

A Hierarchy of Educators' Needs:

A Guide for Fostering Empathetic Schools



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to classrooms and schools, and created a crisis in educator well-being. While elevating and addressing students' needs is and should always be central in education, we must also recognize the many challenges that are affecting the school community as a whole, and educators in particular.

We are a group of preschool-12 educators serving as Teach Plus California Policy Fellows, advocating for students and educators across the state. We believe educator wellness is a determining factor in creating supportive, equitable environments for students and families. When educators are able to bring the best version of themselves to the classroom, students have opportunities for innovative, culturally responsive learning experiences. In fact, educator wellness is directly correlated with an improved positive school climate, performance, and sense of safety for students.¹ In service of fostering a positive school climate for students, we have developed a framework to guide discussions and considerations around adult well-being. In this framework, which we call A Hierarchy of Educators' Needs, we define key areas of need, discuss relevant framing, and suggest concrete solutions that can be adjusted based on local needs and context.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

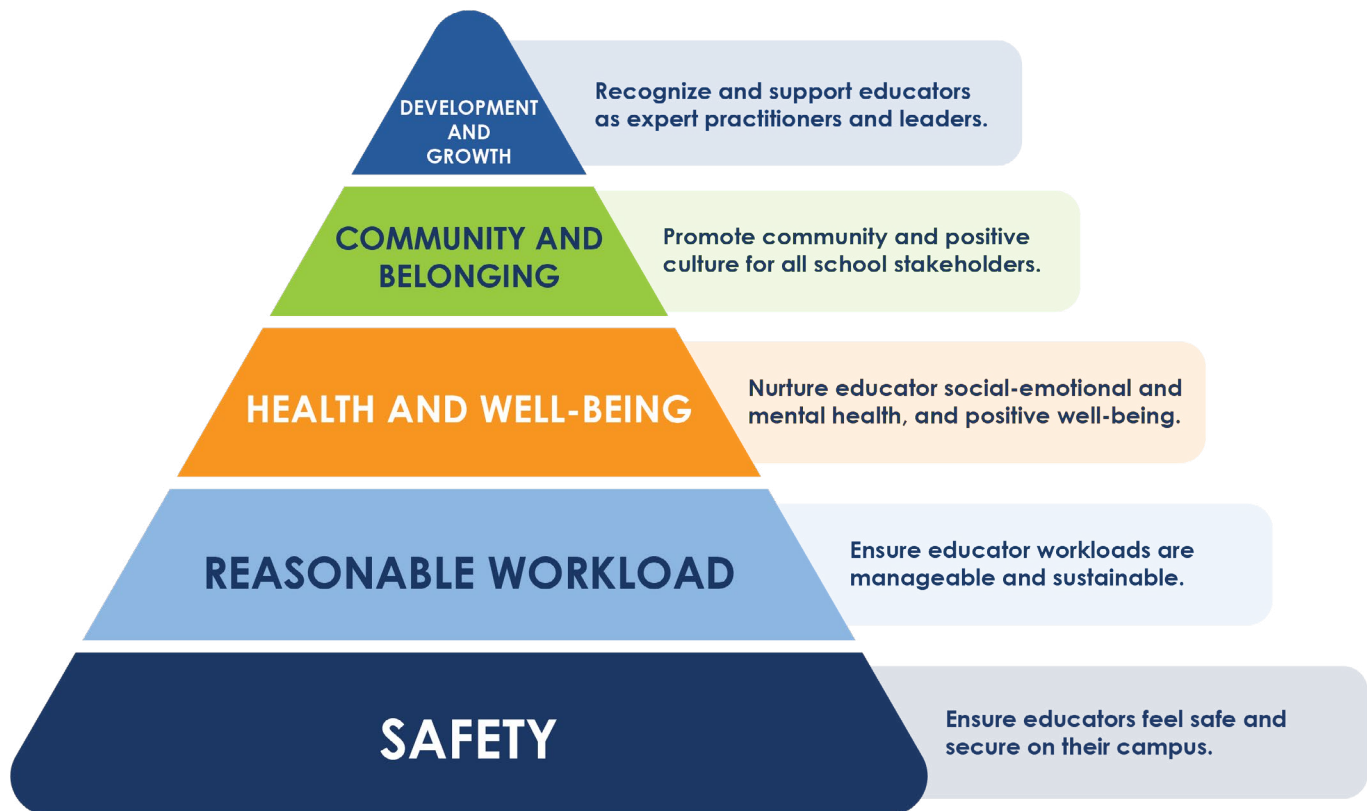
The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the educational system by placing many additional stressors on an already exhausted and burned-out workforce. We have seen this lead to a decline in job satisfaction, difficulties with teacher retention, and increased attrition.² Work environments that were already highly stressful for educators have become unsafe, with increased violence and student misbehavior reported nationwide.³ Educators have become fearful of violent acts in schools, whether it's a student or parent verbally attacking a teacher, or horrific violence involving high-capacity weapons. Additionally, school staff everywhere suffer from overwhelming workloads and constant, sometimes chaotic, change. While we know that building positive relationships with students is essential to their success, we also know that this is difficult, if not impossible, in these circumstances. When we ourselves are unwell, we cannot support our students in their own wellness. Therefore, we believe addressing the needs of educators is the first step in positively impacting the social and academic needs of students.

