

Seth Gershenson: Hi, and welcome to episode number two, out of five, in our podcast, miniseries, Investigating Mental Health in Schools. I am one of your co-hosts, Seth Gershenson. I'm an Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University and a K-12 education policy researcher and I am joined today, as we are every day, with my co-host, Steve Holt. Steve, how are you doing?

Steve Holt: Good. Good. I'm good. Hi everybody, I'm Steve Holt. I'm an Assistant Professor at the University at Albany in Rockefeller College of Public Affairs.

Seth Gershenson: And in episode two, the main feature of today's show is going to be a pretty long and wide ranging discussion with Stephen Guerriero. Who's a long-time public school teacher and we'll get into his background a little bit more once we get him on the line, but we wanted to talk to him for a couple reasons. First, as we'll get into, not only is he a long-time public school teacher, but he also has held a variety of different leadership roles, both in the school and in the local teachers' union.

So he has a pretty [crosstalk 00:01:12] unique perspective on a lot of these different mental health issues facing school [crosstalk 00:01:18] personnel, facing teachers. But the other reason we wanted to talk to him, which I'll let Steve expound on a little bit, is that, as we said last week, the podcast was really motivated by some of our research using survey data that examines teachers' mental health in the aggregate in the United States and what that looks like relative to other professions and how it's changed over time.

Steve Holt: Right.

Seth Gershenson: But Steve, why don't you sort of dive into the two issues here? I think one is the data says what it says, but we want to see what it looks like on the ground in schools and get a teacher's perspective, that's going to be a little richer than the data.

Steve Holt: So when we launched this project, we were building off of a paper that we wrote together that looks at a couple of cohorts of young people as they age into the workforce. And we were able to look at people as they sorted into different occupations and see... Well, look, teachers' mental health relative to people in other occupations is actually not terribly different systematically, but this is a very specific measure and we have a national data set, but that doesn't tell the full story or paint the complete picture of what mental health actually looks like on the ground in schools. So we wanted to talk to Stephen Guerriero to get a better sense of how mental health affects teachers in their day-to-day jobs and what mental health looks like in the classroom among students, among parents and how these social interactions in schools shape mental health.

Seth Gershenson: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And also let's just get a teacher's perspective on [crosstalk 00:03:07] what should or could be done to improve working conditions for teachers, to improve mental health [crosstalk 00:03:14].

Steve Holt: Exactly. Right [crosstalk 00:03:15].

Seth Gershenson: So I think the interview is really interesting and gets at a lot of different issues that are somewhat subtle, that non-teachers, non-school personnel might not think about and certainly that doesn't show up in relatively crude survey data.

Steve Holt: Right. That's exactly right. And more importantly, teachers can provide a sense of what's already being done on the ground too.

Seth Gershenson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Steve Holt: And I think in the conversation with Stephen, he'll be able to point out different resources that schools actually have and how they've actually been deployed and what seems to have worked and what also is very clearly not working [crosstalk 00:03:58].

Seth Gershenson: Right.

Steve Holt: So it can be a useful guide for policy makers thinking about how to improve mental health outcomes among teachers and students.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, for sure. All right. Well, let's cut to the chase and get Mr. Guerriero on the phone. Hi, everybody. I'm very happy today to have Stephen Guerriero as our guest on the podcast. Stephen is a 20 year veteran of the Needham Public Schools in Needham, Massachusetts, where he has mostly taught sixth grade social studies during that time. He also has an important position as the Vice President for Communications of the Needham Teacher Association. And he is the 2021 winner of the William Spratt Award for Excellence in Teaching Middle School Social Studies. Congratulations on the award and welcome to the podcast.

Stephen Guerrie...: Thank you very much. I'm really happy to be here. Thank you for asking me.

Seth Gershenson: I'm really looking forward to our conversation today. We wanted to get teachers' perspectives on mental health in schools and how they see it in their daily jobs. And you're really an ideal person to talk about this, both from your own personal experiences, but also your experience with the teachers' union in Needham and your collaboration and consultation with your colleagues. So we came across a blog post that you wrote for Education Post about mental health in the pandemic.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: And different issues that teachers and students were facing. And to start, I was just curious, how did you get involved with blogging and sharing your thoughts on Education Post and how has that impacted your experience in the classroom and your connection with students and so on?

Stephen Guerrie...: That's a good place to start. I focused mainly on social studies as my subject. So most of my kind of professional writing and involvement was focused on things like modernizing the ancient history curriculum. I participate in archeological digs over the summer and bring back professional development opportunities for my colleagues. And I also create lesson units for my students around that. In the last few years though, I have been getting more involved with the teachers' union specifically, first as a building representative, and then later as the VP for communications. And as part of that, I'm also on the contract bargaining team. So I really see a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the entire district, and especially in advocating for teachers. And so, even before this pandemic, I was very interested, especially in teacher mental health, in that I have seen teachers that I've worked with, both new teachers, veteran teachers, everybody in the middle, kind of see this accelerating stress level that I'm afraid, leads to... Or is leading to burnout.

