

Ultimate Guide to Adult Well-Being & Staff Empowerment in K-12 Schools

FEATURING

3 WAYS TO BUILD CONFIDENCE,
REDUCE WORKPLACE
STRESS AND EMPOWER
TEACHERS & STAFF



Have you checked in with your teachers lately? What about your support staff?

TEACHER WORKFORCE **PRE-PANDEMIC**

TEACHER WORKFORCE **POST-PANDEMIC**

↓ **7%**

Percentage the
teacher workforce
has shrunk post
pandemic

Source: National Education
Association, 2022

While much of the conversation post-pandemic has focused on supporting the academic and mental-health needs of students, **research suggests that the adults in our buildings are struggling, too.** Some say these struggles are one reason why educators at every level are quitting in record numbers.

Just how bad is the state of adult well-being and staff retention in K-12 schools?

"School staffing shortages are not new, but what we are seeing now is an unprecedented staffing crisis across every job category," said NEA President Becky Pringle following the release of [a national survey](#) her organization conducted in 2022. In [a 2022 article](#) for EdSurge, reporter Stephen Noonoo cited data from the Economic Policy Institute estimating the nation's public teaching workforce had "shrunk by nearly 7 percent."



In its survey, The National Education Association asked respondents what proposals they support to address the issue:

96% of respondents said they would support higher pay for teachers.

That one's been a lightning rod for years. But pay is hardly the only factor that has teachers and staff heading for the doors.



In a recent Education Week report, editor Madeline Will cited a Rand Corp. study, which suggests that teachers are nearly twice as likely to suffer from job-related stresses compared with other industries and 10 percentage points more likely to experience burnout, pointing out that frequent and long-term stress is a contributing factor to common mental-health problems, including anxiety and depression.



Despite documented struggles, the EdWeek Research Center has released survey data that suggests mental health programming for adults is rare, if nonexistent, in most K-12 schools, with just two percent of respondents indicating that their schools offered such services.

Educator, author and entrepreneur Carla Tantillo Philibert is an expert in social-emotional learning and student mental health. More recently, Tantillo Philibert has trained her focus on adult well-being in schools. The reason: Before our teachers and staff can be effective advocates for student health, they first have to learn how to advocate for themselves.

She likens the situation to the safety message flight attendants deliver when you board a plane. “Before placing your oxygen mask on your child, they always tell you to make sure that you place yours first,” explains Tantillo Philibert. Her logic checks: “If you pass out before you’re able to help your kid, you’re no good to anyone.”

“Before placing your oxygen mask on your child, they always tell you to make sure that you place yours first. If you pass out before you’re able to help your kid, you’re no good to anyone.”



Carla Tantillo Philibert, educator, author, founder of Mindful Practices & Class Catalyst

If you’re an administrator, school leader, instructional coach or teacher, the research and resources in this guide are intended to help you think about and understand the link between adult well-being and staff retention in your schools. Our hope is that you’ll be able to use that knowledge to improve staff morale and drive positive student outcomes.

READ-ON TO CONSIDER

- 1 Care for your people (and yourself)
- 2 Find your starting point with well-being work in schools
- 3 Successfully anchor adult needs alongside student needs

Ready to get started? Let’s get into it.

1 Care for your people (and yourself)

In case you missed it, a recent Pew Research study found that nearly 30% of teachers said they planned to retire or stop working ahead of the 2024 school year. Whether that has come to fruition is some matter of debate. While we can quibble over percentages, it's hard to argue with the fact that morale is down and vacancies are up.

We've already established that caring for your students starts with caring for your adults. But what does a culture of caring look and feel like in a typical K-12 school?

When asked about creating a culture of caring, Tantillo Philibert thinks back to her tenure as an administrator, running a school. There was a time when she would walk out in the parking lot at night and look at the cars to see who was still there. Tantillo Philibert had this notion that everyone should work as hard as she was working. If the cars weren't there at the end of the day as the sun was going down, the assumption was that people weren't working as hard as they should.



But she soon realized a critical error in that line of thinking: When you run a school, you're going to have team members who need different accommodations and resources to be successful. One teacher might need to leave early to pick their child up from school. Another might prefer to stay late on a Wednesday, so that they can go to the gym on a Friday. The potential accommodations are endless. The point is that, as a leader, you need to understand and make space for those needs – and, importantly, you cannot, under any circumstances, consciously or unconsciously, hold those needs against your people.



3 Keys to Adult Self-Care in Schools

Tantillo Philibert says adult well-being and self care in schools comes down to these factors.

