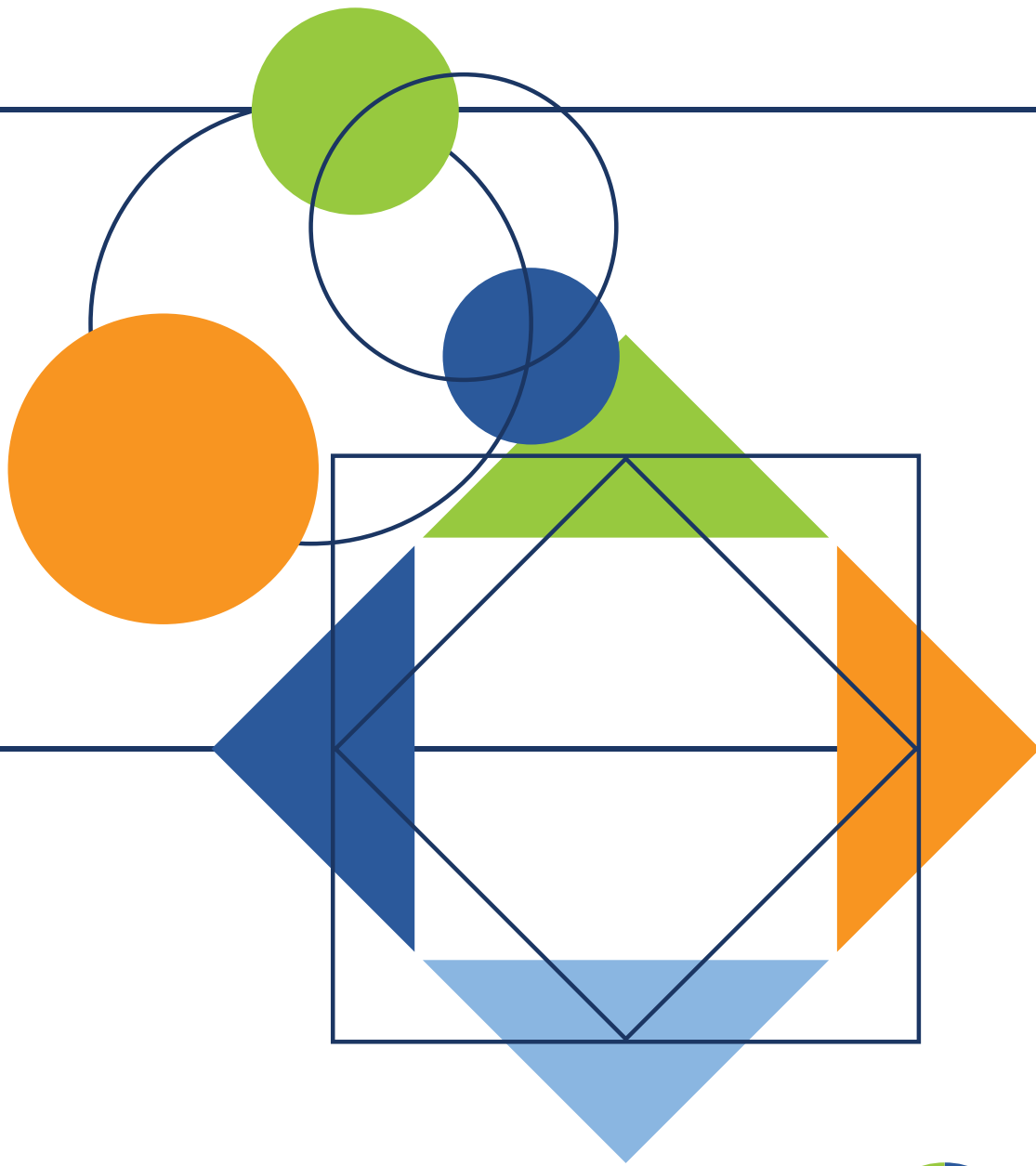


# Meaningful Support for Teacher Mental Health:

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Recommendations from  
Teach Plus Indiana Policy Fellows



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## INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that teachers experience burnout at higher rates than nearly any other professionals.<sup>1</sup> While there are many factors contributing to teachers' collective disenfranchisement, workplace stress, trauma, and unreasonable expectations are some of the common themes. These issues have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only increased the mental health challenges for educators nationwide and in Indiana.