And I think, the job has kind of changed over the past 10 to 15 years in a way that I see my colleagues just really kind of giving everything and not having a lot left over for themselves. And I think that, also accompanied with my own kind of personal involvement with taking care of my own mental health. And I feel like it's really important to kind of break the stigma specifically with teachers who often put their student needs in front of everything else and that [crosstalk 00:07:33] kind of taking care of your own mental health can, for many teachers, feel almost self-indulgent in a way, that can lead them to neglect their own kind of stress levels. And eventually, it creeps up, as we know it doesn't go away. And so, [crosstalk 00:07:50] just taking care of my colleagues and myself, I think, so we can all be there for the kids.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, for sure. And that's an interesting point that you made right off the bat, I guess some academics call it co-production in schooling, where teaching is unique in that being an effective teacher involves someone else that you don't have full control over the students.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: And students and teachers and parents, and everybody has to work together to deliver a quality education and create opportunities for those students.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep, absolutely. [crosstalk 00:08:23] I would add even in talking about the kind of day to day of a teacher, aside from maybe even, I don't know, acting, teaching is such a personality driven job. It's so idiosyncratic in that so much of your success is determined by, at a very basic level, how extroverted you are, how empathic you are, how your interpersonal relationships are successful is

directly correlated to how successful you're going to be academically with your students and also with them as learners and just kids.

Seth Gershenson: Exactly. And it's tough to do those things well if you are feeling stressed or burned out or dealing with your own mental health issues, for sure.

Stephen Guerrie...: Absolutely.

Seth Gershenson: So another thing I saw reading your bio and reading your blog post was you made a point of saying that it's important to have teachers voices in school policy, in education policy.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yes.

Seth Gershenson: You're walking the walk there with your involvement with the union. I'm curious, has your involvement changed at all during the pandemic, and as the world has changed and schooling has changed to be more virtual and things like that?

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah. I would say in the short-term, there are certain changes. And then in the long-term, there are changes, I think we still have yet to reckon with. In the short-term, even just putting myself back into the mindset of Friday, March 13th, when basically school was closed, it was supposed to be for two weeks and ended up being the rest of the school year. And as a member of the union, I was involved in many, many meetings where first, we were just trying to grapple with what is happening. So that kind of sense of not knowing where this is leading, "Is it the tip of a tidal wave? Is it kind of something that will peak and go away?" There was no rule book. We were basically making this up as we go along.

So I was very fortunate to be in a district where the superintendent and the leadership and the school committee really took things seriously and took safety seriously. And I was learning things about HVAC systems and how many air units it takes to change the air in a classroom. And these kinds of things that we had to learn on the [inaudible 00:10:55] and teach over Zoom in a way that we never have before. And so, [crosstalk 00:11:01] we were negotiating in the moment that we were teaching, the health and safety conditions under which we would work and under which we would come back in September. My district went back in hybrid mode in September, and then what the academic expectations were for teachers and for students. And we were getting advice from the CDC. We were getting advice from the federal Department of Education, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the city, local school board, as well as the Board of Health.

So it took an incredible amount of coordination to kind of filter through all that and come up with a coherent policy while we were meeting with students on Zoom every morning. So that definitely involved teachers really getting to the

practice of teaching and what that looks like in terms of our negotiations with no rule book, with basically just trying to do our best with the information that we had at the time. So that was more in the short-term, and then as we hit last summer, we were kind of a little bit more planful because we had the summer to think about what that looks like when we go back into the class. And so, our state, the big urban districts in our state had very different considerations than maybe we did as a suburban district than maybe some of the rural districts had.

And so, where the big districts were worried about just sheer volume of students and sheer level of need that the kids had, versus our district, which was a little bit more fortunate and privileged in that we had mostly newer school buildings, mostly family situations in our district that could abide having students home longer, but it wasn't easy on anyone. And I think some of the long-term impact that we're thinking of is what are some good things that we can take away from our hybrid model? What are some things that we for sure know that didn't work? This probably isn't the place to get into it, but there's a politicization of the local education making policy that I think teachers are only now just getting the tip of, and I think that's going to be our greatest concern going forward. But that might be for later in the conversation, for your question here, I would say it made impact bargaining so much more direct and supercharged than it ever has been.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. And that's just one of the many ways that the pandemic has changed, I guess, the teaching profession. And how teachers approach addressing policy, engaging with policy, but also operating in the classroom.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep.

Seth Gershenson: So to bring it back to mental health a little bit.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: I know this is hard, but let's try to go back to the pre-pandemic normal times.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep.

