

# Teacher Wellness from Vicarious Trauma

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**How does vicarious trauma impact teacher retention?  
How can teacher wellness efforts counteract this?**

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# Executive Summary

## 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.”<sup>i</sup> However, as mentioned in an Edutopia article, teachers often don’t have sufficient coping mechanisms in place to deal with this trauma.<sup>ii</sup> 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.

## METHOD

***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)”

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.

## RECOMMENDATIO

**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.

# Issue

Teachers play a larger role than just educating students, especially when the students in their classroom are in pain. 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.”<sup>1</sup> However, as mentioned in an Edutopia article, teachers often don’t have sufficient coping mechanisms in place to deal with this trauma.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes vicarious trauma is confused for burnout, however they differ in that burnout describes physical and emotional exhaustion that builds up over time, while vicarious trauma refers to compassion fatigue that can shift one’s view of the world.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, people in any field can experience burnout, but vicarious trauma is typically limited to people working in service-oriented positions, such as counselors or teachers. However, teachers often experience both burnout and vicarious trauma, and both may benefit from wellness interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too>

<sup>3</sup> *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook* by Françoise Mathieu

One common problem with teacher wellness programs is that they often focus on a teacher's physical wellness. As highlighted in the literature review below, a teacher's physical wellness is intricately tied to their overall well-being and stress levels. However, physical wellness programs don't address the heart of the issue: vicarious trauma. Though steps toward physical wellness can empower a teacher with stress reduction techniques and other benefits, they do not tackle the trauma itself. Instead, wellness programs that address a wider range of wellness, including emotional and psychological wellness, are more effective approaches to managing this trauma.

One way to approach this idea of teacher wellness is through the oxygen mask approach. On an airplane, flight attendants will remind guests that if there is a sudden change in cabin pressure, they should secure their masks before securing masks on their children. This is highly applicable to the theory of teacher wellness; teachers can only help students through their trauma if teachers can manage their own trauma first.

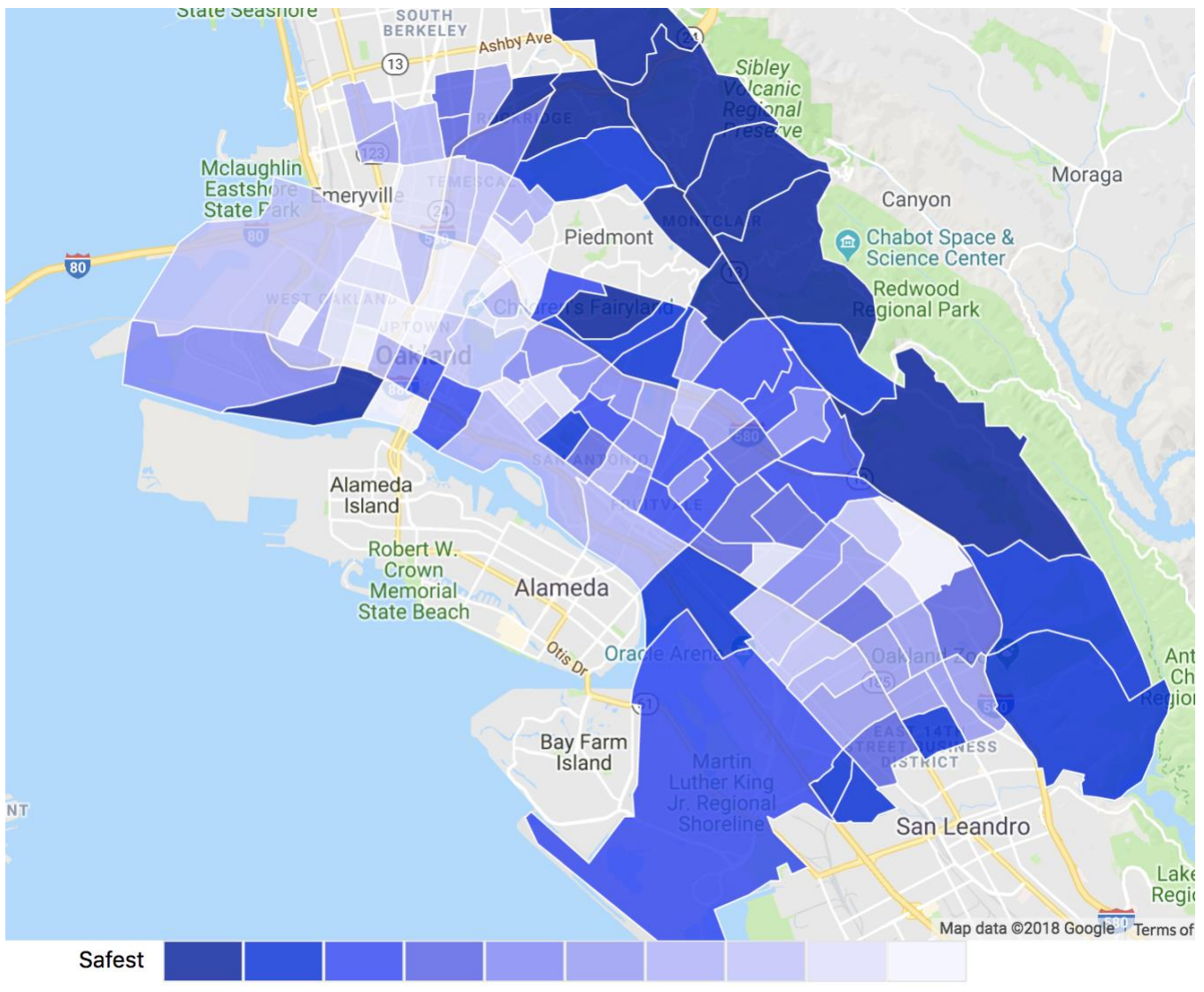
This is a personal issue to Oakland because of the high levels of violence, food and housing insecurity, and influx of students fleeing Central American countries. In Oakland from 2002-2015, 117 children under the age of 18 were shot and killed<sup>4</sup>. Neighborhood Scout considered Oakland safer than only 1% of U.S. cities. The number of violent crimes per 1,000 residents in Oakland is 14.55, compared to a state average of 4.45.<sup>5</sup> These problems are particularly true in the lower-income neighborhoods such as West Oakland and the inner