We are a group of Teach Plus Policy Fellows and diverse educators from across Indiana invested in better understanding how teacher mental health has been impacted by the pandemic and how we might work collectively to better support educators in our state. Indiana teachers, like their peers across the country, want the best for their students academically, socially, and personally. With the additional strains of the pandemic, it has become more difficult than ever to accomplish these goals. Burnout, absenteeism, and workplace dissatisfaction are soaring amongst teachers.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent Teach Plus report, "Prioritizing People: Purposeful investments to better support student and teacher mental health," teachers don't feel their schools are doing enough to support their mental health and well-being.<sup>3</sup> Indiana must do more to support the mental health of our teachers, so that they, in turn, can be in a better position to support Indiana's students.

### Findings

1. Teachers need more substantive support and concrete action from school and district leadership when it comes to teacher mental health.
2. Teachers highlight the lack of time and additional responsibilities and expectations as the stressors most detrimental to their mental health.
3. Teachers want more transparency around administration's workload planning and greater balance between existing and new policies and expectations.

### Recommendations

1. School leaders should ensure educators have time off when needed, provide mental health support, and cultivate a school culture that prioritizes self-care.
2. District leaders should ensure mental health services are included in benefit packages.
3. State policymakers should allocate funding to support mental health services for educators and prioritize policies that set manageable staff to student ratios.

# METHODOLOGY

To better understand the importance of teacher mental health and how it has been impacted by the pandemic, we analyzed two data sets.

The first dataset was collected from focus groups Teach Plus Indiana Policy Fellows conducted in January - May 2021 with over 50 educators from across the state.<sup>4</sup> The participating teachers answered questions regarding how well they felt their administration was supporting teacher and student mental health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second dataset comes from a national qualitative survey facilitated by Teach Plus during the summer of 2021 and leading up to the Prioritizing People report. Taking the Indiana specific subset of data, we did a deep dive into the responses from 40 Indiana teachers who provided qualitative feedback on teacher mental health support.<sup>5</sup>

## FINDINGS

### 1. Teachers need more substantive support and concrete action from school and district leadership when it comes to teacher mental health.

The teachers who participated in our focus groups noted that the efforts taken by school and leadership in regard to teacher mental health often came across as performative. While teachers appreciate that administrators and districts are discussing teacher mental health more in light of COVID-19, the actions taken are often shallow and do not change the environment for teachers enough to feel substantively supported or to have the mental health care that they need. When we asked teachers how they might use more available funds, their responses revolved around one major theme: increased access to mental health services. The teachers who participated in the focus groups and took the survey realized that they cannot help students regulate their behavior and emotions without first regulating their own. *"We also need time to decompress and regulate our emotions. We need time every day during the day to do that ... not just when we are burnt out or in crisis."*<sup>6</sup> Teachers need services so they are better able to address their students' needs in the classroom. Many teachers stated that they would spend additional money on improving benefits to better support mental health services or hire mental health professionals for both teachers and students.

*"Mental health services or additional PTO to utilize for mental health services. There are a lot of teachers on antidepressants or in need of therapy or both. I can no longer afford therapy, but if there was some help financially more teachers would seek it out."*<sup>7</sup>

*"Hire an on-site therapist/social worker available to staff and students."*<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Teachers highlight the lack of time and additional responsibilities and expectations as the stressors most detrimental to their mental health.