Seth Gershenson: And I mean, even then, right? Burnout, stress, teacher turnover was a real problem in many districts, in many schools around the country.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: On the ground, in the classroom, what were your day-to-day experiences with stress and burnout, either for yourself or with your colleagues and was it talked about?

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah, no, absolutely. So even before the pandemic, teacher mental health and kind of social, emotional well-being was a concern for sure. And it was not going

in the right direction in what I saw. And so what I would say is, I'm at a point in my career where I do have a bit of institutional knowledge going back to the early 2000s. And as much as I don't like to hear myself say it, because it makes me sound older than maybe I feel, when we were teaching in the 2000s, not every kid had a computer in their pocket and we had one desktop computer in the back of the room that somebody might earn game time on for 15 minutes, if they did a good job.

Seth Gershenson: Right.

Stephen Guerrie...: To this environment now where you think about it, students are constantly on their devices. They are having new research come out that shows this exposure to devices at such an early age and with such an intensity changes kids' brains in a way that we still don't quite understand. And I think, [crosstalk 00:15:36] that kind of feeling of immediacy, the kind of gamification of the classroom... I consider myself an early adopter of a lot of technologies, I was one of the first in my district to have a classroom blog or to communicate through YouTube videos or things like that. I still see, though, technology is something we haven't hit quite the right balance. And I say that knowing that my students have... They're sixth graders, they have one to one iPads in my school district. So that means that every student in sixth grade has an iPad, provided by the school district that they use and can bring home and that they're also expected to use in school.

And that can lead to many really cool things, like as a social studies teacher, I can use augmented reality to have them look at a 3D model of a Greek ship, but it also means that the same device they're using to play games and that they're using to access social media, we're now saying, "Okay, shut that part of your brain off and now it's just going to be an education tool." And that switch doesn't flip off in that way. And so, a lot of my colleagues are still kind of frustrated by how quickly things move without us kind of doing things planfully. For example, I remember even just 10 years ago, when a kid was being cyber bullied, the response of the school department was, "Well, that's happening outside of school, unless it's happening on school property, we don't really account for that."

And now, of course, that response is horrifying, if we get a [crosstalk 00:17:14] report of cyber bullying, we have to act. And I think we also have situations where kids are on social media, they're exposed to so much more than they used to be, they are used to things... I mean, teaching is always kind of a performative art, but in this case, they're expecting full flash bang entertainment in the classroom. And I think for a lot of teachers, it's been hard to maintain that.

Seth Gershenson: It's hard to compete with an iPad [crosstalk 00:17:42] entertainment.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah, absolutely.

Seth Gershenson: That's fascinating to think about how one of the unintended consequences of tech in the classroom is that it does make teaching... It makes teaching easier in a lot of ways, like you said, but it makes things hard, right? It makes things different. The world's constantly changing and so you have to constantly change to keep up with it.

Stephen Guerrie...: I have a colleague of mine who teaches math and he always jokes, we have four teaching periods in the morning and he'll say something funny a kid said, or something maybe inappropriate a kid said, and be like, "It's four live shows a day." And so we're all kind of in this kind of mode where when I walk into the classroom in the morning, I have to be there of by seven, the doors open to kids at 7:25, I have to go from zero to 60 right at 7:25 in the morning and I got to maintain that until the kids leave. And so, [crosstalk 00:18:40] when I think about teacher mental health, I mean, there is a cost to kind of maintaining that super high level of energy and optimism and excitement and understanding and social empathy non-stop all the way through the end of the day.

And [crosstalk 00:19:00] set aside teachers having... Who knows, a parent might pass away, or you might be going through something really tough, or you might be worried about money or a spouse is laid off, it doesn't matter. Those same 100 kids are going to be cycling through your classroom and you have to maintain a level 60 the whole time. And so I think that's really the root of what I see in teacher burnout and in kind of that trouble maintaining that stamina.

Seth Gershenson: Right. You always have to be on.

Stephen Guerrie...: Always have to be on.

Seth Gershenson: And teaching is very unique in that. So many other jobs, you can step away and have a private moment to regroup. And it's really hard for teachers to do that.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah, absolutely. And also you're on display, so even if you're kind of off to the side, talking with another student, if I have 25 kids in my classroom and I'm helping one student, the other 24 sets of eyes are on me and they're looking at how I interact. If a student is acting in a way that's either inappropriate or mean to another student or physically kind of problematic, all those students are watching. The stakes are very high. I mean, I think, I don't know where I read it, but the idea that teachers make a 1000 decisions in a day and I think that really is true. Everything feels super high stakes and you want to get it right. But you also have your own kind of sets of emotions and things that are out of your control, like-

Seth Gershenson: For sure.

