



Addressing Vicarious Trauma in Oakland’s Teachers

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ISSUE

Teachers play a larger role than just educating students, especially when the students in their classroom are in pain. However, the vicarious trauma that teachers experience when performing this role can lead to burnout and teacher attrition. Teachers often work on the front lines in regard to childhood trauma—they are often the first person a child will tell about trauma, and they have to manage classroom behaviors that manifest from trauma. Beyond making their job more difficult on the day-to-day, teachers experience vicarious trauma in which they often will experience a physiological or emotional response. The American Counseling Association defines vicarious trauma as “the emotional residue of exposure” felt after people “become witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured.”ⁱ However, as mentioned in an Edutopia article, teachers often don’t have sufficient coping mechanisms in place to deal with this trauma.ⁱⁱ This is a personal issue to Oakland because of the high levels of violence, food and housing insecurity, and influx of students fleeing Central American countries. Teachers in Oakland are feeling the stress of this reality.

METHODS

In order to assess a district’s role in preventing or healing vicarious trauma, this report relies on an academic literature review and a survey of best practices. This project focuses specifically on the best practices for schools and districts to promote teacher well-being, particularly with respect to vicarious trauma. I seek to answer the following questions:

- How can districts and schools shift culture to facilitate healing?
- What methods are used elsewhere to address vicarious trauma?

FINDINGS

Study	Findings
University of Northern Colorado	Four dimensions to prevent and intervene to address vicarious trauma: personal wellness, organizational, supervision, and education. This study suggests that the goal of an organization, or in this case, a school, should be to create a culture where teachers feel like they can “seek support and assistance when they are struggling”
Louisiana State University/Tennessee at Chattanooga	Organizational and personal wellness plans to address stress and trauma must go beyond physical wellness. An ideal wellness program would address all of the following dimensions of wellness: “(1) physical health, (2) leisure, (3) relationships, (4) work pursuits, and (5) an area of their choosing (spiritual, financial, hobby)”



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University of Michigan	An evaluation of a school-based wellness program in Atlanta, TeachWell, identified the impact of the program on teacher job satisfaction, a key predictor of teacher retention. The program implemented wellness classes throughout the school year for teachers, which gave them practices to improve their own wellness and the wellness of their students. However, the study found no indication that the program increased student or teacher outcomes on any measure and have attributed this to low participation and buy-in from teachers.
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There are multiple ways to address vicarious trauma in teachers, but creating a space where teachers feel able to heal is critical. This report looks to programs and methods being used in other districts, as well in other professions that experience vicarious trauma, such as healthcare or counseling. We find that there are a number of underlying themes in these programs:

- **Shifting Culture:** One of the most heavily cited impacts on teacher emotional wellness is shifting school and district culture to support it. Teachers should feel like good emotional wellness is both encouraged and facilitated. This largely comes from positive school site relationships and a school culture that encourages self-care.
- **Teacher Buy-In:** Evidence suggests that, as much effort as a school or district puts into teacher wellness, teacher buy-in into the programs is essential. Oakland is already promoting this, in part, by allowing teachers to submit their own proposals as grants and implement them at the school site. However, further exploration of how to promote this buy-in, possibly with the support of each site's Wellness Council, is necessary.
- **Wellness Plans:** One highly suggested method to organizationally support teacher wellness is to ask teachers to create their own wellness plan, and to create a school-wide wellness plan. By doing this, a school can encourage and support wellness while still giving teachers ownership over their own goals. At the end of each semester, the school can facilitate reflective time on these wellness goals, which allows teachers to consciously think about how much time and effort they are putting into their own wellness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short Term: Shift framing of wellness grant program to focus on shifting school culture towards a more open and collaborative environment. This will allow for the wellness grants to better serve the purpose they are intended for while maintaining the teacher-led aspect of it. **Long-Term: Implement organizational practices such as staff check ins, promoting mental health care, teacher support groups or buddies, and vicarious trauma workshops.** These active steps from a school's administration can work to make teachers feel that their feelings are heard and important. It also allows teachers to create a culture of healing amongst their own colleagues.

ⁱ <https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too>



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