

Seth Gershenson: Hi, everybody and welcome back to our fifth and final episode of Mind the Teacher podcast that investigates the factors that influence teachers' mental health and the consequences of teachers' mental health problems. Today we're going to wrap everything up and talk out some policy implications and some things that schools and districts and policymakers can do to help teachers and help teachers' mental health and ultimately help students. So we've covered a lot of ground in our mini series. In episode one, we heard from Professors Eisenberg and Biasi. They helped us understand how researchers think about mental health and how costly poor mental health can be broadly.

Stephen Holt: Right. As Barbara Biasi's work has shown, untreated mental health issues can really undermine productivity in general. While her work was looking at workers overall, we might imagine that poor of health among teachers can be particularly costly because it can affect students as well, which is something that teachers Stephen Guerriero pointed out in episode two. While in episode three, we talked with Professors John Jerrim and Sam Sims, and discussed our own work about how both in the US and abroad teachers have mental health outcomes similar to other occupations, our conversation with Dr. Elizabeth Steiner at RAND flagged that the pandemic might have been particularly hard on teachers' stress and anxiety levels.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. Like many things in education, race plays an important role as well combined with general concerns about teachers' mental health. In our conversation with professor Travis Bristol at UC Berkeley, he talked about the dual toll that black teachers face in grappling with inequality and racism alongside the stressors of their jobs that all teachers face. And as he put it in episode four, black teacher have really been dealing with a dual pandemic or a duality of stressors, both in terms of the disruptions caused by COVID-19, as well as the longstanding implications of racism in this country and in many of our schools.

Stephen Holt: For this episode, we wanted to revisit some of the topics from previous episodes to pull out some key points and takeaways regarding both teachers' mental health generally, and a more forward looking focus on what can be done to support teachers coming out of the pandemic. To kick this off, I had a conversation with Matt Barnum as the national reporter for Chalkbeat, a leading news organization focused on issues in education. Matt was the perfect person to speak with for a broad 30,000 foot view of what's going on in school districts during the pandemic and what school leaders should pay attention to as we move forward.

After this conversation with Matt, Seth, and I will return for an overview of the kinds of mental health supporting interventions that have been shown to be effective in both school and non-school setting. Today we have Matt Barnum on the show. Matt is the national reporter for Chalkbeat, a news organization that is focused on covering education related stories. Prior to joining Chalkbeat, Matt

was a writer at The 74, the policy director of educators for excellence, New York, and a middle school language arts teacher in Colorado.

If you pay any attention to policy issues in education, you've almost certainly encountered Matt's work. He covers everything from summarizing and assessing policy proposals coming out of Washington, to highlighting the latest research in education. We invited him onto the podcast because Matt has done a lot of reporting on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' wellbeing and parental wellbeing and mental health in schools. Matt, we're very grateful to have you on the pod and really look forward to the discussion.

Matt Barnum: Yeah, thanks for having me. Looking forward to it.

Stephen Holt: It seems like prior to the pandemic, it maybe occasionally come up, but it just wasn't a huge focus in a lot of education circles, but obviously the pandemic has highlighted a lot of things. So give me an overview of how the pandemic has shaped how we think about mental health in schools. How's it impacted teachers first and foremost?

Matt Barnum: Sure. Yeah. I mean the teacher stuff is what I know the best because there have been some very good research done on it. We have evidence that teachers have experienced more stress than other workers during the pandemic and they also self-report more signs of depression. I mean, that's important because teachers... In many professions, people are feeling stressed out right now and may have felt stressed out before the pandemic. It's always important to say compared to what. I think I might have been a little skeptical that teachers had disproportionately negative feelings of stress or mental health issues because of the pandemic. But we do actually now have good survey evidence that at least teachers report higher levels of stress than some other workers during the pandemic.

I think that's concerning. I think it's concerning both in terms of how that's going to show up and affect teachers' effectiveness as instructors and how it has affected their effectiveness and how that could show up in terms of burnout or teacher attrition, which I'm sure we'll talk about later. And then of course, I think it just matters in and of itself because school officials should care about how their staff teachers are feeling.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. When you're thinking about teachers, in your reporting, did you talk to need teachers and get a sense for maybe some of the things that they might have brought up that have really affected their mental health regarding changes from the pandemic?