Stephen Guerrie...: Like the students.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. And I mean, a 1000 decisions might even be on the low-end.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah.

Seth Gershenson: And then, the other weird thing about it is that it's not always clear in the moment, which decisions are the big ones.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah.

Seth Gershenson: You might only realize that a decision was not great or consequential five or 10 decisions later. So do teachers talk about these feelings with each other, either in a sort of general sense or in a specific, acute issue sense? In your experience, did you talk to your colleagues, did colleagues approach you?

Stephen Guerrie...: I would say both. I think there's... Like any workplace, you have people that you're closer to and people that are more kind of colleagues or acquaintances. We did talk about these things. It's really a fine line between kind of supporting each other, kind of venting and finding funny things that kids might do that irk you or whatever, but you don't want to cross the line into kind of griping. Or when I first started teaching, my mentor teacher always told me, "Don't go to the teacher's lounge because that's where the lounge lizards are, and all they do is complain and they're negative and it will bring you down." And I understand that, and I have really tried to be a positive voice, but when you have four people who are kind of super stressed out, most often teachers are very high performing, so they're very critical of their own work.

I think there's a point at which it becomes unhelpful to kind of vent with your colleagues. And I think [crosstalk 00:22:18] that's where we get into the conversation of kind of outside help. But I would say I'm very fortunate in that I work with teachers that I'm very friendly with. And so we always talked about... Somebody will come in and want to something funny and say, "Okay, this is in the trust tree." And we all know because we do have that trust in each other, we can vent in a way that is cathartic, but is also not something we would want to share with the outside that we kind of have this shared experience that gives us all this language we can use to communicate.

Seth Gershenson: For sure. No, venting can be very cathartic, but too much of it, I guess, can lead to sort of a toxic atmosphere.

Stephen Guerrie...: Definitely.

Seth Gershenson: And you sort of hinted at, I guess, the next thing I wanted to talk about, which is when there is a teacher who's really struggling, whether related to in-school problems or personal issues outside of school, what sorts of problems does that cause in the classroom? Does that spill over to students? Does it spill over to colleagues? What are the consequences, I guess, of teachers struggling with these mental health problems or concerns or stresses?

Stephen Guerrie...: And I think, I'd say one of the hardest things for teachers to do is to recognize when they are struggling, specifically with mental health. And I think that we are all so kind of charged up in a way, nobody goes into teaching... I should say almost nobody goes into teaching feeling like, "I'm just going to grind this out." People go into teaching because they love the kids, they love their subjects. They really get excited about sharing the knowledge that they have at a deep level. But I think in order to kind of be in a job that is like that...

And I put that in the category of my mom was a nurse and she had a very similar kind of attitude of give, give, give, "Do everything for everyone else, skip lunch if I have to, or work late if I have to, go in early if I have to, work at home grading papers," because everything that's me that says, "I want to do a good job, I want to pour into the work." And so the first thing that I do notice is that teachers often are much more stressed out and exhausted than they even realize. It's almost like how people say, "By the time you feel thirsty, you're already way dehydrated."

And so, I think it's that kind of thing where sometimes it takes somebody from the outside, sometimes it's a spouse or a family member, sometimes it's a trusted colleague or especially a mentor when we're talking about younger teachers in the first five years or so of teaching to say, "It's okay to step back. It's okay to not stay until 7:00 PM making a lesson plan." I mean, one of the most valuable lessons that I learned as an early teacher was I worked with this brilliant, very caring mentor teacher, and she said to me, "Steve, you have to take care of yourself first because if you don't take care of yourself, you're not going to have anything to give to the kids."

And so we were talking about another colleague, a young teacher, whose car I had noticed when I was leaving the school at 7:00 PM. And I said, "This teacher's here so late." And the mentor teacher said to me, "That teacher might stay till seven tonight on Monday and they might have a slam bang lesson on Tuesday that's amazing and the kids are excited and awesome. They still have to plan for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday and the week after, and the week after that, and that's not sustainable." And so I think, perfectionism really goes hand in hand with teaching and I think teachers really set themselves up to have a kind of mental exhaustion that we need to address outside of the school environment.

Seth Gershenson: And you think that might be something that's unique to teaching, that drive for perfectionism?

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah. I think other kind of-

Seth Gershenson: Relatively unique.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah. No, absolutely. I'm sure people in the medical field and people with high stakes jobs like that have a certain kind of [crosstalk 00:26:27].

Seth Gershenson: [crosstalk 00:26:27] other people depend on you.