As Policy Fellows, we wrestled with how best to discuss these needs and focus on solutions to the challenges we are facing. Our Hierarchy of Educators' Needs is inspired by the work of Abraham Maslow.⁴ Maslow's original hierarchy, a psychological framework, describes a pattern through which human needs and motivation generally develop, with the most fundamental needs at the bottom. As educators, we have all been trained to understand Maslow's hierarchy as it applies to students. Now, we feel a sense of urgency to do the same for our fellow educators. Our Hierarchy of Educators' Needs identifies the needs that must be addressed to support educators and is arranged as a pyramid to illustrate that each need builds upon the previous one.

We believe that if district leaders utilize this framework in developing district and site plans and goals, we will build capacity in all areas. Implementing priorities that revolve around teachers' social-emotional learning (SEL) will directly impact educator retention and morale. As schools become more healthy, supportive, and positive, staffing shortages will be reduced. This consistency will provide an improved school climate and less

educator turnover.⁵ If educators have their basic social-emotional needs met, they can focus on and be present in building student engagement, providing instruction, and finding resources to support students. Ultimately, with more positive school climates, we believe that many student outcomes will improve—including academic achievement, attendance rates, and graduation rates.

A HIERARCHY OF EDUCATORS' NEEDS: FRAMES FOR INQUIRY



Every educator is taught to consider Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs when they work with students; it is accepted that if the basic needs in this model are not addressed, students are unable to prioritize learning and education. The same is true of educators. Until now, the work of creating wellness has largely fallen on educators themselves, in the form of recommendations for "self-care." However, we believe it is important to recognize that an approach centered on self-care will not solve the problem. Rather, the emphasis should be on a culture of community care and an understanding of how the success of the whole depends on equitably meeting the needs of everyone involved. This frame should be fundamental to how schools and districts support the development and success of the adults in our system.

Moreover, we believe a school that centers social-emotional learning for all provides opportunities for continuous development and growth, promotes a sense of community and belonging, supports educational partners' health and well-being, ensures a reasonable workload, and establishes a physically and emotionally safe environment to learn and teach.

NEED 1

SAFETY

Ensure educators feel safe and secure on their campus.

At the most basic level, schools need to be physically safe spaces to learn and work for students and adults. However, nearly 60 percent of educators experienced physical or verbal aggression during the pandemic. There have been increases in student behavior issues and school violence in the past year,⁶ including tragic, traumatizing school shootings. We provide the questions below as a guide for reflection about how school sites are addressing the safety of adults on campus. Though each school site is unique, the recommendations and considerations listed below provide a broad approach to achieving a more empathetic school culture and climate.

Recommended Empathetic Solutions:

- + Establish a Safe Schools Committee with representatives from all campus educational partners that meets regularly, includes clear protocols that address adult safety on campus, and disseminates the safety plan information campus-wide.
- + Hire additional staff as necessary to maintain high levels of school safety.
- + Gather data regarding safety concerns and protocols.

Considerations Before Engaging in Discussion

- + Is there a school safety plan?
- + Has the safety plan been reviewed with staff?
- + Do staff know how to access the safety plan?
- + What changes and modifications have been made to the safety plan post-pandemic?
- + Is staff feedback collected and implemented when making revisions to the safety plan?
- + Is there a site-specific safety committee?