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<sup>4</sup> Downing, Shane. *Keeping trauma-informed teachers in Oakland, CA, schools*, <https://acestoohigh.com/2016/01/19/keeping-trauma-informed-teachers-in-oakland-ca-schools/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/ca/oakland/crime>

corridor of Oakland between I-880 and I-580. Below is a map showing the distribution of crime in Oakland, with the darker blue being safer<sup>6</sup>.



Teachers in Oakland are feeling the stress of this reality. Nationally, the teacher attrition rate hovers at around 8% a year<sup>7</sup>, but Oakland Unified loses about 19.5% of their teachers in a

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Learning Policy Institute. *Teacher Turnover: Why It Matters and What We Can Do About It*.  
[https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher\\_Turnover\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher_Turnover_REPORT.pdf)

given year<sup>8</sup>. This means that over the course of an OUSD student's middle school career, they will see nearly 2/3rds of their teachers leave the classroom. The lowest teacher retention rates, hovering at barely over 70% per year, happens in the East and West regions of OUSD, areas that also have the highest crime<sup>9</sup>. Teachers who teach newcomer students are exposed to other types of trauma, as well. In 2015, 17.2% of newcomers were refugees or asylees and 22.25% of newcomers came as unaccompanied minors<sup>10</sup>. The number of newcomer students has only grown since then. Though the impact of this increased trauma in the classroom on teacher retention is still being studied, it's easy to imagine the problem is just as bad, if not worse, for the newcomer teachers than for the district as a whole.

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## Landscape Analysis

The school and the district work as hosts for the interactions between teachers and students, including the interactions surrounding student trauma. As such, the school can be thought of as the context in which secondary trauma arises. Research supports that if a school can harness this context, instead of being burdened by it, they can effectively manage vicarious trauma in teachers. While vicarious trauma will always be a part of the teaching profession just due to the nature of teaching traumatized students, an organization's culture is an important aspect of managing trauma and keeping the whole teacher in the classroom.