Stephen Guerrie...: Other people depend on you. And I think, [crosstalk 00:26:31] we all can think back to both extremely life changing interactions we've had with a teacher. Or if I said to you, "Think of the worst moment you had as a kid in a classroom." We all have kind of those moments burned into our brain or think of that moment when you thought, "Oh my God, this is so amazing. This opened a new world to me." Those moments don't come with music, they don't come with super lighting, they are all the time. And so we're trying to be at that level 60 for our kids all the time, because we know that even the smallest interaction can be so impactful to our kids. We just really want to do our best and to just imprint on the kids everything good that we want to, and that's really hard because you're not your best [crosstalk 00:27:27] at every moment of the work day.

Seth Gershenson: Right. So when you do notice a colleague that might be struggling or when you yourself might feel like you're struggling or treading water, what should happen, or how might you help a colleague? What do you wish school leadership provided you? How can we help teachers out?

Stephen Guerrie...: So I would say for sure, I'm very fortunate in that I work in a public school district. We have a service called an EAP, an Employment Assistance Program. And I feel very free to share 10 years ago, I was in that place, I was in my maybe ninth or 10th year teaching. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was close to the verge of a burnout. I was doing all the committees, all the after school stuff. I was teaching even Saturday class. And the year began and the second day of school, before the kids came in around seven in the morning, I had a full blown panic attack in the classroom. And I don't know if you've experienced them or if any of your listeners have experienced panic attacks, you know that it's not about logic. It feels like you're going to die any second and you don't know why.

Seth Gershenson: Right.

Stephen Guerrie...: It's completely physiological and it takes over. And I had never experienced that before. And it was really frightening. And so, luckily I was able to take a couple of sick days. My administrator was very understanding and she and I have a good working relationship. And so I think that step one is that I had a relationship of trust and not judgment with my administrator. The second thing is I had the ability to take the day off and she could say to me, "We have coverage. I can get somebody in here, it'll be okay. Your colleagues who teach on your cluster can help with lesson plans, [inaudible 00:29:30] take care of yourself." That was very helpful because, of course, it doesn't help to be on a panic attack break and also feel like, "Oh my God, I left my kids in the lurch with nothing to do."

And then, finally I did have the resources of the EAP, the Employment Assistance Program, where I could go to a licensed counselor and that person... I had five free sessions and we sat down, it was not affiliated with the school

district. So this was an outside provider, which is important because I wouldn't want my most personal kind of private interactions with a social worker to be something that I would worry about going back to my administrator. And so, we sat down, she said, "Okay, what are your goals for our five sessions?" And talked about it, "Reduce stress, have a better work life balance." And also to kind of find a person for more long-term mental health care for me, like a counselor that I really trust, that I build a relationship with and that can kind of sustain me for the longer term, for the school year.

And that was really life changing for me, both in my career and in my personal life. I had never accessed mental health resources. I think looking back, I was right in that number of men who were raised to believe, "You don't cry and your emotions stay behind a wall and you shouldn't bother with them. And mental health is only for people who are in crisis." And breaking down those myths really helped open up a world of help to me that I wouldn't have otherwise realized. And that made all the difference-

Seth Gershenson: For sure. And just the fact that your school had this EAP that made the [crosstalk 00:31:21] help available.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yes. And it was paid, it was free for me, and it was paid through the school district and that I know I'm very privileged to have, but it is something that was bargained between the teachers' union and the school district that's part of the contract. And so I think, right there, you have an avenue for kind of building a support in place that's very tangible and that's very kind of teacher focused. So it's not the school district. It's not a guidance counselor or a HR professional in the district, it's a licensed social worker who can really [crosstalk 00:31:56].

Seth Gershenson: It's an important point you make that the value of having it be a truly outside confidential counselor.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yes. And a professional experienced in working with teachers.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. Who knows what to do.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah.

Seth Gershenson: Oh, absolutely.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep.

Seth Gershenson: So not all districts have that [crosstalk 00:32:16].

Stephen Guerrie...: That's correct.

Seth Gershenson: So when we get to thinking about what sorts of policy changes would be beneficial, it seems like that is a very reasonable place to start that different

unions and schools and districts should seriously consider. My guess is that it's a very cost effective program too, because there's a good chance if those five sessions weren't there, you might have left the profession.

Stephen Guerrie...: But that's true.

Seth Gershenson: We know how costly it is to recruit new teachers.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yes. And even more than that, I would say in the shorter term too, you're talking about many days of absences that need to be covered and paid by [inaudible 00:32:56] [crosstalk 00:32:57] substitutes, which is even more costly.

Seth Gershenson: That's right.

