

OVERCOMING TRAUMA

Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellow
Recommendations for Improving Teacher
and Student Mental Health



INTRODUCTION

Mental health affects every facet of an individual's life, including how they feel, think, and interact with others. The COVID-19 pandemic has created new mental health challenges and exacerbated old ones for people everywhere, but teachers have been hit especially hard. As professionals who teach, develop, and care for young people, teachers have been selflessly bearing their students' mental health burdens while managing their own. Additionally, teachers have contended with several professional challenges including changes to instructional delivery and frequent adjustments to their campus, district, and state's regulations. Despite these challenges, teachers often prioritize the needs of their students above their own mental health. These sacrifices have been especially prevalent during the pandemic and have led to teachers feeling less effective, burned out, and leaving the classroom when our students need them the most.

"There are so many brilliant educators who sacrifice so much of their personal lives for their students. That's dedication! But how can they take care of themselves?"

"It's not possible to establish work-life boundaries without guidance and support. Teachers can only take so much negativity before they burn out."

Students' mental health challenges have been well-documented over the past two years. Last fall, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry declared a national mental health emergency¹ among young people, and the U.S. Surgeon General has pointed out that mental health intervention is "not just medical, but moral."² In 2019, Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows advocated for trauma-informed care training, a trauma-informed instruction requirement for teachers renewing their licenses, and increased mental health counseling for students in their [The Mental Health Equation: Student Safety Through Mental Health Supports](#) memo.³ As a result of their advocacy, several policies were implemented that provide additional support for students' mental health and well-being. Senate Bill 11, passed in 2019, provides additional funding for mental health personnel and support⁴ while House Bill 18, passed during the same session, increases mental health training for educators.⁵ In 2021, the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 123, ensuring that personal skills will be integrated into the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for K-12 grades.⁶ While recent Texas policy changes are a step in the right direction, understanding what teachers think about student mental health would help paint a fuller picture and get schools and communities closer to solutions.

We are a diverse group of 60 demonstrably effective Texas teachers and Teach Plus Policy Fellows committed to effectuating change in education policy by advocating for ourselves and our students. As practitioners who experienced the many repercussions of COVID-19, we wanted to know more about the pandemic's effect on our colleagues and students' mental health and explore solutions to help alleviate the pervasive mental health crisis. This report builds on Teach Plus and FuelEd's 2021 collaboration, [Prioritizing People: Purposeful Investments to Better Support Student and Teacher Mental Health](#)⁷, to explore how Texas schools and districts can better support teacher and student mental health.

Mental Health Framework

This report focuses on Texas teachers' perspectives but utilizes concepts and findings established by Teach Plus and FuelEd in their *Prioritizing People* report, which highlights the following three pathways that restore mental health, promote emotional well-being, and build resilience in teachers and students:

- + **Reflection** is taking time to notice, name, and understand one's own emotions, sensations, thoughts, values, needs, and experiences. Especially after experiencing trauma, students and teachers need time for reflection to make sense of, process, and move through difficult experiences. Because sensemaking with the help of a trusted relationship is a powerful way to manage stress and heal trauma, reflection should take place in relationships where one can receive validation and empathy in addition to independent self-reflection.
- + **Regulation** is the capacity or opportunity to stay in or return to a state of feeling safe and calm when stressed. While solitary activities can promote self-regulation, the experience of being calmed and cared for through relationships—also known as co-regulation—enables humans to develop brain structures and skills for self-regulation, self-care, and resilience in the face of stress.
- + **Relationships** are foundational to both well-being and resilience. Through ongoing experiences of feeling safe and seen inside relationships, students and teachers develop an increasing capacity to regulate, reflect, engage in empathy, and solve problems.

Findings

1. Teachers believe schools and districts can be more supportive of teacher and student mental health and well-being.
2. Teachers feel overburdened by their teaching and administrative responsibilities while simultaneously contending with constantly changing expectations.

Recommendations

1. Provide more access to mental health professionals and improve physical spaces for teachers and students to reflect, regulate, and build relationships.
2. Collaborate with teachers to implement social emotional learning programs that create opportunities for students to reflect, regulate, and build relationships.
3. Consult teachers and incorporate their ideas when making school and district policy decisions that impact their mental health and professional workload.

METHODOLOGY

In 2021, Teach Plus and FuelEd administered a survey to educators throughout their respective networks. Next, Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows examined data from 100 respondents who indicated they were current Texas teachers. Finally, Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows synthesized educators' responses to create the findings and recommendations produced in this report.