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<sup>8</sup> *Oakland Unified School District.*

[https://dashboards.ousd.org/t/HR/views/RetentionDashboardPublic/TeachersDistrictwide?%3Aembed=y&%3AhowShareOptions=true&%3Adisplay\\_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no](https://dashboards.ousd.org/t/HR/views/RetentionDashboardPublic/TeachersDistrictwide?%3Aembed=y&%3AhowShareOptions=true&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no)

<sup>9</sup> *Cham, Carrie. "Keep Our Oakland Teachers!" Educate 78. <http://educate78.org/keep-oakland-teachers-teacher-retention/>*

<sup>10</sup> *Oakland Unified School District.*

## **Managing Vicarious Trauma in Teachers**

A study done by a psychologist at the University of Northern Colorado suggests that there are four dimensions that prevention and intervention efforts should take place in to address vicarious trauma: personal wellness, organizational, supervision, and education. The majority of the focus of this project is on the personal wellness aspect of this, which includes multiple parts: physical, psychological, emotional, etc. However, it is important to address these other dimensions, as well. One way that is particularly pertinent to a school setting is through organizational culture shifting. 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”.<sup>11</sup> This culture shift must be intentional and supported throughout the school. Other organizational supports can be training support, particularly training surrounding trauma within the classroom, and resources for self-care. The third dimension, supervision, refers to the leadership of a school monitoring how teachers are doing and helping intervene and support when they are struggling. The fourth dimension, education, refers to informing teachers of vicarious trauma and identifying steps they can take on their own to address it.

## **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. One study suggests that participants (in this case teachers) create one major objective and three concrete goals for each of the following categories: (1) physical health, (2) leisure, (3)

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<sup>11</sup> <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0a28/ec3542a643eef11e31f1c1538c25b230e18d.pdf>

relationships, (4) work pursuits, and (5) an area of their choosing (spiritual, financial, hobby).<sup>12</sup>

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.

### **Shifting Culture**

One of the most heavily cited impacts on teacher emotional wellness is shifting school and district culture to support it. This is also the goal of a local, Oakland-based organization, The Teaching Well. The Wellness Department at Oakland Unified School District has already partnered with The Teaching Well, and this could be an opportunity for the engagement of newcomer teachers, as well. The Teaching Well outlines three steps to shifting culture within a school:

**“Step 1:** Provide teachers with the skills and capacity to build positive school site relationships among administrators, colleagues and students.

**Step 2:** Create an environment conducive to learning and facilitate time for teacher well-being and self-care.

**Step 3:** Increase teacher retention and save schools money on training new staff, reestablishing relationships and resources in the community, and rebuilding instructional expertise and staff camaraderie.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Shifting a Wellness Paradigm in Teacher Education* by Jennifer Curry and Elizabeth O’Brien

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.theteachingwell.org/mission/>

## **Importance of 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. 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. The study also scored participation in each program and found that there was very low teacher turnout at the different wellness events. Due to budget constraints, only 30% of teachers were offered the program, and those teachers only attended about 21% of the classes. This is also similar to participation rates in other school initiatives, and the study suggests that for a wellness program to be effective, teacher buy-in is significant. 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.

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## **Best Practices for Improving Teacher Wellness**

To identify the best practices for teacher wellness, I have used a collection of case studies. These case studies focus on other districts or programs that have implemented a wellness program. The majority of these programs specifically focus on wellness based on vicarious trauma. However, not all of the cases examined in this study focus on school

districts. For example, the first case study illustrated below focuses on the Center for Health Care Strategies and the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers. These organizations work in conjunction to provide mental health resources and wellness programs to health care providers who experience vicarious trauma based on their interactions with patients. Though these programs are not immediately implementable to school districts due to the differing structures of districts and health organizations, the lessons learned from these programs are directly applicable.

### **Center for Health Care Strategies / Camden Coalition of Health Care Providers**

Research from the Center for Health Care Strategies suggests<sup>14</sup> that interventions for secondary trauma and compassion fatigue can be organized into the following categories:

- 1) General wellness – This category includes physical wellness, such as yoga, and exercise, as well as activities such as healthy eating and meditation.
- 2) Organizational – This category refers to creating a culture that allows individuals to seek support
- 3) Education – This strategy refers to informing individuals about secondary trauma and stress, as well as teaching strategies for self-care.
- 4) Supervision – This refers to creating a supervisory relationship between administrator and individual to address stress or trauma.

The center highlights trauma informed practices in a variety of compassion-oriented groups. One group that practices wellness among its practitioners is the Camden Coalition of

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<sup>14</sup> *Center for Health Care Strategies, Strategies for Encouraging Staff Wellness in Trauma Informed Organizations*

Healthcare Providers in Camden, New Jersey. The Camden Coalition provides mental health benefits in addition to their standard health insurance. It also has shifted organizational policies to focus more on wellness: including encouraging members to leave their work at work. They also have a “morning huddle” every morning where they check in, get ready for the day, and build support networks at the school. Some things included in these morning huddles are dancing, sharing stress about particular issues with patients, and identifying good work being done by colleagues. Lastly, the group offers non-working events such as retreats to further build the team.