Stephen Guerrie...: Putting this support in place is also tied to kind of a district's health plan. And so I know that a lot of public districts generally... I mean the direction is probably not going the right way, but offer good health coverage and that behavioral health, that mental health is health. And so, [crosstalk 00:33:21] in my health plan, for example, I pay a small co-payment, but I have very good coverage for behavioral health services. And that's really important because if you're talking about somebody who needs help or consultation on a weekly or a bimonthly basis, those can add up really fast. And I think that covering those just as you would cover someone who has diabetes and needs insulin, or that needs physical therapy to recover from an injury, in the same way, we need to fund and advocate for behavioral health services as part of our health plans.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, absolutely. That makes a lot of sense. The other thing that your story made me think of about is people have talked about the idea of having mental health days or recovery days, or whatever you want to call them.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: One way to do it is, like you say, if we seriously view mental health the same way we view physical health.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: You could take an absence for a mental health day or recovery day, but as we all know, teacher absences impose costs, financial for the subs, and then if you can't find a sub, there's complications for your colleagues in the school.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep.

Seth Gershenson: The one way to do it is to broaden absences to include mental health days.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: But the other idea is to maybe think about just once a month or so, have an in-service type day that rather than sitting in professional development meetings all day, is a true personal day.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: Is that something that is on the table or ever considered?

Stephen Guerrie...: We talk about this a lot too, like professional development, and also with this last year in the pandemic, teachers have had a lot more freedom to... For example, we were teaching in hybrid mode, so teachers were full-time in the building from September until the end of the school year. But things like faculty meetings, we could either participate in through our laptop in our classroom or go home and participate from home. And I think that kind of structure was really helpful and gave people the flexibility that they needed to kind of deal with all the craziness and changes of the pandemic. What I think, though, is days off are tricky to talk about, I think because, a lot of outside the profession folks look at teaching and say, "Well, you have the summer, you have February vacation or April vacation, and so what's the big deal?"

And I think what is missing is that the intensity level of being with a room full of, for me, 11 year olds, from 7:20 in the morning until 2:30 in the afternoon, doesn't mean that it's confined just to that time. So I'm preparing in the afternoons or I'm using my weekends to grade papers, things like that.

Seth Gershenson: Yep.

Stephen Guerrie...: I think what you're going to get if you mandate kind of personal days or something like that is especially younger teachers using that time to work on classroom materials, to focus on their classroom. And I think what is really valuable is someone in the profession that is trusted to say, "You need to take care of yourself first, or you can let me know when you're feeling stressed." I'll give a very kind of concrete example of a colleague really taking my stress level down a notch.

We were in a professional in-service and they were introducing all these new kind of programs we can use in our classroom, all these new iPad apps. And some of them were paid aid by the district. So you're feeling like, "Okay, I want to use this. I want the district to really get their money's worth. And I want the kids to get the most of it." And I was really feeling overwhelmed by the time we got to the fourth or fifth kind of application that we were being shown. And a colleague of mine took me aside and was like, "Steve, I just want you to remember this..." Because I was saying, "I don't know how I'm going to use all these things. I have to learn how to use them. I have to implement them with the kids. I have to get their feedback and reflect and change based on that."

And she said, "We work in a cluster." So I'm a social studies teacher. I work with the science teacher, the English teacher and the math teacher as a group, along with the special ed liaison. And she said, "Steve, we're a team and you're seeing your classroom as an island, but you have to remember, the kid who's sitting in your classroom in 45 minutes they're in my classroom and 45 minutes from then they're going to be in the math classroom. And so, if you do one of these programs we're learning and I do one of these programs and the math teacher does one of these programs, these kids are having a very busy day and they're getting exposed to a lot of different kinds of learning. And so you just have to remember, you don't have to be all the things to all the kids.

You are part of a larger system in which we're all working for the same goal. And so as long as we coordinate." And I know that I'm very fortunate in that, and the sixth grade has that cluster form. I know for my elementary colleagues who have to teach all the subjects, that's really hard. It's really designed in a way where all the onus is on them. And so, I think that the more we can kind of come at this as a collaborative approach, the more that we can foster trusted relationships where people feel free to say, "I need help," is one of the most fundamental things that we can do.

Seth Gershenson: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Breaking down the stigma for sure.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah. And not letting-

Seth Gershenson: Some of that's not unique to teaching. I mean, the stigma around talking about mental health is certainly broader than teaching, but teaching is unique in a lot of the ways that we've talked about.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep. I just want to add one more thing to that, which is [crosstalk 00:39:09] now teaching and the education profession in general is getting better at recognizing things like trauma informed education. But what we haven't done is really look at what I've read is secondary trauma. So, I might have a student who we might have to file a neglect, 51A, for the child to get care or involve the Department of Family Services. I might also have a student who is misusing kind of their chat feature and they're having, at 11 years old, the most troubling, problematic communications with other students. And I might also have a student who's using slurs or myself as a gay man, I might have students using slurs against other students that are hurtful to me.

