

## Teacher Stress and Burnout in Urban Middle Schools

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Now more than ever, teachers are experiencing tremendous demands on the job, often with insufficient resources to manage them, particularly in urban schools. The resulting stress and burnout are unhealthy for teachers and, as this study found, tied to the quality of their interactions with students in the classroom. These findings have implications for policy changes needed to reduce teachers' job demands and expand resources to support their well-being.

### TEACHER STRESS, BURNOUT, AND QUALITY OF CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS

Urban teachers' **stress** and **burnout** are largely influenced by the **demands** of the job and the **resources** available to them to meet those demands. This in turn may hinder teachers' provision of **warmth** and **challenge** in the classroom.

- **Demands** include the high levels of poverty, adverse experiences, and trauma exposure affecting their students' social, emotional, academic, and behavioral needs in the classroom. Teaching in underresourced schools with large classroom sizes and racial mismatch between a predominantly White teaching workforce and predominantly BIPOC student body presents structural job demands as well.
- **Resources** include supportive and trusting relationships with colleagues, confidence in their leaders, opportunities to work with students who value academics, and confidence in their own ability to support students' positive behavior and respond effectively to student needs. The school may also provide wellness resources and supports to teachers.
- Unhealthy **stress** results when demands exceed resources and the ability to cope. This stress is characterized by "fight-or-flight" responses. A prolonged imbalance also causes **burnout**, which often shows up as emotional exhaustion.
- A balance of **warmth and academic challenge** in teachers' interactions with students may suffer when they are stressed and/or burnt out. A warm and challenging teaching style is associated with positive student outcomes, particularly among Black youth in urban schools. **THE STUDY** This study examined the interplay of job demands and resources as they related to teacher stress, burnout, and observed quality of their classroom interactions with students. Administrative, classroom observational, and teacher-report data from 255 teachers and classrooms in 33 middle schools in two urban or urban fringe districts in a mid-Atlantic state were leveraged in the analysis. Demands were measured by both administrative data from the school and observed student behaviors in the classroom. Resources, stress, and burnout were measured by teachers reports. Warmth was measured by observed responsiveness to academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Challenge was measured by observed extended dialogue, leading to deeper understanding and engagement in higher-order thinking.

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## **OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS**

### **How Job Demands and Resources Relate to Stress and Burnout:**

- When job demands were higher – such as when more of their students were experiencing poverty and had higher classroom behavioral needs – teachers experienced higher levels of stress and burnout.
- When teachers rated their relationships with colleagues and self-confidence to provide positive behavior supports to students higher, they reported lower stress.
- The above resources, plus perceived student academic motivation, related to lower burnout.
- When teachers' report of resources was accounted for, difficult student behaviors were no longer associated with stress and burnout. Stress and Burnout Associations with Warm-Challenging Classroom Learning Environments:
- Teachers experiencing higher levels of stress were observed providing fewer opportunities to engage in higher order thinking (less challenge).
- Teachers reporting higher burnout showed more warmth in their interactions with students.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Affirmation and takeaway for teachers: Teachers who are more emotionally exhausted may also be more attuned, more accepting of children where they are, and more responsive in their interactions to children's needs. Their emotional exhaustion is likely related to attending so closely to students' needs. When teachers are stressed, however, they may find it harder to maintain challenging instructional practices with their students, suggesting the importance of self-care for their own – and their students' – benefit. Takeaway for policymakers and administrators: Teachers working in schools with a high proportion of students experiencing poverty and behavioral needs are more likely to be stressed and burned out. However, when teachers feel confident in their behavior support practices, feel they have supportive and trusting relationships with colleagues, and feel that their students are academically motivated, they may be less prone to stress and burnout. Teacher stress-reduction and wellness efforts are not only warranted for occupational health but may also be instrumental in ensuring high quality classroom instruction.

**Recommendations** to enhance resources and minimize impact of demands to lower teacher stress and burnout:

- Provide effective stress-reduction interventions for teachers. For example, Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE)® (Jennings et al., 2017) is evidence-based and designed for teachers.
- Provide professional development and coaching opportunities to increase teachers' confidence in their ability to effectively support positive behavior and respond to student needs in the classroom.
- Foster opportunities for teachers to build trusting and supportive relationships with their colleagues. • Build a shared student-teacher perspective of their school's culture of valuing academics.

**For more information about this research, see: Bottiani, J. H., Duran, C. A., Pas, E. T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2019). Teacher stress and burnout in urban middle schools: Associations with job demands, resources, and effective classroom practices. *Journal of School Psychology, 77*, 36-51.**