Matt Barnum: Yeah. Well, I think the thing that has jumped out to me, both from talking to teachers and looking at the empirical survey data is the different modes of teaching and the different modes of schooling have really affected teachers because teachers just like anyone want to be effective at their job. When you're

feeling like you're not effective, you don't feel good about yourself. You feel stressed out. That may have a direct effect on your mental health and I think, a mantra from teachers, it's like I'm a first year teacher again. And that's really hard as anyone who has been a first year teacher knows.

That, I think really manifests itself in a number of different ways or was caused by a number of different aspects of this pandemic, not just the health issues, but the pedagogical issues of teaching remotely and in person at the same time. Teaching remote students as you're teaching in person students. Toggling back and forth between different instructional modes and not feeling like you're getting in a group. I think that's really shown up both in my conversations with teachers and in the data as a key source of stress this year.

I think the other aspect of it is whether teachers should go into work has been, I think it's probably fair to say, uniquely a political and public policy issue. I don't know that this has shown up in the polls or has even been asked about in the polls, but I think teachers have been very cognizant about this very fierce debate about whether schools should be reopened and to what extent they should have their buildings opened. I mean, I think it's a totally legitimate debate. Of course, that was a question for policy and politics, but what I've wondered about is how teachers have experienced seeing that debate play out in the headlines and whether that has also been an additional source of stress.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. I mean, that's an excellent point. Very few occupations had their job protocols and occupational protocols, part of a large, very public, very intense debate. When talking to teachers, it's often treated as a caring profession and people think of it as a caring profession. I think that's mostly right. Like teachers often do care a lot about their students.

So when you are talking about the personal wellbeing and thinking about family members and the added stress that that brings during the pandemic. I wonder how much teachers have experienced an exponential version of that in that they're not worrying just about themselves and their family, but also their students that they have relationships with. Have you gotten that sense at all from any of the coverage or from teachers?

Matt Barnum: That's a good question. I mean, obviously if you talk to a teacher, they really care about their students. I think that's one of the reasons that pedagogical stressors have been so severe is that many teachers have felt that they just haven't been effective or as effective as educators this year and they're concerned about how that's going to affect their students. And then that's translating into stress in them working hard. I mean, there's other data indicating, and I believe this is self-report data.

I think we know that self-reported data on working hours is not perfect. So let's take this with a grain of salt. But I think there's other data showing that teachers have worked longer hours during the school year, and that's also a

manifestation of them caring and then being concerned about their students' education and their effectiveness in the classroom or in the Zoom classroom. But then working longer hours could also contribute to stress and mental health issues or relationship challenges with family members. And so, yeah, I think that the caring aspect of it certainly can be a contributor.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. So have you talked to any principals or school districts or gotten a sense from them, how they are responding to this strain that teachers are reporting? Has there been any talk of that or?

Matt Barnum: I don't know that I have seen much about that. I have to think about that. I guess actually the clearest and most tangible way that I've seen schools respond, and this has been a pretty common response. So we don't know exactly how prevalent have been with monetary bonuses for teachers and what some are calling, thank you bonuses. Certainly, I have to imagine there have been other responses at school or district level and maybe providing extra support in terms of mental health support or in terms of sharing your appreciation for teachers who have gone above and beyond.

But the one thing I've seen at the policy level have been these thank you bonuses. Those have involved sending a check or direct deposit of \$500 to \$2,000 to teachers to say, "Thank you for your hard work this year. We know this year has been really hard." Teachers I've talked to have been really appreciative of that, and they said, "We finally feel seen. We finally feel appreciated for the work we've done." I will say these bonuses are a little controversial though, because sometimes they're coming from the stimulus money that got sent through to of schools.

There are some folks who say, "Well, we should be using that money directly on needs that schools and students and teachers are experiencing going forward, not as a backwards looking bonus for work already done."

Stephen Holt: Right. It's more, I think, conceptualized as a capacity building thing rather than a bonus

Matt Barnum: Thank you backwards. Right.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. So to get the closing section of our conversation, I think. I would really just like maybe your thoughts given that you have a broad view of a lot of the research that's come out and that you talk to a lot of school leaders regularly in the course of your job. So in thinking about the likely return to in-person instruction in the fall, I mean, although with the Delta variant, this seems the likelihood has changed a little bit.

What should districts be thinking about to support their teaching workforce? Particularly, in light of what we know about the difficulty of the previous year.

Teachers have reported look, I'm stressed and depressed and I imagine this summer wasn't necessarily a big reprieve.