And so I think that when I go home and I'm thinking of that 11 year old, who is clearly suffering abuse or who is saying things that's abusive to other students, that's not normal, but it's a normal part of the job because every year you have students like that. And so, we have not reckoned with how do you have a teacher exposed to both the best and the very worst of kids and families and what they're going through and kind of have this protective layer? Because if you take everything very personally in the way that most teachers do, you feel for that kid, you want to help that kid, you want to change their life into a

different direction [crosstalk 00:40:47], that takes a toll on your mental well-being, I think, in a way that we haven't even kind of explicitly talked about as a profession.

Seth Gershenson: I fully agree. That's a very deep insight, I think, that people go into teaching because they want to help, they want to save kids and you're not always going to save everybody.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah. And also reckoning with-

Seth Gershenson: And it's hard for us to deal with as humans.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah. And for teaching, you have so much in your control, I can run my classroom, I can set the expectations, I can design these really engaging lessons to get the kids into, but if a kid goes home and that 11 year old is responsible for making dinner for two younger siblings, or if that kid goes home and no one's home and they have full access to the internet with no adult supervision, I don't control that. And so when the consequences of that come into my classroom, I am left feeling both powerless and feeling kind of responsible and that's a hard thing to reconcile [crosstalk 00:41:50].

Seth Gershenson: Absolutely. So we're nearing the end of our time. This has been a very, I think, insightful and helpful conversation that I hope our listeners also find helpful and can use this when thinking about what they're doing in their own districts and as parents, what they're doing with their students. To sort of wrap it up, most of what we talked about, I would say is not unique to the pandemic. A lot of these issues have been around in teaching for a long time.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yes.

Seth Gershenson: But as we bring it home, let's talk about how, if at all, have things changed maybe permanently, maybe just for the next couple years, how has this whole pandemic, there's these newfound pressures on parents at home that might rub off on students that students might bring to the classroom, as teachers, we have concerns of our own about our own families and so on.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: How has the pandemic changed any of this calculus? What should we be doing as we move forward in the next couple years, do you think?

Stephen Guerrie...: I think that's a really good question. And the answer is really complicated, but I would say, we, as kind of a culture and a society, when the pandemic hit, it rocked us so hard to our core, that it made us realize a lot of things that we had taken for granted. And it's kind of [crosstalk 00:43:28] energized and empowered people, I think, in a way that reacts to that reality. So, one example is that when the schools closed, a lot of communities realized that many

students were getting two out of their three meals a day from their schools. A lot of communities were realizing that a lot of kids only had access to high quality books through their school or had access to mental health counseling, like a guidance counselor, through their school, that schools were-

Seth Gershenson: Internet.

Stephen Guerrie...: Internet, absolutely. That schools were on the front line of screening for abuse and neglect. And that schools were at a very fundamental level, the structure that as a middle school teacher, one fundamental truth I know is that all kids crave structure. They don't know how to express that, they don't know that, but their safety is directly related to kind of predictability. And what I mean in that is that, that five days a week, they know what they do. They get up, they go to school, they know what to expect, they know where to go.

Some classes they might not like, whatever, but they do know that there's a general expectation. And they also know that they can take for granted that that environment is organized and monitored in a way that kind of the free for all of kids playing outside doesn't have. So for example, there are expectations in the classroom and the way kids are supposed to speak to each other and the way that they're supposed to act, take turns.

When you take all that away, I think parents, families and communities realize how much is lost. And I hope that in realizing that, they realize how much is at stake in our schools and that having our schools be places, not only of learning, but of child development by professionals who can help guide kids to be good citizens, good people, empathic human beings, I think is just so important and such kind of a larger commitment that the community has. I mean, if you think about someone's average lifespan from birth to death, at no other point does society, the community, have as much input and as much at stake as they do in school. And so that is the place where kids are not only developing as people, but we're developing, what does it mean need to be part of this community?

How do we take care of each other? What is the value we put on learning, on empathy, on curiosity? And I think that in the way that kind of the isolation of the pandemic has really affected people, what has also affected people is kind of looking in a new way at how powerful schools are. And unfortunately, that's not all positive because as we're seeing, just like health, schools can be politicized as well. And I think one of the things that teachers will encounter in this coming school year, that is supposed to start in a few weeks, is a more active vocal segment of the community, really looking at what they're doing, sometimes with best intentions and sometimes not. And teachers, I think, are going to feel on guard in a way of what they're saying in the classroom, of how what they're saying is perceived by the community in a new way.

And so, I think for all those reasons, school has become much more in the spotlight. And then what I really hope is that we can get people of [Goodwill

00:47:07] to really think about what are the ways that we can support our teachers, that we can support our kids and that we can make sure we don't repeat the mistakes of the past. So we don't continue the negative trends, that we can kind of arrest those and move them in a positive direction. So when we were seeing more behavioral issues in school, or more instances of ADD or ADHD or more diagnoses of kind of social and emotional dysregulation, I think that's not an accident that those numbers are going up just as we are paying more attention to the importance of social and emotional learning beyond academics.