There have been a multitude of accommodations made for teachers during this time of COVID. Some of these changes have been a much-appreciated shift to focusing on the social, emotional, and mental well-being of our students. However, the constant need for change has taken a toll on workers in the profession. Already in the landscape of education, teachers are compelled by parents, administrators, and themselves to be flexible to the circumstances of students. Within the last three years, this demand for flexibility has only increased. Teachers' roles have now expanded to include social emotional support for students, technology support for students and families, and facilitation of hybrid learning, to name a few additional duties. One teacher captured this tension, saying, *"It can feel difficult at times because of the expectation to be able to be flexible and change any and everything at the drop of a hat. It can be frustrating with negative responses from parents and guardians ... and you feel as if your hands are tied..."*<sup>9</sup> Yet the time capacity and expectations around academics have not changed. Teachers feel that the extra duties delegated to them create added stress to their workday, leaving them feeling both mentally and physically exhausted. This need was displayed through responses such as, *"I would suggest paying for additional staff so that teachers do not have to do extra duties such as traffic duty, before-school supervision, and study hall supervision. This would improve their ability to have a sustainable work-life balance."*<sup>10</sup>

We also asked teachers how schools could improve their infrastructure to alleviate the stressors added by COVID. When addressing this theme, teachers shared many of their feelings about this topic.

*"... invest in making our teacher's lounge a place that teachers can go and relax..."*<sup>11</sup>

*"Give teachers a true workday at school without students to get caught up on work."*<sup>12</sup>

*"Hire a mental health professional to be on campus to support teachers with mental health."*<sup>13</sup>

## 3. Teachers want more transparency around administration's workload planning and greater balance between existing and new policies and expectations.

When asked what things their administration was doing well and what they could do better, teachers identified three main areas for improvement. The first is transparency around the administration's decision-making process. As one teacher put it, *"Decisions are made in a secretive and last-second manner. It really drives my anxiety. Even if they don't know if the plan is solid, express their thought process."*<sup>14</sup> Teachers also want administrators to listen to them and consider their input. One teacher said, *"They have provided us with resources but it is very hands-off. It would be nice for any of the administration to just have a conversation with staff. There is a lack of transparency on what is being planned and how we can have a say in anything that is going on."*<sup>15</sup>

Finally, teachers are calling for their administration to better and more realistically balance their existing workloads and expectations around new policies. One teacher said, *"[My administration] could keep a more consistent schedule or at least transparency in decision making. They appear to be trying through sharing resources, but no time has been carved out for this ... as new other requirements have come, nothing has been taken away."*<sup>16</sup> Another teacher said, *"With the addition of SEL, which*

*I wholeheartedly believe in, more has been added to teachers' plates, and there's even more demand to meet every need of every child – academic and emotional. The pressure on teachers has never been so high. The stakes keep being raised without solutions or regard to what one person can realistically do."*<sup>17</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### What can school leaders do?

School leaders set the culture in a building and create the supports that allow teachers to focus on their students. Studies have shown that teachers who have a good sense of well-being were able to better foster supportive, positive relationships with their students.<sup>18</sup> As schools continue to grapple with how to better support teacher mental health, school leaders can ensure that educators have time off when needed and provide support to those who are experiencing mental health challenges. This support can take the form of access to therapy and counseling services through school based, office, or telehealth visits. School leaders can also work to create relaxing and inviting spaces within the school where staff can go during their lunch or prep periods in order to reset and regroup. Such spaces should be created with teacher input and be focused around community, collaboration, and meeting staff needs. Finally, school leaders can ensure that teachers' voices are being heard, whether during meetings or via surveys, and cultivate a school culture that prioritizes self-care and transparent communication. Any additional workload added to a teachers' responsibility should have a meaningful reason and impact to the classroom and school and should be stated to the teacher when the workload is added.

### What can district leaders do?

While district leaders are the furthest from the classroom, they have the most influence over how the district functions and whether or not it does so cohesively. To support teacher mental health, district leaders can create policies allowing for additional paid time off for teachers to utilize mental health services. District leaders can also ensure that mental health support is part of their district's benefits package so teachers can access mental health services easily instead of paying for them out of their own pocket. Finally, district leaders should provide school leaders with guidance regarding the assignment of additional duties for teachers and provide incentives for schools to build in more time for teachers to plan lessons and grade during paid hours, thus freeing teachers up to maintain a better work-life balance.

