

Supporting Ongoing Student and Teacher Mental Health Needs:

Recommendations From Teach Plus New Mexico



May 2022



INTRODUCTION

In 2020, 50 percent of the educators who participated in the Teach Plus report, [Barriers to Bridges: Teacher Perspectives on Accelerating Learning, Leadership, and Innovation in the Pandemic](#), which examined the frontline experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, reported that their schools and districts were prepared to meet their students' mental health.¹ As the pandemic went on, more and more evidence emerged of the enormous social and emotional and mental health toll of COVID-19. In a 2021 Rand corporation survey, one in four teachers reported experiencing symptoms of depression and school administrators named supporting the mental health needs of their teachers as one of the biggest stressors within their buildings.²

We are a group of highly effective teachers and Teach Plus New Mexico Policy Fellows who teach diverse student populations across our state. In May 2021, our colleagues in the Teach Plus New Mexico Policy Fellowship surveyed educators from around the state to determine how schools and districts were supporting student and teacher mental health and what additional supports were needed. A year later, we wanted to revisit this work to find out if and how schools in our state have improved their efforts to support teacher and student mental health based on what teachers in our survey recommended in 2021. In this brief, we present the findings from our 2022 survey and additional recommendations for policymakers to address the ongoing mental health challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

1. Student mental health is a priority whereas teacher mental health is less widely addressed.
2. Teachers continue to value support such as access to counselors and social workers, educator professional development and resources for families, and strategies such as breaks and support time throughout the school day.
3. Teachers' mental well-being would benefit from previously recommended supports such as an extended lunch and break times during the day, access to community classes to destress, and opportunities to collaborate with other educators outside of their school and district.

Recommendations

1. Require schools to include specific goals in their 90-day plans to support and monitor both student and teacher mental health.
2. Build partnerships with families to better serve students through communication, resources, and training to support their children at home and through involvement in the school community as volunteers and tutors.
3. Allow flexibility and breaks in daily school schedules to support student and teacher mental health needs.

2021 SURVEY: OVERVIEW

In 2021, more than half of the teachers we surveyed reported that their schools were prioritizing student mental health and they felt comfortable discussing student mental health issues. Teachers' top three priorities for students included counselor and social worker positions; professional development and resources for families; and reorganized schedules to include additional breaks/support.

By contrast, fewer than half of the teachers we surveyed believed that schools were prioritizing teacher mental health and the majority of educators did not feel comfortable discussing teacher mental health issues. Teachers' top three priorities in support of educator mental health included extended lunch/break time during the daily schedule; annual memberships to various local classes; and access to professional learning networks outside of the school/district.³

In 2021, our recommendations were:

1. Require districts to include specific goals in their 90-day plans to monitor and support student and teacher mental health, such as plans to increase student access to counselors and social workers.
2. Adjust mandatory instructional time to build in time for mental health breaks during the school day.
3. Strengthen communication, connections, and partnerships with parents and families to better serve students

2022 SURVEY: METHODOLOGY

For our 2022 report, we surveyed 148 educators from 44 districts in the state. Over 70 percent of respondents teach at Title I schools.⁴ This survey and the 2021 survey were shared openly with teachers across the state. While there may be some overlap between respondents in the 2021 survey and this survey, the sample of teachers is not necessarily the same. For this survey, we asked the respondents to review the findings and recommendations from the 2021 survey and report on what they have seen implemented at their school site during the 2021-22 school year.



FINDINGS

1. Student mental health is a priority whereas teacher mental health is less widely addressed.

As in 2021, the teachers in our current survey reported that school leaders are prioritizing student mental health.⁸ Teachers shared that when it comes to student mental health, they are comfortable discussing it with school leaders.⁹ However, nearly one half of our respondents indicated that teacher mental health is not being prioritized in their schools. Teachers also reported that they do not feel comfortable discussing their own mental health.¹⁰ Student mental health certainly remains a concern but progress has been made in mitigating some of the social and emotional challenges for students such as identifying and self-regulating strong emotions, emotional outbursts, and anxiety. The same cannot be said when it comes to addressing the mental health of teachers and well-being of educators remains of deep concern. *"Schools are moving mountains for student mental health but there needs to be more done for teachers,"* wrote one respondent.

Teachers in our survey indicated that finding time and support to address their own health and well-being is very challenging. With increasing duties, covering for teacher vacancies, and addressing student needs, teachers need more focused time to reflect, destress, and catch up with the critical components of their job. Forty-eight percent of our respondents reported that they don't feel comfortable talking about their mental health with school leaders, which makes it that much harder for them to make the necessary adjustments.¹¹

"There is a stigma attached to mental health. We see this in our society and communities and that extends to the school. I think we work hard to destigmatize mental health as health with students, but that attitude is not always extended to teachers."

2. Teachers continue to value support such as access to counselors and social workers, educator professional development and resources for families, and strategies such as breaks and support time throughout the school day.

The teachers we surveyed stressed the urgency in supporting them and their students to cope and persevere through yet another challenging school year. They indicated that mental health providers trained in providing counseling services should be at the forefront in schools.