Matt Barnum: Yeah. I mean, it is a million dollar question because it's like, well, at the heart of getting schools to operate effectively and in general is like, well, how can we support teachers so that they're at their best for students. That's always been true and it's especially true right now. I don't know that I have clear answers and I don't know that there is a clear quote-unquote research based answer. I have a couple thoughts though. I think one thing, very high level thing is like, set up supports for students so that they're ready to learn when they enter the classroom, and so that teachers can focus on teaching.

We know students are going to enter schools with a lot of challenges both academic, socially, emotionally. Some students have not been in a school building in a year and a half. There was a recent estimate that 120,000 students have lost a caregiver or parent because of COVID. Many children have been socially isolated and are going to struggle to re-acclimate to being around peers for six to seven hours a day. I mean, these are really, really steep challenges that I know our educators are cognizant of. I know that they're worried is going to make it hard to dive back into instruction to make up for the learning gaps that have emerged.

I don't know that the right answer is to just dive right back into instruction, but make sure schools have supports in for those students. I think a lot of that is not going to be through teachers. I think that's going to be through counselors and social workers, but it could also be through poor teachers and giving teachers trainings to provide extra supports for students when they come in that aren't just instructional or making sure the classroom is conducive to students, forming meaningful relationships with their teachers and with their peers.

Some have talked about reducing class size as a way to do that. That thinking about the structures that allow for instruction to be effective is the broad answer. How you put that in place and practice, I think is really where the rubber hits the road.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. I think that's an excellent point in that districts need to start thinking now about how they're going to deal with such a broad set of community traumas that I think a lot of students are going to be entering the classroom with and preparing both teachers, but also the school support staff for how exactly they're going to handle those traumas. I think is a good thing to flag that I don't think it's gotten a lot of attention. So closing thoughts. If you are thinking about maybe the top three things that administrators should be doing to try and avoid teacher burnout, is there anything beyond that list, like smaller classrooms and support staff, or did we just basically cover it in your mind?

Matt Barnum: No. We probably didn't cover it. I think this isn't a burnout per se issue, but this is a teacher retention issue, which is pay. If you're going to talk about retention

in any profession, you have to think about pay is going to be where you start. So I would consider if you are a school district that has a lot of teacher retention. I'd ask, are we paying teachers a competitive wage? I would also ask differentially, are we seeing higher turnover in high poverty schools or in certain grades in subjects? We often see shortages in math and science and in particular. And then should we have targeted pay increases in areas where we're really seeing increased turnover?

Now I think pay is not the only thing. You can be burnt out even if you're well paid. And you might even right stay in the classroom if you're burnt out and well paid or waiting on your pension to burst or what have you. But it's still an issue both for the running of a school and for just caring about teachers as human beings. I think, being cognizant of workload and working conditions are really important. The working conditions can be what type of building teachers go into every day. Is it a safe, healthy, functioning building? It can be class sizes and it can be feeling like you are effective in your job, and whether you have the resources and support to do your job. It can be really small things like, "Gosh, is the printer in our school working and is it a pain in the butt for teachers to print the materials they need?" Just the small workings of a school, I think should be helpful to teachers rather than hindering teachers.

I think in education, perhaps more so than many other professions, we have very high supervisor to staff ratios where it's like teachers may be quote-unquote supervised. One principal may quote-unquote supervise 30, 40 teachers and so they're not able to give them support and feedback yeah in thinking about improving supervising and support for teachers. And also sometimes that feedback is like teachers don't get a like, "Oh wow, you're doing a great job." People and all workers need and benefit from that. If you're not hearing that, that can be really draining and stressful.

Stephen Holt: That's an excellent point. I think about this quite a bit, because a lot of the narrative that you hear in public education generally is that it's highly bureaucratic and administration heavy. But when you actually look at schools, many of the challenges that they have in managing teachers even in normal times is that there's a principal and maybe a vice principal dealing with the whole school.

Matt Barnum: Right. It's hard to make a clean comparison or figure out that the best way to assess this, but I agree with you, there is a narrative about administrative bloat or the bloat as it's sometimes called. I mean, the spending in education on central administration, I don't want to say a number, because I don't have it at my fingertips. But it's a small fraction of the education budget, which I don't know, maybe it should be smaller, but maybe it be bigger.