1. **Awareness** Give your team members a safe space to make requests.
2. **Access** Secure resources for team members who need them.
3. **Agency** Empower people to use the resources you provide.

Run surveys. Encourage dialogue. Then comb through those findings and go on a mission, as leader of people, to secure the resources that your team is telling you it desperately needs. Mani-pedi days and pizza for lunch won't cut it, says Tantillo Philibert. Perks are not accommodations. They're nice to have. But, what we're talking about runs deeper. It's about need.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time folks are so well intentioned," says Tantillo Philibert. "They care about their staff, they care about their district, they care about their teams. Why aren't people satisfied working in this district? No one can really put their finger on it. We've got to start by looking at numbers, looking at data, then being strategic. What bucket do our folks fall into?"

2 Find your starting point with well-being work in schools

So, where do you start with adult well-being?

Schools are notorious for once-annual staff and student engagement surveys. But, while surveys have a critical role to play in helping to assess school and workplace culture, Tantillo Philibert and other experts contend that conducting surveys as a matter of reflex, or as lip-service to a problem, is often what gets schools into trouble.

Needs are fluid. That means, if you conduct a survey once at the end of the year, those needs are likely to change drastically by the time school starts up again. Conversely, if you conduct a survey in the beginning of the year, those needs will likely change by the second or third week.

Says Tantillo Philibert: "Looking at the system-level work and the work that we need principals and administrators and leaders and superintendents and assistants to do, it's that definitional work around what is well-being and what is appreciation. And when you are combing through your data at the state level or the district level, and you say, 'Gosh, folks aren't well,' what are they looking for? Is it well-being support or is it appreciation?"



2 Find your starting point with well-being work (cont'd)

Find your cadence

Now that you have a working definition, you need to talk specifics. Surveys are helpful, but they don't help you keep your finger on the pulse in a way that enables change in real time.

"The advice I always give folks is to collect data more often and in a less heavy and serious way," suggests Tantillo Philibert.

For example, consider implementing a check-in, check-out system, where students and adults have dedicated opportunities to tell you how they are feeling and how those feelings might impact their performance.

"You run the numbers every week and you say, 'Well, this week or this month, everyone's talking about clean drinking water,'" suggests Tantillo Philibert. "Can we get that thing that they have in the airport where you put your water bottle in? What would that cost?' 'Can we get a local business to donate that technology in each of our buildings?' You're constantly seeing the data as iterative because well-being needs are iterative."

Individual vs. collective well-being

Experts say it's important to make a distinction between individual and collective well-being. Meeting personal needs is important. But collective needs speak to a broader organizational culture.

"We're thinking about what policies, practices and procedures impact the collective and what things impact the individual," says Tantillo Philibert. "That's going to be constantly iterative. That's just the nature of the beast and we're gonna solve for that."



"The advice I always give folks is to collect data more often and in a less heavy and serious way."

Carla Tantillo Philibert

4 questions to ask:

- Do meetings start and end on time in your schools?
- Does PD happen inside or outside of school hours?
- Are leave and substitute policies posted and clear?
- What about roles and responsibilities before and after the bell?



3 Successfully anchor adult needs alongside student needs

When thinking about adult well-being in schools, anchoring the needs of adults alongside the needs of students isn't necessarily easy, or even intuitive. But working inside an organization that learns to do this well can be a game-changer for staff.

If you lead a district, department or school, Tantillo Philibert says that anchoring adult needs often boils down to an exercise in resource allocation. Schools have become fairly adept at doing this for students, but not as much for adults.



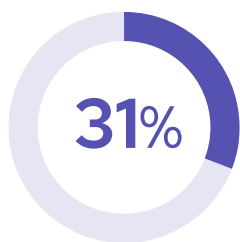
Open doors aren't the only answer

Sometimes we can convince ourselves that letting people talk is tantamount to solving their problems. As administrators, we tell staff that our doors are always open and we invite people in to air their grievances.

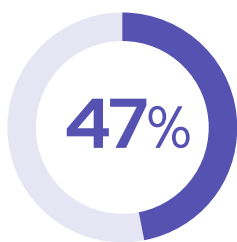
But, is this solving their problem? Or, just taking up more time? Time that, as a principal or other administrator, you might use to address certain challenges in a more specific or intentional way.

For example, if the need is mental-health support, do you have a professional counseling resource on staff specifically for teachers and staff, or are you asking your student counselor to pull double duty? Is time a primary source of stress for your team? Have you considered the benefits of a flexible schedule, or some alternative?