When asked about the effectiveness of the recommended mental health supports from our 2021 survey, teachers emphasized the importance and beneficial impact of the following: access to counselors and social workers at school sites; information and resources for families; and flexibility of instructional schedules to include breaks and support times.⁵ When asked how effective is having counselors and social worker positions at school, 70 percent of the respondents agreed that having mental health service roles in schools such as counselors and social workers is effective in supporting students.⁶

“The needs of the students coming out of nearly a year of remote learning and amid a global pandemic cannot be met by the available counseling staff through no fault of their own. Increasing [access] to counselors might also increase the effectiveness of the developing knowledge and resources for families.”

“I think we need more counseling and social work services. There is a bigger need than the past, and having only one [counselor or social worker] is not sufficient.”

Teachers mentioned their lack of time to access mental health support for themselves and added that educators need access to counselors and support as needed; *“Being able to use [paid leave] without guilt would be beneficial. We need time to see doctors, counselors, etc. if we need it.”*

Teachers felt it is important that families are a part of the social emotional support ecosystem and yet, according to one respondent, *“Communication at school about available resources, if any, is lacking.”* A majority of teachers in our survey indicated that information and resources for families are needed to improve student mental health support at school. This would involve parents and families being able to access resources and understand how to support their student’s mental well being at home. Partnering with parents in supporting student mental health provides a proactive approach in helping students address issues of trauma and providing families with resources to address student mental health at home is beneficial to student overall well-being.⁷

Our respondents also indicated that breaks and support time are beneficial. Students need break time to refocus so they are more engaged when they are learning in class. As one teacher pointed out, *“[We] need schedules that support mindfulness, time for play.”* Another stated, *“Students need personal time and attention, not additional online courses or resources to help with their needs.”*

3. Teachers’ mental well-being would benefit from previously recommended supports such as an extended lunch and break times during the day, access to community classes to destress, and opportunities to collaborate with other educators outside of their school and district.

The teachers in our survey underscored that Teach Plus’ 2021 recommendations, such as having an extended lunch and break times during the day, access to community classes such as yoga, gym, and dance and opportunities to collaborate with other educators in professional learning networks outside of their school and district, are beneficial to teachers’ mental health.¹² All these allow teachers to have time to themselves to destress, reflect, and reinvigorate before returning to the classroom. While expectations shifted for teachers and students during the pandemic and more was added to their plates, little was eliminated and no coping mechanisms were added. Teachers highlighted that there is an urgent need to do so.

Adjusting schedules to incorporate breaks for all to refocus and regain clarity in learning objectives and learning outcomes is especially important. Thirty-six percent of our respondents indicated that adding break and support times for student mental health is effective, and 45 percent stated that this wasn’t provided for at their school site.¹³

“Collaboration with teachers is minimal these days. Staff meetings are non-existent anymore. Prep times are scarce. Full-time counselors and social workers are needed to help with emotional support. We are falling apart and don’t feel well. There is not enough time to reflect, create meaningful lessons, talk with students, or really create a positive school culture for our students.”

Teachers are also still experiencing burnout and symptoms of pandemic fatigue but have few strategies to mitigate this. There is a need for further inquiry into what can be done to support teachers and their students and the call for teachers to receive the support they need must not be ignored.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Require schools to include specific goals in their 90-day plans to support and monitor both student and teacher mental health.

Although New Mexico's schools and districts have made steps toward addressing the mental health of students and teachers, the support teachers have asked for has not been widely implemented. We recommend that all New Mexico schools incorporate specific goals to address student and teacher mental health in their 90-day plans. As a required tool to increase student achievement and improve outcomes for all learners, schools can utilize this resource throughout the year for continuous monitoring and improvement.

Schools also need sufficient numbers of counselors and social workers who can address student needs at the school site and are available to meet with students regularly. Teachers need access to and time to connect with mental health support providers, as needed. Teachers stress a need for schools, districts, and the state to prioritize mental health support through intentional planning and ongoing support.

2. Build partnerships with families to better serve students through communication, resources, and training to support their children at home and through involvement in the school community as volunteers and tutors.

Families are important stakeholders in schools. By recruiting parent and family volunteers, teachers can have an extra set of hands, ears, and eyes in the classroom, hallways, and lunch room, increasing positive relationships students experience at school.¹⁴ School leaders can bolster these partnerships by providing families with information and resources focused on identifying their child's strong emotions, talking with their child about these, and reinforcing social emotional skills and practices at home. Districts and the state should also provide schools with ideas and training in family engagement strategies to give schools the necessary tools to more comfortably welcome parents and families into the school learning community.

3. Provide students and teachers a break during the school day by allowing flexibility in daily schedules to support mental health needs.