Maybe school administration should be a higher fraction. It's hard to say, but at least at the supervisor to staff ratio, I mean there isn't these very tiny ratios of

all these supervisors supervising teachers. So it's interesting how that idea has developed in and solidified in the minds of many people.

Stephen Holt: Right. And the pandemic is to your point, a great example of this in that a lot of these shifts online and shifts to different modalities, teachers were in many ways on their own in doing this. There was very little capacity to try and coordinate it and what capacity there was one or two administrators at a school trying to make sure people had internet, make sure their students had laptops and et cetera, et cetera. That's a lot to organize without even thinking about training their teachers and giving feedback.

Matt Barnum: Right. I think there have been some survey questions about what share of teachers have received any professional development on teaching online, for instance. I know that certainly some and maybe a majority have. I'm sure that the vast majority, even those who have received some training would probably say it was not enough and it wasn't good enough, which is understandable in one sense, in terms of this happened overnight and districts and schools probably didn't have the capacity. They were like, "Well, who do we call to do this training? We don't have anyone to do this training right now." But that I'm sure was another source of stress for teachers.

Stephen Holt: Yeah, exactly. Well, do you have any closing thoughts that you'd like to share? Things that you've been thinking about regarding teachers' mental health coming out of this or have we saturated?

Matt Barnum: I think we've covered most of it. I think to me, the things that I'll be really curious about will be that teacher turnover, attrition numbers coming out of this summer and into next school year. As I think one proxy and indicator of mental health and burnout, not the only one, I think I'll also be really curious to follow whether hopefully we'll have surveys this coming school year and whether we see teacher stress go down this coming school year or stay at an elevated level.

I think that will be a really important question. I think it'll be really concerning if we see it staying at that same level. I think that would be, if I were school district official, I would want to have that data for my district at the start of the school year and be monitoring that in real time and then asking teachers, "Well, what can I do to address that?" And relatedly, usually in education, there's at least a feeling of a great deal of scarcity and not having free budget money to buy things that teachers might want.

I don't want to overstate things, but it is definitely true that many school districts find themselves with money to spend. And so if you are a school district official and you're worried about teachers' stress, you should ask teachers, "Well, how can I spend some money to help alleviate your concerns?" That would be a really good question that school district leaders should be asking.

Stephen Holt: That's a great point. Planting the seeds early and starting to have the conversations early among districts, this is the time to do it because we're flush with cash as you pointed out which is rare. And the way we spend that cash, we want to make sure that we're getting the best return per dollar. I think there's a tendency sometimes to do very short-term thinking in how we spend random cash. To your point earlier about thank you, bonuses, I mean, I think that's nice, but it's also a one time deal that will fade. So I think having conversations about how to some ongoing supports is crucial now.

Matt Barnum: Right. And thinking about what are one time things that we can buy with this money that might have long-term payoffs. I think I would ask teachers, "Do you need a new curriculum? What's your curriculum like right now and could we get a curriculum for you that makes sure that helps reduce the time that you are spending lesson planning every evening or designing a curriculum from scratch?" Or like, "What is wrong with your school building? What are things in your school building that are not working or that make your life worse or make it harder for your students to pay attention?" I mean, we have a bunch of evidence for instance, that air conditioning in schools has a tangible effect on student learning.

Stephen Holt: Huge effect.

Matt Barnum: Even if we didn't see that show up in test scores, I would still say that's something that affects teachers and students' feeling of comfort and stress in schools. If you're learning when it's 80, 90 degrees out and you don't have air conditioning, that's just really unpleasant. And so that could also be another short-term investment has a long-term payoff.

Stephen Holt: All right. Excellent. Matt, thank you so much for joining us. It was an absolute pleasure having this conversation with you.

Matt Barnum: Yeah. Likewise, thanks so much for having me. I enjoyed it.

Stephen Holt: So in today's episode, we want to start a conversation around what school districts, principals, and policy makers can do to help support good mental health among teachers both generally and coming out of the pandemic.

Seth Gershenson: One main policy response is going to be utilizing what's known in psychology as burnout prevention interventions.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. Right. Like the name suggests, the idea here is to try and reduce employee burnout.

Seth Gershenson: Right. And there's two classes of interventions here. Those that are directed at individuals, individual facing interventions, as well as those directed at organizations. Of course, in our case, those organizations would be schools or maybe districts and a large body of evidence in psychology finds that person

directed interventions of this type are really effective at improving mental health and reducing burnout, at least in the short-term. But to get a longer lasting impact, what you really need to do is to couple those person facing interventions with organization directed interventions as well. When those two things are combined, then they can really yield the long-term benefits and improvements that we're after.