These practices, while written for healthcare providers, are relevant and easily applicable to school districts. The purpose of these plans ties into the goal of shifting culture within the district and could further fight teacher isolation.

### **Teacher Coach**

Some school districts bring in third party wellness groups, like the Teaching Well in Oakland. One such program is Teacher Coach, which offers an online portal for educators with webinars that cover a wide range of stress-inducing life problems, ranging from student trauma to teacher stress to dealing with school site conflict and difficult parents<sup>15</sup>. Teacher Coach also has professional development workshops that site leaders can carry out to focus on teacher wellness.<sup>16</sup>

The fundamental theory underlying Teacher Coach is that personal growth, comprised of wellness within families, relationships, and oneself, combined with professional development

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<sup>15</sup> *Teacher Coach Engagement Menu*, <https://www.teachercoach.com/assets/Uploads/TC-Engagement-Menu-2019.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> *Teacher Coach Professional Development*, <https://www.teachercoach.com/educator/professional-development/>

creates a whole teacher. Their personal growth modules focus on subcategories such as fair fighting, burnout, behavioral health, and nutrition. Teacher Coach is also funded through an independent revenue stream, making it appealing for budget conscious districts, and makes their resources available to the families of the district, as well.<sup>17</sup>

### **UCSF HEARTS Program**

One program that exists within Oakland Unified School District's backyard is the UCSF Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) program. Implemented in schools within the San Francisco Unified School District, this program actually seeks to help with student trauma. However, one portion of this program is especially relevant to our discussion of managing teacher vicarious trauma. One of the program's three main areas of focus is centered around building skills within schools to support traumatized students. The HEARTS program outlines four ways they support teachers in this regard:

- 1) "Interventions such as psychoeducational and skill-building workshops for parents/caregivers
- 2) Training and consultation in complex trauma and trauma sensitive practices for teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and school mental health staff
- 3) Aimed at building capacity in SFUSD personnel around more effectively working with traumatized students
- 4) Support for school staff around stress, burnout, and vicarious traumatization"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Shulman, Robyn. *It's Time to Support the Mental Health & Well Being of Teachers*, Huffington Post, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-this-founder-is-addressing-the-problem-nobody-wants\\_us\\_59c3ba04e4b0ffc2dedb5b4d](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-this-founder-is-addressing-the-problem-nobody-wants_us_59c3ba04e4b0ffc2dedb5b4d)

<sup>18</sup> UCSF Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools Program, [http://coe.ucsf.edu/coe/spotlight/ucsf\\_hearts.html](http://coe.ucsf.edu/coe/spotlight/ucsf_hearts.html)

These strategies take form in numerous ways. For example, students with significant trauma get a Care Team, and teachers work together to address the needs of the students. Doing this helps to promote a sense of collaboration within staff and removes the stress of being the sole provider aiding in a student's trauma. They also create teacher wellness groups to make teacher vicarious trauma a more openly talked about part of school culture<sup>19</sup>.

### **Washoe County School District Wellness Program**

The Washoe County School District in Washoe County Nevada has implemented a program for their teachers called the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. This program focuses on techniques to control anxiety, stress, and trauma within the job. It runs in cycles, with the full curriculum lasting 8 weeks with meetings once per week. The curriculum includes yoga, meditation, and "other cognitively oriented mindfulness and awareness practices"<sup>20</sup>.

The program states the goal of their mindfulness program is to help teachers to learn "to pay attention to our thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations and acknowledging whatever is present."<sup>21</sup> Because the program is run by professional staff, it costs money. Unfortunately, Washoe County School District does not cover these costs, though teachers receive a discounted price for the session. Ideally, a similar program could be implemented within the district and available for free to teachers or it likely would not be highly utilized.

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<sup>19</sup> UCSF HEARTS Program Overview, <http://hearts.ucsf.edu/program-overview>

<sup>20</sup> Herbert and Forman, *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction*

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/165/Flyer%20for%20WCSD%20March%202018-MBSR.pdf>

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## 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.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf>  
<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too>