NEED 2

REASONABLE WORKLOAD

Ensure educator workloads are manageable and sustainable.

It is an unfortunate reality that the aftermath of the pandemic has placed an increasing demand on educators' time, as there has been an increase in the number of students in need of mental health and academic support and a need to connect families with support services. The increase in educator responsibilities without a reciprocal increase in time to complete them is putting educators under tremendous strain. This has been compounded by staff shortages, often resulting in educators giving up their preparation periods to cover for colleagues. Educators are left with less time to dedicate to individual student needs, less time for building a strong school-to-home connection, and less time to document student progress. According to Education Week, much of the intervention work done is emotionally draining, but educators experience feelings of guilt if they take time off to attend to personal wellness.⁷ Consider the questions below and how educators' duties and demands on their time may have changed over the past year. Then, reflect on empathetic solutions that can be implemented at school sites.

Recommended Empathetic Solutions:

- + Redesign schedules to include pupil-free time and mental health days for educators, not counted as sick time.
- + Bring in additional educators and support staff as needed to reduce the adult-to-student ratio, and establish systems of support to address burnout.

Considerations Before Engaging in Discussion

- + What types of instructional support exist for educators within the classroom?
- + What duties are educators implicitly or explicitly expected to complete outside of the workday?
- + Is there enough coverage on campus for educators? Are conference/preparation times respected?
- + Is there sufficient support staff to assist with supervision and behavior intervention?
- + Are educators given sufficient time to document their student's progress and to communicate with parents and student success teams?

NEED 3

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Nurture educator social-emotional and mental health, and positive well-being.

The pandemic demonstrated that educators did not have adequate preparation to handle the social-emotional needs of students. This became even clearer as schools began to reopen and students returned to campus. Many educators struggled with their own social-emotional and mental health challenges and did not have sufficient training to support themselves or their students. School sites need to allocate appropriate resources to implement adult SEL strategies and hire wellness personnel for staff, designate mental health professionals to focus on educator well-being, and include information on adult social-emotional well-being from school climate surveys on the statewide dashboard. Resources and support must be prioritized to meet the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals set by the state and also to address climate and culture issues.

Recommended Empathetic Solutions

- + Designate support staff to focus on educator well-being.
- + Implement adult wellness interventions and ensure ample availability of school-based mental health professionals for students and staff.
- + Include information on adult social-emotional well-being from school climate surveys on statewide dashboard.

Considerations Before Engaging in Discussion

- + What is the current level of adult SEL knowledge and practice at the site?
- + What existing resources are in place to support educator wellness?
- + How is adult SEL implemented in meetings, conversations, and systems?
- + In what ways are educators thriving, and in what ways are they struggling with well-being?
- + Are there sufficient funds allocated to support the LCAP and Targeted Student Population (TSP) goals in the projected budget?

NEED 4

COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

Promote community and positive culture for all school stakeholders.

Distance learning and COVID protocols have created further disconnection and disengagement among educators, administrators, students, parents, and school community members. Districts must address this issue by developing positive relationships with all stakeholders, starting with involved adults.⁸ Educators should feel safe, supported, and heard by their leaders, including their unions, and all of these stakeholders should engage in continuous, open dialogue. Campus cultures must be positive, warm places with supportive staff specifically focusing on adult well-being, including crisis intervention personnel. Leaders should model relationship-building as a primary means of communication with all community members, with accountability for positive relationships built into school planning and evaluation.

Recommended Empathetic Solutions

- + Provide and implement school-wide policies aimed at creating a positive campus culture.
- + Provide opportunities to promote positive relationships and collaboration among educators, administrators, families, community members, and unions.
- + Provide support staff that aim to address and focus on a school site's well-being.

Considerations Before Engaging in Discussion

- + What existing perceptions and realities exist with regards to site culture?
- + How have families, unions, non-profits, and other partners been included? What stakeholders might have been left out of conversations?
- + What opportunities exist for educational partners to communicate their needs and perspectives?
- + What supports are in place for all educational partners? What and who might be missing?
- + What have past outcomes been when stakeholders raise concerns?
- + Where are relationships strong, and where do they need reinforcement?
- + How is building relationships included in the site plan?

NEED 5

DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

Recognize and support educators as expert practitioners and leaders.