Stephen Holt: Interesting. What would an organization face intervention look like?

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, that's a good question. So at the organizational level, what we mean is interventions or policy changes or initiatives that basically change workplace policies and procedures. So changing the context that individuals are working in. Specifically, the most common of these would aim to either reduce the job demands that individuals face on a daily basis. So lighten their workload say or improve general working conditions or the other common type of change in this sense would be to increase workers' autonomy and/or to give them more input into workplace policies and decisions in the first place.

Both of these ideas are probably quite familiar to any of the teachers in our audience, as well as to education researchers, as these are both general things that we talk a lot about in education research, when we're talking about improving teacher retention. To summarize real simply, increase teachers autonomy, increase working conditions, and those are two things that are well known to increase teacher retention in general. And then in the case of teachers, we could implement the first type of organizational intervention by providing, say, increase administrative or grading or paraprofessional support to teachers. That would lessen their workload, provide them a little bit support.

Similarly, we could increase their planning and prep time. Give them a little bit more time off during the day to rest, relax, recharge, and organize themselves for the remainder of the day. That's something that is fairly easy to implement and something that schools should seriously consider. The other thing is to think about ways to provide additional paid personal days or paid time off or mental health days. Whatever you want to call them.

Now that's a little bit harder to implement, a little bit more costly. It requires finding substitute teachers and so on. So that can be a little bit more difficult to implement, but again, it's something well worth thinking about.

Stephen Holt: So a lot of this sounds a lot like some of the suggestions that John Jerrim and Sam Sims made in our conversation with them. They had done a lot of work on the factors that shape working conditions and teachers jobs stress as a result from those working conditions. And two of the things that they talked a lot about are workload and principal leadership. And so they gave examples of, for instance, providing assistance for grading. For teachers to manage grading so it doesn't spill into over other things. Or adopting even just a policy where instead of grading individual assignments.

Teachers provide feedback to the whole class and give examples of what a good assignment looked like and how to improve assignments, because then it just reduces the time that teachers are spending on grading. And then the other example that they talked about was discipline. They said a lot of job stress comes from disciplinary issues in a school, and oftentimes teachers have to both assign detentions for instance, for a disciplinary infraction from a student. But then in assigning that detention, they have to then manage the detention period sometimes.

So one way principals can ease the workload is creating clear disciplinary expectations, making sure that everybody's on the same page for when to discipline students and then providing administrative support to run the detention session for teachers so that they don't have to take that on as well as managing their classrooms.

Seth Gershenson: Right. The common theme there is that you're taking minor tasks off teacher's plate that allow them to focus their full energy on their primary job of educating students. The other common theme of some of that is that principals are involved in making some of those changes. We talked before in a few episodes about how important principals are. We said, teachers are the most important part of a good school and good principals are a close second there in terms of what makes a school effective and functional.

Principals absolutely matter. Good leadership is absolutely important, and that's another thing that Stephen Guerriero talked a lot about in episode two. Just having administrators that are trustworthy, that teachers can trust, that make teachers at ease. That makes teachers more invested in their job. It makes them feel valued and respected and that lets do their best in the classroom.

Stephen Holt: Right. John Jerrim, Sam Sims echoed that, talking a lot about the importance of having a supportive leader at a school and having an empathetic principals that really understand what teachers are going through and try and support them accordingly. And Stephen Guerriero, when we were talking to him, he really had a common theme in a lot of his suggestions and how we can best support teachers. And the common theme in helping teachers maintain good mental health was really just investing in our teachers and our teaching workforce.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, absolutely. One straightforward way of investing is by providing resources specifically, resources to help ensure teachers physical and mental health and to support their health. That comes down to good health insurance. That includes not only access to physical health, the way we often think about doctors and health insurance, but also behavioral and mental health services as part of that health plan. I already mentioned maybe including mental health and recovery days as a category of teacher absences or paid time off.

But the other thing is that it's just so important to seriously think about mental health in the same way, and just as important as we treat physical health. Now,

speaking of physical health, another resource that is becoming more and more important in this COVID pandemic era is good HVAC and ventilation and sanitation systems and schools. This would reduce teachers fear and also quite literally improve air quality and physical health in the school.