1. Teachers believe schools and districts can be more supportive of teacher and student mental health and well-being.

There is a common theme in school hallway and teachers' lounge conversations: Teachers and students are stressed, overwhelmed, and feel there is a lack of accessible resources to help support their mental health. In our survey, we asked teachers about their feelings on the mental health supports available to their students. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents said that their school was "doing too little."⁸ One teacher shared, "... we are over-managed, over-tested, and spread too thin" while another affirmed by pointing out that, "Our counselors are very busy with scheduling and testing, and students can't always talk to somebody when they need to."

Respondents were also asked to consider how their schools were supporting them. The results were similar, with 74 percent of teachers feeling their schools were also "doing too little" to support teachers. The main factors contributing to teachers' feelings were a lack of self-care time and being left out of the decision-making process. One respondent commented, "Teachers just don't have enough time to take care of themselves," while another added that schools should "listen to those who are on the front lines ... The more your educators are valued, the more society will, and as a result, schools will be happier places to be."

There is no panacea for student and teacher mental health and well-being. As one teacher wrote, "Each teacher and student processes mental health differently. You cannot utilize a one-step method to address mental issues. There needs to be opportunities to truly listen and address the issues facing teachers and students." Schools and districts should take additional steps to ensure that Texas teachers and students' mental health and well-being are protected and supported.

2. Teachers feel overburdened by their teaching and administrative responsibilities while simultaneously contending with constantly changing expectations.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a set of ongoing challenges that schools and districts in Texas are still trying to understand and solve. In 2020, teachers across the state scrambled to gather materials and create curricula to accommodate students during a worldwide pandemic that caused school closures, limited in-person learning, mask mandates, and the suspension of State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. During this time, students experienced learning loss⁹ while additional COVID-19-related responsibilities and changing expectations fell heavily on teachers. One Texas teacher shared, "Teacher and student mental health is paramount and frequently overlooked. Addressing these needs would be a great way to help begin to close the achievement gap; often the battles we fight are with ourselves."

Seventy-two percent of respondents felt that their schools were not doing enough to “support teacher mental health.”¹⁰ When teachers completed the survey, many schools had begun to open up, and vaccines were becoming available. Yet, teachers still felt overburdened by a lack of support from their campuses. Teachers’ concerns included a lack of counselors and therapists, physical spaces to retreat, and wellness initiatives, combined with a steadily increasing workload. A specific policy concern is House Bill 4545, passed during Texas’ 87th legislative session in 2021, which requires some students to receive accelerated instruction.¹¹ While most surveyed teachers believe that students need additional support due to pandemic-related learning loss, many struggle to accept that the law may require some teachers to provide and monitor accelerated learning while teaching their existing curriculum without additional support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide more access to mental health professionals and improve physical spaces for teachers and students to reflect, regulate, and build relationships.

When a teacher or student is dealing with grief, trauma, or depression, it is unlikely they will be successful in the classroom. Based on teachers’ survey responses, the most crucial key to improving mental health is to increase access to mental health professionals for both teachers and students.

Texas has already recognized the need for improved mental health across the state. In 2020, the Texas Collaborative Task Force on Public School Mental Health Services found that TEA currently has 2.5 full-time employees focusing on mental health, substance abuse, and suicide prevention for the entire state and that they are “overextended.”¹² The report also points out that while educators are not expert mental health providers, they should be trained to recognize signs of mental health conditions and be able to “refer the student to an appropriate behavioral health professional.”¹³

Improving Teacher Access to Mental Health Professionals

A 2022 survey released by the Texas American Federation of Teachers found that 66 percent of Texas educators are considering leaving the profession.¹⁴ According to the survey, educators blamed stressful working conditions, including safety concerns and an increasing workload, for mulling a career change. Several teachers who completed our survey suggested schools and districts alleviate these challenges by increasing access to mental health professionals. One teacher summarized by writing, *“Access to therapy and having regular, quality sessions can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.”* Our teacher respondents’ other concerns include the cost and time needed to utilize existing mental health resources. One teacher requested that schools and districts *“invest in the already existing mental health support to allow for more free or reduced price services,”* while another noted that *“[m]ore telehealth access and time given to utilize therapy without penalty”* would help improve teachers’ mental health and well-being. Schools and districts should increase access to mental health professionals through staffing, pricing, and time, or they will likely continue to see increased turnover and teacher shortages in the coming years.

Improving Student-to-Mental Health Professional Ratios

Mental health concerns among students are common across the state of Texas. In 2019, one in five children in Texas aged 0–17 were estimated to have two or more adverse childhood experiences that may impact their emotional, cognitive, social, and biological functioning.¹⁵ In 2019, almost two in every five Texas high school students reported experiencing feelings of sadness or hopelessness almost daily for two or more weeks within the past year, and one in 10 high school students in Texas reported attempting suicide within the last year.¹⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these mental health symptoms.