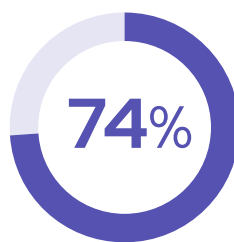
Teacher Well-Being Index



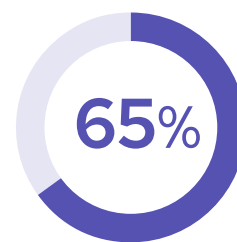
Experienced a mental health issue in the past academic year



Were away for a month or more with mental health symptoms over the academic year



Feel they do not have enough guidance about mental health and wellbeing at work



Would not feel confident disclosing mental health problems or unmanageable stress to their employer

Source: Education Support Partnership, 2019

3 Successfully anchor adult needs alongside student needs (cont'd)

Empower your staff to self-advocate

As a school leader, it's impossible to meet the needs of every adult in your building or buildings. It would be a fool's errand to even try. Alternatively, Tantillo Philibert suggests helping teachers and staff become stronger self-advocates.

"Say, it turns out that 80% of staff are having trouble with sleep," suggests Tantillo Philibert. So you have someone from a local hospital come in and do a session. Or maybe there is a water main break in town and your teachers and their families don't have access to clean drinking water. Can you identify a local business to donate, so staff can pick up a case of water at school and take it home?

"We need the principal hustling resources for the school. Not spending it with one teacher, hugging that teacher about what's going on or hugging that staff member. And that's hard. But that principal has limited time," explains Tantillo Philibert. That isn't to say that you can't or shouldn't take time out of your day to listen to people in a time of need. Just know that, by itself, listening is not an effective strategy for improving overall adult well-being in your schools.

Challenge teachers and staff to take personal ownership of their own professional happiness and well-being.



Empower your team. Practical self-care strategies for teachers & staff.

York College of Pennsylvania offers the following self-care strategies.

Set Reasonable Boundaries	Time Management: Set clearly defined work hours.
	Digital Detox: Take intentional technology breaks.
Manage Stress	Breathing Exercises: Practice deep breathing.
	Physical Activity: Make regular physical activity a priority.
	Journaling: Take time to reflect (in writing) on your experiences.
Mindfulness & Relaxation	Meditation: Devote time to mindfulness practices to reduce worry.
	Yoga: Postures to improve flexibility, reduce stress and promote mindfulness.
	Creative Outlets: Practice art, music, or writing to open the mind and relieve stress.

Source: [York College of Pennsylvania](#)

Ready to anchor the needs of the adults in your building, so that they can anchor the needs of students?

Catch Carla Tantillo Philibert on The RocketPD Podcast

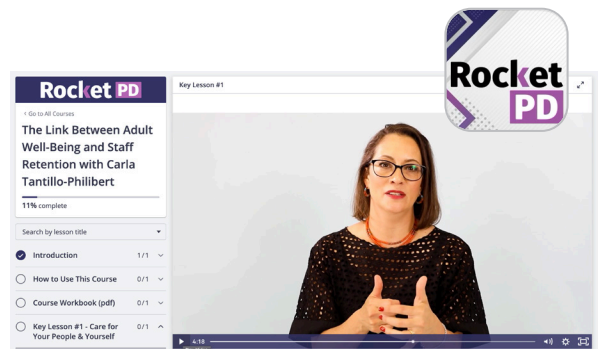
Catch Corey Murray's interview with Carla Tantillo Philibert on adult well-being in K-12 schools.

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Take Carla's 60-min. Course on K-12 Adult Well-Being

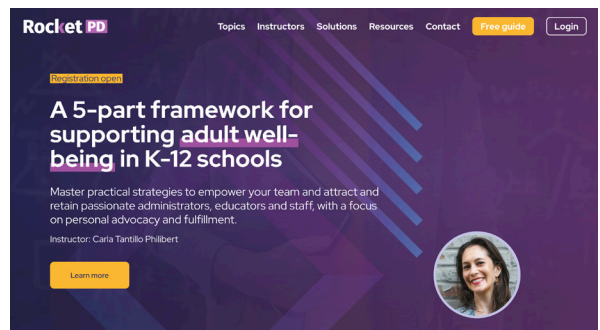
Download the RocketPD app and join Carla over 5 short video lessons with practical, job-embedded strategies for adult well-being in schools. Video-based course includes a downloadable workbook and available Certificate of Completion.



Register for Carla Tantillo Philibert's Live-Virtual Cohort

Don't miss your chance to collaborate with Carla and other educators from around the world for a collaborative learning experience, **A 5-part framework for supporting adult well-being in K-12 schools**. Spots are limited. Discounts available for teams. Visit RocketPD.com or email info@rocketpd.com to learn more.

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The work you do matters

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