And then this is related to other policies that schools and districts might enact, whether it's masking mandates, or vaccine mandates. All of those are school level investments or school level policy changes that can increase the work environment, increase the working conditions, improve the working conditions for teachers to again, let them be their most effective selves.

Stephen Holt: Right. To that point, there's actually some pretty interesting recent research that we could probably post to the website that looks at things like air quality in schools and emissions near schools and the effect that it has on students and student performance. One obvious inference that you could make is if this is affecting students, it's almost certainly affecting the teachers in those schools as well. And so improving the air quality in schools and just the physical space of schools to help ease the physical burden of being in a school can go a long way at helping improve teachers' mental health as well.

Seth Gershenson: Yup, for sure.

Stephen Holt: Some other things that Stephen Guerriero mentioned that I think would be helpful for district leaders to think about adopting is providing teachers with access to things like an employee assistance program, which he talked about his experience going to a licensed counselor who was not affiliated with the school, which for him was important for developing a trusting relationship with the counselor and feeling like he could get the services in a way that wouldn't spill over into his professional relationship with the school.

He was able to do that for free under an employee assistance program. The district covered for it, covered the cost of seeing the counselor. This is the cost that sometimes districts can be a little pressed for, but it might in the long run save schools and school districts money, because it can help retain teachers by helping maintain their good mental health and helping intervene in particularly acute moments of stress and anxiety that might actually lead to burnout.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. And just to be clear, I should say a little bit more about what an EAP is, an employee assistance program is. It's basically a workplace service that helps employees and even their families cope with a crisis or other stressful situation. If an employer, in this case, a school or district has a licensed counselor on staff, they could administer those services that counseling on their own. But by and large, most companies that have this program, including school outsource it to a third party professional. Again, a licensed counselor.

So my understanding is that an EAP is pretty similar to insurance programs with counseling coverage that are distinct from medical benefits. There are a

separate provision of the insurance program. And then again, even an employee who opts out of health coverage can still use the EAP benefits at no charge. Yes, there's a bit of an upfront cost, but there's also a huge benefit that would likely increase teacher retention, increase teacher effectiveness, and just make the school and classroom environment a more welcoming and safe place for teachers and students.

Stephen Holt: Actually, meeting with a counselor is a personal thing. So would that be an example of what you were talking about before as a person facing intervention?

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, I think so. For sure. That's the whole other set of policies that we think are worth thinking about. So individual one-on-one counseling is I guess obviously, in some sense, a personal facing intervention, but there's a lot of variation here, terms of.... There's a whole array of person facing interventions we can think about. To be sure, there's some blurry lines here about what's organizational, what's personal, especially in the sense that at the end of the day, the firm or the company or the school, the organization is the one providing the access to the person facing intervention.

So there's blurry line sometimes, but one popular intervention on the individual side or individual facing side is to provide social supports. Again, access to counseling could be part of that, but another important part of this that is probably especially relevant for teachers is some form of peer mentoring or peer support groups. There's a whole other class of interventions here where the goal is really to improve job skills, improve effectiveness in the workplace and that alone will reduce stress as well as benefit students.

So I remember when we were talking with Elizabeth Steiner from RAND, she mentioned the importance of providing tech support and tech help and tech training to teachers that were thrown into virtual or hybrid teaching back in spring of 2020 with very little notice, many of whom who had very little prior experience with teaching online. That was a stressful experience and providing some individual tech supporter tech training would fit in this category of individual facing interventions that boost individuals' job skills in a way that makes the job less stressful.

Now that's unique to COVID a little bit, I think, but more generally, in the teaching context that we're focused on here in this podcast, teacher coaching, I think is one of the best, most evidence based highest leverage opportunities in this space. And Matthew Kraft at Brown University and some of his co-authors have done a lot of really important work here showing how teacher coaching programs can be really effective and really the most effective form of professional development. And really, if we're talking about improving teachers' job skills, we're talking about professional development.

And so at its core, these coaching programs are all about an observation and feedback cycle where the coaches provide individualized feedback to teachers

that helps them improve their craft, improve their classroom management, improve their pedagogy, whatever. So these coaches are experts in the field. They might be master teachers. They're going to model those practices and work with teachers to really help them perfect their craft. And reduce burnout is likely a mechanism through which these programs are so effective, because they're helping teachers do better in the classroom. They see that. They see their students do better. They manage a classroom better and it makes the job a little bit easier.