Despite the demonstrated need for school mental health professionals, data from the 2019-2020 Texas Education Agency (TEA) Mental Health Task Report Force shows that Texas schools fail to meet the following recommended ratios:

- + Students to school counselor (recommended: 250/1; Texas: 413/1),
- + Students to school psychologist (Recommended: 1,000/1; Texas: 2,751/1),
- + Students to social worker (Recommended: 400/1; Texas: 6,626/1).¹⁷

Research has shown that school-based mental health providers improve school climate and create other positive outcomes for students.¹⁸ The Mental Health Task Force noted that teachers do not have the time or training to provide in-depth mental health services and should be able to refer cases to behavioral specialists for counseling. Ideally, all students should have the option to meet with a mental health professional. As one teacher wrote, *“Every student should have at least two check-ins with a mental health professional, regardless of whether they were referred by a teacher for counseling ... [this] will prevent quieter students who are struggling [from] be[ing] overlooked [and] reduce mental health stigma.”*

The state should increase funding to provide more mental health experts on campuses. Most schools do not have enough full-time counselors, and teachers do not have the necessary qualifications or time to sufficiently address students' mental health needs on top of their other teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Establishing Restorative Spaces

Stress-Reducing Spaces for Teachers

Texas teachers seek restorative spaces and experiences in response to their COVID-19-related stress and increasing workloads. Our survey revealed that some campuses do not even have a teachers' lounge, with one educator noting that *“at one point [teachers were] asked to eat in [their] cars.”* Each campus should establish and reserve a designated space for teachers to reflect, regulate, and build relationships.

To alleviate stress and combat teacher burnout, participants underscored that teachers' lounge should include amenities such as *“natural light, soothing music, comfortable [massage] chairs, and roomy eating areas,”* with *“microwaves and refrigerators”* so teachers can *“unwind”* and *“breathe”* at some point during the workday. Studies show that aromatherapy is another effective way to help alleviate work-related stress.¹⁹ For example, diffusing natural oils in a dedicated teacher space could help relieve physical and psychological stress symptoms.

Reflecting and regulating can also take place outside. Our survey participants listed zen gardens, places to meditate, and activities such as yoga and Zumba as other opportunities to *“get out of a stressful environment.”* Establishing spaces that allow teachers to take advantage of quiet areas and connect with the sounds of nature supports restoration. Dedicated teacher spaces would also promote mental health

and well-being by creating opportunities for teachers to build relationships. As one participant wrote, *"The sense of community and belonging is so important when we feel isolated and drained from our work."*

Reflecting, regulating, and building relationships can occur anywhere teachers can relax and express themselves openly. This space is a teacher's lounge for most campuses, although additional opportunities exist to create such spaces outside. Establishing and protecting these spaces for teachers and incorporating their suggestions would help schools and districts support teachers' mental health and well-being while simultaneously improving student outcomes.

Non-Instructional Restorative Spaces for Students

Students need mental health support beyond what schools provide in classrooms. They need a dedicated space to speak to mental health professionals who can offer guidance and routine support throughout the school year. "An effective model for care requires easy accessibility of health services through integration and collaborations of multiple services in one place."²⁰ A dedicated space would be especially beneficial in creating a campus culture that encourages students to name their emotions and develop healthy coping mechanisms while fostering open communication with available professionals to alleviate stress and heal from trauma. As one survey respondent stated, *"... many students do not regularly see doctors and this would provide an opportunity for those who need it to get mental health support."*

Additionally, students would benefit from a place to go when they need a break from learning or a moment to recollect their emotional state. One teacher respondent wrote, *"The mental health of students would be greatly improved by stepping out of the physical classroom and away from screens."* According to research, regular breaks can keep students' brains healthy and ready for reading comprehension and divergent thinking.²¹ Potential possibilities for these spaces include a school garden, sound space, or sensory path. Research suggests that outdoor learning environments can influence student behaviors and the development of social relationships.²² Creating a physical space could be part of a campus-specific initiative to promote and support students' mental health and well-being.

Schools and districts should intentionally establish dedicated campus spaces that promote students' mental health. Specifically, students can benefit from two spaces: one for meeting with mental health professionals as part of daily or weekly check-ins to build connectivity and trust; and another for brain breaks and opportunities for students to reflect, regulate, and build relationships.

2. Collaborate with teachers to implement social emotional learning programs that create opportunities for students to reflect, regulate, and build relationships.

