true for teachers who are often already over-taxed by the day-to-day demands of the job.

In his book, *Mutual Aid*, Dean Spade (2020) writes that, "burnout is the combination of resentment, exhaustion, shame, and frustration that make us lose connection to pleasure and passion in the work and instead encounter difficult feelings like avoidance, compulsion, control, and anxiety."

For many, teaching is viewed as a highly rewarding profession; the opportunity to form relationships with so many young folks while supporting their growth is a joyous experience that would be difficult to find in any other field. However, when bogged down by the unending list of obligations and faced with the challenge of disrupting structural inequalities baked into the system, the experiences that make the career so special can quickly become overshadowed by burnout.



Noticing Burnout

Burnout can look like... (adapted from Spade, 2020)

- Feeling stressed when thinking about work being done by someone else who might do it differently
- Feeling resentment about the amount of work you do or have done relative to others
- Not respecting group agreements because you feel above the process as leader or hardest worker
- Feeling competition with other individuals or groups that seem to receive more support
- Feelings of martyrdom
- Taking on extra work or responsibilities to be important or control outcomes
- Feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or anxious
- Feeling like there's no way to do less work or have less responsibility
- Over promising and under delivering
- Making decisions from a scarcity mindset "There's not enough money/time/resources"
- Having no boundaries with work - working at all hours, skipping meals, not setting aside time to be unplugged
- Feeling defensive or unwilling to hear feedback
- Feeling shame



Mutual Aid & Community Care

Collective Care:

The term "collective care" has its roots in indigenous and historical activism movements, such as the Civil Rights movement. Whereas self-care focuses on individuals caring for themselves, collective care moves the focus away from individuals to communities. Collective care emphasizes a communal responsibility to care for one another in and across groups.

Mutual Aid:

Mutual aid involves community members within a system coming together to identify an unmet need, using shared resources to address the need, and joining forces to advocate for systemic change (Spade, 2020). Mutual aid also has its roots in activist movements across history.

Key Strategies & Takeaways

Connect with Community

Take the time to consider who your communities are in your professional life. What groups are you a part of that you're excited about and feel uplifted by? With which colleagues do you trust, feel supported by, and feel challenged (in positive ways)? Who can you lean on when you're overwhelmed or need help? Who helps you grow and thrive as a teacher?



Collaborate

Actively seek ways to collaborate with your communities to share the workload. For instance, working with subject-level peers to plan units and lessons. Designate time in professional learning communities to accomplish common tasks/goals. Create space in your communities to discuss individual or collective challenges and to brainstorm solutions. Teaming up with other professionals in your building creates opportunities for connection, amplification of teacher/educator voice, and meaningful collaboration to reduce feelings of isolation and overwhelm.

Set boundaries around work:

In a career where serving students is the mission, it can be difficult to keep your work at school. Whether it's lesson planning, grading, or just constantly contemplating ways to better support your students, the job can too easily follow you home. Setting and clearly communicating boundaries (for yourself, your peers, and your supervisors) is important to creating a work-life balance that is sustainable and fulfilling. Talk with your community about the process of setting boundaries. Find out what works for others. Examples may include leaving your work laptop at school or turning off work email notifications at a specific time. Identify your boundaries and share them with colleagues you trust. Finding allies in setting boundaries helps with personal accountability and systemic advocacy.



Follow the energy

Before taking on additional/optional work, consider how it aligns with your values, interests, and professional or personal goals. Do the things that serve you and energize you, and avoid (whenever possible) the things that drain you or conflict with your values. For instance, before joining a leadership team, consider whether the team's mission aligns with your values, consider whether the work commitments are consistent with your needs, and consider how membership on the team might impact your professional growth.

Advocate

Voicing needs or challenging current systemic practices can be frightening, taxing, and sometimes dangerous. But finding ways to advocate for yourself and others in safe, collaborative ways can be deeply empowering and restorative. Consider how you can leverage your communities to advocate for yourself, your colleagues, and your students. You might use professional workgroups to raise challenges you are facing and seek collaborative solutions. You might talk to union representatives about your ideas for improving systems. You might invite administrators to a team meeting to discuss a challenge the group is facing. You might join leadership teams that focus on issues you feel passionate about.



Conclusion

Collective care/mutual aid work will look different for everyone based on their unique context and needs. Considering the strategies discussed in the last lesson, use the following reflection activity to consider how you might take one or more of those strategies back to your school and classroom.

Building Up:

- Consider what you can start doing to improve wellness as your practice equitable teaching in your school.
- What coworkers would or do make great allies/teammates? How can you build in more time to connect with them?
- What is a boundary you could set to make your work feel less overwhelming and all-consuming? How will you communicate this boundary to your work community?
- What areas of your work are you excited about? What energizes you? How can you build in more time or space for those aspects of your work?

Letting Go

- Consider what you can stop doing or let go of to help improve your wellness.
- What responsibilities could you delegate to or share with others?
- What tasks are draining you most? Can they be modified, shared, or stopped completely to allow more time for more fulfilling things?

References

Spade, D. (2020). Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next). Verso Books.