Stephen Holt:

It's a lot easier to be sustainable in being effective in your job when you don't feel the anxiety or stress of recognizing poor performance or just uncertainty of how you're doing. That can cause a lot of stress and anxiety. This is all closely related to some of the things that Stephen Guerriero, the teacher we talked to offered in episode two. He talked about how valuable mentorship and having trusted colleagues and a support system within the profession has been for him in both improving his craft, but also just having it a sounding board for ideas. Someone to touch base with when you're feeling burnt out.

These are all things that can not only help you improve your craft, but through improving your craft as a teacher, improve your mental health as a result. And coaches or master teachers provides an opportunity for schools and districts that adopt them to really systematize the creation of a mentor system for their teachers. It really allows them to have a built in mechanism for teachers to have someone to go to when they need professional advice, but also potential obvious starting point for check-ins about mental health or potential stress and burnout.

Another thing that's somewhat related to this is, Stephen Guerriero had talked about how teachers are often exposed to the trauma of their students. One skill that's really helpful that districts could help teachers build is thinking through how to cope with and manage this secondary trauma, this trauma that they've experienced through their students trauma. Those kinds of things can be really taxing on a teacher and on a teacher's mental health, if they're not properly addressed or if teachers don't have a good set of skills for coping with this, which I think is something that districts could provide both through mentoring, but also through professional development, as you said, additional professional development.

Seth Gershenson:

Yeah. I think that's right. It all comes back to having support systems that are built into the workplace, built into the structure of the school. So the other class of person-based intervention then getting a little bit away from the mentor and skill development side of things is more in line with these coping skills. Some of this is designed by social psychologists, where the goal is to help individuals process and move on from a challenging day or a challenging encounter, as well as relaxation techniques that as the name suggests, aim to provide individuals with opportunities and techniques to unwind and decompress and stay relaxed, stay comfortable.

Now, importantly, these can be both reactive and proactive, meaning that some of these interventions we're talking about would be reactive to a triggering event or to a traumatic event. Others would be proactive in the sense that they're being offered all the time or at the beginning of the school year to try to lay a solid foundation from which to go about their day in the school.

Stephen Holt: Those relax technique sound pretty familiar to me. Like mindfulness training exercises and interventions.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. I think that's right. What do you know about the mindfulness training type of interventions?

Stephen Holt: Well, so for instance, just to provide a single example, one team of researchers randomly assigned teachers to a mindfulness career curriculum before the start of the school year. They found that teachers who participated in this curriculum reported lower stress and improved self-efficacy beliefs and reported healthier responses to conflict and managing challenging students throughout the semester. So this curriculum involved 11 sessions over the course of nine weeks.

So just about three to six hours per week in training. It provided instruction on mindfulness practices, like how to be aware of points of tension and finding ways to focus on your current, emotional and physical state while you're walking or standing. It complimented this with role play exercises for teachers to practice recognizing and maintaining mindfulness in stressful interactions, like say conflict with a challenging student, as an example.

And finally, the curriculum created space for teachers to trigger particular emotional responses in themselves and learn coping strategies to avoid negative externalized responses to those uncomfortable emotions. From what I understand, the basic idea of programs like this is analogous to taking classes with a trainer at a gym. If you want to stay in good physical shape, you need to learn some exercises you can do on your own and it helps to have a professional guide you in doing these exercises correctly.

I think the idea of these mindfulness based curriculums is that it provides teachers going into the semester, some exercises for identifying their own mental state and finding ways to alleviate these stressors, recenter their minds and have practiced responses to challenging interactions with students.

Seth Gershenson: Well, I mean, that makes a ton of sense. We do our best work. I know I do my best work when other non-work aspects of our lives are going well, whether that's socially, whether it's with your family, mentally, emotionally, your physical health. When all those other dimensions of your life are going well, it's the easiest to do well at work. It seems like these mindfulness exercises really can help improve some of those other dimensions that we don't always think of as being this explicitly job related.

Stephen Holt: Right. Yeah. I think that's exactly right.

Seth Gershenson: So we've just hit our listeners with a lot. Let's recap a little bit. And again, even though we talked about a lot of different things, I feel like there's a ton of agreement from all these different guests that we've had on the podcast, all these different search literatures from education scholars, economists, social psychologists. There's a lot of overlap here as well as from different stakeholder groups.