SEL Background and Benefits

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring

decisions.”²³ In *Prioritizing People*, Teach Plus and FuelEd recommend that every school campus “normalize mental health supports and resources by promoting them, subsidizing them, and embedding them in ... school systems.”²⁴ As one teacher in our survey wrote, *“It’s unreasonable to expect teachers to be responsible for every part of student well-being without showing us what that looks like ...”*

Research shows that SEL programs positively impact student academic performance and behavior. Such “programming has improved students’ academic performance by 11 to 17 percentile points.”²⁵ Implementing SEL programming is also a crucial component of teacher-student relationship building and will equip students with problem-solving skills they can leverage throughout their lives. The long-term benefits of effective SEL programming include college readiness, career success, positive relationships, and better mental health.²⁶

Implementing SEL Programs

SEL programs should not look the same in every community. Every campus should have the opportunity to implement a well-designed, campus-tailored SEL program. As one teacher wrote, *“[Individuals] have different needs based on their trauma. We should look [in]to finding evidence based best practices that ... research[es] trauma in specific communities, and do[es] a needs assessment within the community being served to understand what ... their needs are.”* Additionally, schools, districts, and the state must sufficiently fund SEL programs and access to mental health professionals, prioritizing communities with less access to mental health services. One teacher responded to the survey by writing, *“Listen to the needs of each campus or district and be equitable rather than give equal treatment. Many schools and communities need access and funds to mental health services more than other communities.”*

Some districts have responded to calls for SEL resources by establishing SEL competencies or standards. However, if teachers’ primary responsibility is to teach Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and district-adopted curriculum, their productivity and effectiveness will be hindered by the expectation to incorporate additional standards. As one teacher responded, *“[F]ocus on mental health professionals’ integration into school culture. Stop asking teachers to do this work as it is not their trained expertise.”* Additionally, mental health professionals should be released from all non-counseling duties to best serve students’ SEL needs, which also allows teachers to focus on becoming their most effective selves. One teacher responded to the survey by writing, *“Policymakers can support the mental health of educators by not tasking teachers to handle these types of lessons ... These services should be led by those who have received professional and/or formal training.”*

Campuses need a district or state-mandated requirement for SEL programming, including guidance for implementation. Many teachers consider SEL programming paramount with one writing, *“Consider it a critical requirement this year as students will have the trauma for a while as school begins to open.”* While we recommend a requirement, it is in each campus community’s best interest to maintain autonomy when implementing SEL programs.

3. Consult teachers and incorporate their ideas when making school and district policy decisions that impact their mental health and professional workload.

Embracing Teacher Voice

Teachers are the best source for determining students' needs. Thoughtfully engaging teachers ensures that schools and districts gather the most recent, accurate, and appropriate information and context when making policy decisions. When teachers and students have the opportunity to become part of the process, instead of simply following orders based on decision-makers' perceptions from outside of the classroom, they are more likely to experience meaningful and sustainable improvement.

Teachers agree that current teaching and administrative workloads are not sustainable due to the toll on their mental health. As one respondent commented, *"Have reasonable expectations for teachers so they can model good mental health for students. It is absurd for us to expect students to learn balanced and healthy work and life habits when the only way for teachers to model that to them is to set boundaries and leave the classroom altogether."* Making the teaching profession more sustainable by embracing teacher voice throughout decision-making processes will allow teachers to remain in classrooms without sacrificing their mental health.

Developing Teacher-Informed Policies

As one respondent noted, *"Treat teachers as professionals and let us control how we do our jobs ... We are treated by policy makers and admin as a group to control and not as equals. We are a profession; we train and educate and continue to grow in our fields. Listen to us and actually allow us to have the freedom and control to run our schools and classrooms."* State agencies, school boards, and local campuses should make serving on committees more accessible for teachers. Providing teachers with the opportunity to represent the larger community of educators allows them to communicate targeted needs to decision-makers in a way that affirms their knowledge, experience, and voice.

Teachers are serious about being heard. As one educator suggested, *"Visit schools, observe practices, make time to be present. Listen and open focus groups."* Districts should gather workplace feedback through anonymous surveys to explore teachers' attitudes about administrative duties and teaching workload, school community and team-building efforts, and the quality of professional development and enrichment opportunities. Administrators should utilize survey responses to inform and guide campus and district policies that promote teachers' mental health well-being.

Consulting with teachers about mental health issues affecting their quality of life and work enables them to provide feedback that will contribute to more positive work environments and better outcomes for students.

CONCLUSION

The teacher respondents in our survey pointed out several opportunities to improve mental health and well-being for teachers and students. Schools and districts should get more mental health professionals on campuses and create spaces for teachers and students to reflect, regulate, and build relationships while incorporating teachers' views into policy decisions affecting teaching and administrative workloads and mental health. By addressing these issues, schools and districts take an essential step toward improving the lives and effectiveness of Texas teachers and the mental health and well-being of Texas students.

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FuelEd is a non-profit organization whose mission is to grow emotionally intelligent educators who build relationship-driven schools. We partner with schools to develop educators' interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and emotional well-being so that every educator can build secure relationships that provide the conditions for optimal learning and development. Our vision is a world where educator training and support—and the very definition of an educator—is reimagined to prioritize educators' emotional intelligence, emotional health, and interpersonal skills.

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ENDNOTES

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