Teachers recognize how to help their students but often do not have the bandwidth to perform all that is required of them. School leaders should rework the daily schedule to allow for breaks for students and teachers to regroup, refocus, and reengage to help ward off stress and despondency. We recommend that district leaders support school leaders to develop expectations around scheduling and that the state determines instructional time minimums that encourage mental restoration through physical activity, outdoor learning, and art.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in New Mexico are deeply concerned about the mental health of their students and equally feel the need to take care of their own mental health. State, district, and school leaders should pay close attention to these mental health concerns and to teachers' recommendations. As we continue to evolve our educational environment to meet the needs of our students, academically as well as socio-emotionally, we need to implement these recommendations to ensure that our entire educational community has a healthier, more successful future.

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

1 Teoh, M., Rothfarb, L., Castro, A., Coryell, M., Currey, A., Fortier, D., Gensic, J., Horton, J., Smith, J., Tripp, T., & Jack, J. (2021). *Barriers to Bridges*. Teach Plus. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from https://teachplus.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Documents/teach_plus_barriers_to_bridges.pdf

2 Will, M., & Superville, D. R. (2022, April 4). *Don't forget the adults: How schools and districts can support educator mental health*. Education Week. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/dont-forget-the-adults-how-schools-and-districts-can-support-educator-mental-health/2022/03>

3 Teach Plus. (2021). (rep.). *Teacher Voice on Supporting Student and Teacher Mental Health: Recommendations from Teach Plus New Mexico*.

4 Question: "Do you teach in a Title I school?" (n=147) "yes" (76.2%), "no" (17.0%), "unsure" (6.8%); Survey respondents included 148 New Mexico teachers representing 44 school districts across the state of New Mexico.

5 Teach Plus. (2021). (rep.). *Teacher Voice on Supporting Student and Teacher Mental Health: Recommendations from Teach Plus New Mexico*.

6 Question: "How effective are the following supports at your school?" Responses: "**Counselor and social worker positions**" (n= 148) "Very effective" (19.6%), "Somewhat effective" (50.7%), "Ineffective" (27.0%), "Not provided" (2.70%) "**Professional development and resources for families**" (n=148) "Very effective" (6.1%), "Somewhat effective" (43.2%), "Ineffective" (36.5%), "Not provided" (14.2%) "**Reorganized schedules to include additional breaks/support**" (n=147) "Very effective" (9.6%), "Somewhat effective" (25.9%), "Ineffective" (19.7%), "Not provided" (44.9%)

7 Doll, B., Cummings, J. A., Christenson, S., Whitehouse, E. M., & VanGetson, G. R. (2008). Partnering with Families to Enhance Students' Mental Health. In *Transforming School Mental Health Services: Population-based approaches to promoting the competency and wellness of children*. essay, Corwin Press.

8 Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: My school leaders priorities **supporting student mental health.**" (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (29.3%), "Somewhat Agree" (42.2%), "Somewhat disagree" (14.3%), "Strongly disagree" (13.6%) "Unsure" (0.7%)

9 Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel comfortable discussing

student mental health issues in my school" (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (43.5%), "Somewhat Agree" (38.8%), "Somewhat disagree" (7.5%), "Strongly disagree" (9.5%) "Unsure" (0.7%)

10 Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: My school leaders priorities supporting **teacher mental health.**" (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (20.4%), "Somewhat Agree" (30.6%, "Somewhat disagree" (24.5%), "Strongly disagree" (22.5%) "Unsure" (2.0%); Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel comfortable discussing **teacher mental health** issues in my school" (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (19.7%), "Somewhat Agree" (28.6%), "Somewhat disagree" (23.1%), "Strongly disagree" (24.5%) "Unsure" (4.1%)

11 Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel comfortable discussing **teacher mental health** issues in my school" (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (19.7%), "Somewhat Agree" (28.6%), "Somewhat disagree" (23.1%), "Strongly disagree" (24.5%) "Unsure" (4.1%)

12 Question: "How effective are the following supports at your school?" Responses: "**Annual memberships to various local classes (gym, dance, cooking)**" (n= 146) "Very effective" (4.8%), "Somewhat effective" (14.4%), "Ineffective" (13.0%), "Not provided" (67.8%) "**Access to professional learning networks outside of the school/district**" (n=148) "Very effective" (6.08 percent), "Somewhat effective" (35.1%), "Ineffective" (19.6%), "Not provided" (39.2%) "**Extended lunch/break time during the daily schedule**" (n=148) "Very effective" (6.8%), "Somewhat effective" (10.1%), "Ineffective" (7.4%), "Not provided" (75.7%)

13 Question: "How effective are the following supports at your school?" Responses: "**Counselor and social worker positions**" (n= 148) "Very effective" (19.6%), "Somewhat effective" (50.7%), "Ineffective" (27.0%), "Not provided" (2.70%) "**Professional development and resources for families**" (n=148) "Very effective" (6.1%), "Somewhat effective" (43.2%), "Ineffective" (36.5%), "Not provided" (14.2%) "**Reorganized schedules to include additional breaks/support**" (n=147) "Very effective" (9.6%), "Somewhat effective" (25.9%), "Ineffective" (19.7%), "Not provided" (44.9%)

14 *Parental involvement is key to student success*. Public School Review. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/parental-involvement-is-key-to-student-success>