Things that teachers mentioned and parents mentioned and so on, and that's reassuring, because I think there's some real common ground to move forward on. And so the first big point is just, we really do need to think carefully and be committed to offering both reactive and proactive supports for teachers and for teachers' mental health.

Stephen Holt: Yeah. Right. And so some simple things that schools and district can do on the proactive side of things is to open the school year with some person facing mindfulness classes for teachers. Just a basic curriculum going into the semester, that'll give teachers the tools that they need to manage their stress throughout the year. The other thing is to make sure that teachers have mentors or coaches to help offer feedback, give them skilled development and help provide the tools that they need to be confident and effective in the classroom.

Also, offers a formal mechanism for checking in on two teachers, mental health throughout the year. And then at the organizational level, schools can be proactive by helping teachers manage their workloads through taking extraneous activities off their plate and giving them more autonomy in the classroom and input in school policy and school decision making.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, for sure.

Stephen Holt: And then on the reactive side, districts and this similar to personal facing and organization facing, there's some blurry lines here because many of the reactive things are reactive to a particularly intense moment, but they're also things that would help on the proactive end too. So things like providing an employer assistance program to make sure that teachers have access throughout the school year to qualified professional counselors. Teachers shouldn't just use these counselors and go to counseling sessions when there's a problem, but it's particularly important that they have access in case there actually is an acute or traumatic event where teachers need immediate professional health.

And then on the reactive side, providing mental health days when they're necessary, and again, this could be a proactive thing before you reach the level of needing a day off, having a day off that you can take, that's just a personal day to help you rebalance would be a huge help for teachers. But I think it's particularly important when they've reached an acute moment of burnout and

poor mental health that they have paid mental health days available when they need them.

Seth Gershenson: What you said about utilizing the counseling throughout reminds me of a lesson I learned when I was training to run a marathon and running a marathon, they always said, drink water throughout the race as you go, every chance you have, because if you wait to drink till you're thirsty, it's too late. I think that that's true in running and exercising, it's also very true here. If you wait to see a counselor until you're thinking about leaving the profession and have experienced something traumatic in the classroom, it very well might be too late.

It's certainly better than not going, but dealing with small problems early on and even just working on yourself and your mindfulness early on can really prevent those potential problems from boiling over. And there will be stressful situations in the course of a school year. That's the nature of the job. What we're advocating for here is to support teachers in a way that they're ready to easily deal with those challenges that come up.

Stephen Holt: Right. Yeah. That's exactly right.

Seth Gershenson: And then I think it also bears mentioning and very much relates to our discussion with Dr. Travis Bristol about racial inequalities before and during the pandemic experience is that we've talked a lot about providing resources and investing in teachers, but of course the truth is that schools and districts and communities vary wildly in their access to those resources and in their ability to implement many of the suggestions that we've made here. In that sense, I think it's critically important that state and federal policy makers in the education space recognize this.

They really have an obligation, I think, to help and level the playing field and provide supports to the teachers in the schools and districts that might not be able to provide them on their own. Otherwise, the existing socioeconomic and racial disparities that already exist in educational access and educational outcomes will worsen over time.

Stephen Holt: Right. I think that's a fundamentally important point for us to keep in mind.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. I also think it's probably a good point to end on. Thanks everybody so much for following us along in this adventure. We've learned a lot. We hope you've learned a lot. We've really enjoyed interacting with you all and talking to our guests and learning some of this scientific literature and different policies and different things that schools are doing. As a reminder, the podcast website is live. It has transcripts for all the episodes, it has bios for all the guests. It has links to all of the resources and the research studies we've mentioned. Again, the website is www.american.edu/spa/dpap/mind-the-teacher where mind the teacher is hyphenated. Mind-the-teacher.

Check out those resources on the website. Contact us if you want to further the conversation offline. We really do hope this was informative and helpful and a conversation starter on what we think and what many think is a very, very important issue, and that is teachers' mental health and mental health in schools generally. So once again, I'm one of your hosts, Seth Gershenson from American University, and...

Stephen Holt: Thanks everybody. I'm Stephen Holt. I'm at University at Albany in SUNY.

Seth Gershenson: Yep. Well, thanks, Steve. This was fun, and again, I hope it was helpful and we look forward to hearing from you.

Stephen Holt: Bye everyone.

Seth Gershenson: See you.