Educators are highly qualified professionals with direct experience in the classroom. They have firsthand knowledge of strategies and techniques that work well with their student populations. School, district, and system leaders should leverage this expertise by creating leadership opportunities on and off campus such as mentoring new career educators, planning and leading professional development, or sitting on leadership boards. It is the job of site and district leaders to nurture, encourage, and provide opportunities for educator leaders. As educators volunteer to take on these additional leadership roles, they should be adequately compensated for them, and provided with additional preparation time to complete those tasks.

Recommended Empathetic Solutions

- + Provide educators with recognition, time, and compensation for taking on additional duties and leadership roles.

Considerations Before Engaging in Discussion

- + What leadership opportunities exist for educators at the school site? Do these opportunities encourage educators to stay in the classroom?
- + How are veteran and new educators' skills and insights being tapped into?
- + How are educator leaders being compensated for additional duties?
- + Are educators provided with support to grow as professionals in alignment with the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP)?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

How School and District Leaders Should Use This Guide to Foster Empathetic Schools



We believe it is essential for school and district leaders to center the well-being of adults and students when making decisions about our schools. We hope that district leaders use the Hierarchy of Educators' Needs as a guide for creating healthy, effective, and efficient communities of practice. Below are key recommendations for how school and district leaders can leverage this guide to drive change in their schools for more empathetic communities.

1 District and school leaders should create explicit mechanisms for gathering data and reflections from staff about key elements in the Hierarchy.

It is vital that school leaders prioritize teachers' well-being by authentically engaging with and listening to those adults working directly with students and parents. Many districts conduct experience surveys of staff, which is an important first step in gauging staff needs. We recommend that district leaders go a step further to utilize educator focus groups and advisory boards to gather additional insight. Using qualitative data can further elevate teacher voices, and allow for opportunities to share impactful personal experiences. Whatever the mechanism for gathering data, it should assess the full Hierarchy of Educators' Needs.

2 District and school leaders should build strategies and investments into school and district plans to support teacher well-being by prioritizing the Hierarchy in district goals and budgetary decisions

Once school and district leaders gather data on key elements of the Hierarchy, they should set explicit goals for addressing those needs in school and district plans with built-in accountability and continuous improvement goals. To prioritize fostering empathetic schools, district LCAPs should have clear goals and activities reflecting how the district will address the needs that were surfaced. Additionally, district budgets should reflect the importance of these goals by allocating funds for solutions.

When California established the LCAP, they made clear that these plans must address a range of community needs, [outlining eight to 10 state priorities that each LCAP must address](#). One of the priorities is a positive school climate, which the California Department of Education defines as “built on caring, trusting, inclusive, and respectful relationships among students, staff, and families. Good relationships result in a sense of safety, order, and connectedness among members of the school community.”¹⁹ When districts describe the goals, actions, services and expenditures that address the priorities around a positive school climate priority, they should include explicit reference to the Hierarchy of Educators’ Needs for it to provide clear expectations towards the well-being of teachers, staff, and students.

School leaders should ensure that they have established a climate and authentic opportunities for constructive conversations between administration and staff.

Historically, educators work in isolation, separate from colleagues and site leadership. Leaders need to utilize intentional strategies to foster constructive and collaborative conversations between administration and staff about well-being. As school leaders begin to engage in these conversations, they need to make sure that there are formal and informal ways for educators to elevate problems of practice and develop solutions alongside administrators and colleagues. They need to ensure that the current school climate provides both academic and emotional support for teachers.

CONCLUSION

Our students deserve to have an effective SEL approach, which requires implementing an SEL framework for the adults in charge of their care and education. While creating and implementing the Hierarchy of Educators’ Needs framework will require additional funding and shifts in budget priorities, we believe that a healthy school climate and culture will create long-term stability, ultimately benefiting all stakeholders in the education ecosystem.

Our hope is that the considerations posed for each identified need in the Hierarchy of Educators’ Needs are useful in opening meaningful dialogue between educators, site administrators, union organizers, and other facilitators. The five needs we identified, and the corresponding Recommended Empathetic Solutions, are meant to reflect a school model that incorporates and prioritizes adult social-emotional learning and needs. Educators are the primary factor in creating and providing a positive learning environment for students. The impact that one educator has is exponential. If each educator has their needs met, it opens the possibility for a truly transformative learning environment for all students.

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org



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ENDNOTES

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