Seth Gershenson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephen Guerrie...: And that carries over to all segments of our society.

Seth Gershenson: Oh, absolutely. I mean, almost the politicization of almost everything.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep.

Seth Gershenson: That reminds me, there's this whole other growing pressure on teachers that you hinted at, which is, how do you talk about the recent election?

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: How do you talk about January 6th? How do you talk about the vaccine? How do you talk about-

Stephen Guerrie...: Systemic racism.

Seth Gershenson: Yes, absolutely. How do you talk about different police brutality incidents, police violence incidents? So I think you're right. And maybe this is another way that teaching is unique in that everybody, or almost everybody went to school at one point and we're on the other side of the classroom. Many people had a child in school at some point and that does make teaching unique in another way, that everybody has an opinion about it.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yes.

Seth Gershenson: This increased interest, hopefully much of it is in good faith, but I share your concern that there is some bad faith interest in watching and trying to regulate what teachers are talking about and how they're talking about these current events in their classroom.

Stephen Guerrie...: Yep. And there are segments and the issue is that they're often the loudest voice in the room looking for mistakes, looking for that in, looking for that kind of viral moment that they can grasp onto and then project all that they want it to be onto it. And I think, just as teachers are so aware of the stakes when they interact with kids, hoping that kids have a positive experience in school and in

their classrooms, they're also going to encounter even higher stakes when the outside community is kind of scrutinizing what they're doing I think in a way that has not been done before. And I think, I fear that that's going to lead to even more kind of burnout, teachers being like, "Well, I don't need this."

Seth Gershenson: Yep.

Stephen Guerrie...: I think this summer has been, from what I've seen, a real kind of moment of reckoning for a lot of teachers, kind of a real examination of, "Is this the job that I see myself in long-term in the direction that it's going?"

And I don't think we'll know the real answer to that until a year, two years out, and we see what the retention rates look like. We already know that a significantly high percentage of teachers leave the profession in the first five years. And part of that might be teacher prep programs. Part of it might be teachers realizing, "This isn't the job that's right for me." But I think a big part of that is teachers really thinking, "This is not worth it, this is not worth my well-being in this way."

Seth Gershenson: Unfortunately, I think that's right. So to wrap up then, we talked about some things that districts and school leaders can do to try to retain good teachers [crosstalk 00:50:45], to try to keep teachers feeling good about the job and up to the task and having good work life balance. And some of that's having good mentors that give that advice and give that friendly ear to hear what's going on. The other big thing is this idea of providing external help when needed with the EAP, providing a counselor to talk through problems.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: And ideally, like you said, "If you're thirsty, it's too late, you're already dehydrated."

Stephen Guerrie...: Right.

Seth Gershenson: Maybe even provide those counseling sessions before there's a crisis, before there's a dire need for them.

Stephen Guerrie...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Gershenson: And these are things that, I guess, teacher unions can ask for. These are things that districts and schools can try to provide. Is there any other advice or key point you want to leave our listeners with?

Stephen Guerrie...: Yeah, I think I would say we invest in our teachers. So much responsibility in terms of caring for, and developing our kids, the future of our society. And so, we need to make sure that we have teachers who are mentally taking care of their well-being, who have the supports that they need, and that especially the

teachers realize, it's not all on an individual teacher, that we are in this together, that this is something that it's a team approach and that the community at large has your back, that the community sees what you do, that they value what you do, and that they support what you do. And I think that goes for administrators, especially, to develop trusting relationships with the people they work for. And when I say trusting, I mean, if a teacher is comfortable enough to go to an administrator and say, "I need help," that's the measure of a good trusting relationship.

If an administrator feels like, "I don't know that my teachers would say that to me," that needs re-examining. And I think finally, we have an elected school committee in our town and I think they are ultimately the voices of the community. And as long as you are open and honest with your school committee or whatever the representative of the community is, to say, "These are the issues we're facing. This is the help that we need." When we were talking about, during the pandemic, air exchanges per hour in the classroom, we knew that was a matter of life or death or spreading disease or controlling disease. And I think having that sense of urgency, not [inaudible 00:53:29] after the pandemic does, is really important. That people realize how important our schools are and how important our teachers are to those schools.

Seth Gershenson: Yep. Well said, and we, the public, can prove that we value teachers by investing in them in all the ways that you've said and we've talked about.

Stephen Guerrie...: Absolutely.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, for sure. Well, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today. I really appreciate the honesty and sincerity and that you brought to the discussion. Thanks again, we're going to link to your blog on the website and hope to talk again in the future. And our guest today has been Stephen Guerriero, a sixth grade teacher in Needham Public Schools. And thanks again for joining us.

Stephen Guerrie...: Thank you very much.