### What can state policymakers do?

Policymakers understand that all students have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic differently and that each student has different needs which are taxing on teachers. Policymakers should set aside funding in the state budget for teachers to get the mental health services they need to be available for their students. Policymakers should also support policies that allow for manageable staff to student ratios. Large class sizes make it more difficult for teachers to address all of their students' needs, which contributes to teachers' traumatic stress.

## CONCLUSION

Purposefully addressing Indiana teachers' mental health will not only help teachers but will also benefit students, as teachers who are well-regulated are better at their jobs. Supporting educator mental health will also help alleviate Indiana's critical teacher shortage. Indiana schools and districts need to make mental health services accessible to teachers. Districts must provide guidance to their schools to help manage teacher workloads and allow teachers to have an appropriate work-life balance. And Indiana lawmakers need to support policies that support staff to student ratios and allocate funding to support mental health services for teachers. By investing in teacher mental health, Indiana will be investing in students and their academic outcomes, strengthening the teaching profession across the state.

## 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](https://teachplus.org)



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## ENDNOTES

- 1 BC Teachers' Federation. (2020, December 7) Safeguarding teachers' mental health through the second wave of COVID-19 and beyond: Submission to The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED610467.pdf>.
- 2 Roffey, Sue. "Pupil Wellbeing - Teacher Wellbeing: Two Sides of the Same Coin?" Educational & Child Psychology, vol. 29, no. 4, 2012, pp. 8–17., Retrieved from <https://www.sueroffey.com/wp-content/uploads/import/32-Roffey%20ECP29-4.pdf>.
- 3 Teach Plus, & Fuel Ed. (2022, March 11). Prioritizing people: Purposeful investments to better support student and teacher mental health. Teach Plus - Resources. Retrieved June 28, 2022, from [https://teachplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/prioritizing\\_people.pdf](https://teachplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/prioritizing_people.pdf).

#### 4 Indiana Focus Group Questions (Spring 2021):

- a. How well has your administration tended to teachers' mental health this school year?
- b. When it comes to teachers' mental health, what is your administration doing well and what could it do better?
- c. How does it feel to be a teacher right now?
- d. How has your school year been going so far this year? What has gone well in your teaching? What's not going well?

#### 5 National Survey Questions (Summer 2021):

- a. If your school had \$100 to spend per teacher to better support their mental health, how would you recommend spending it and why would it improve teacher mental health?
- b. What if your school had \$1,000 per teacher, how would you recommend spending it to better support teacher mental health and why would it improve teacher mental health?
- c. What if your school had \$100 per student, how would you recommend spending it to better support student mental health and why would it improve teacher mental health?
- d. What if your school had \$1,000 per student, how would you recommend spending it to better support student mental health and why would it improve teacher mental health?
- e. What advice do you have for policymakers and education leaders on how to better support the mental health of students and teachers?

6 Question: "What advice do you have for policymakers and education leaders on how to better support the mental health of students and teachers?" Survey Question (open response).

7 Question: "If your school had \$100 to spend per teacher to better support their mental health, how would you recommend spending it and why would it improve teacher mental health?" Survey Question (open response).

8 Question: "What if your school had \$1,000 per teacher, how would you recommend spending it to better support teacher mental health and why would it improve teacher mental health?" Survey Question (open response).

9 Question: "How does it feel to be a teacher right now?" Focus Group Question (open response).

10 See endnote 8.

11 See endnote 7.

12 See endnote 7.

13 See endnote 8.

14 Question: "When it comes to teachers' mental health, what is your administration doing well and what could it do better?" Focus Group Question (open response)

15 See endnote 14.

16 See endnote 14.

17 See endnote 6.

18 Harding, S., Morris, R., Gunnell, D., Ford, T., Hollingworth, W., Tilling, K., Evans, R., Bell, S., Grey, J., Brockman, R., Campbell, R., Araya, R., Murphy, S., & Kidger, J. (2018). Is teachers' mental health and wellbeing associated with students' mental health and wellbeing? Retrieved from <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/114525/1/PIIS0165032718301733.pdf>