Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

Combating Teacher Burnout and Boosting Retention

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How educators feel matters. Their emotional outlook influences instructional quality, student achievement, and the overall classroom and school climate. But their emotional wellbeing is too often overlooked. In our work at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, we have discovered that many educators are uncomfortable discussing emotions—their own and those of their students.

Supporting educators' and students' emotional well-being requires the support of leadership. But too often, education leaders also fall into the trap of suppressing or denying their emotions. Like other professionals, they have been conditioned to "toughen up" and push their feelings aside, often resulting in their engaging with others (and themselves) in ways that don't align with their best intentions. This mindset trickles down to educators and, ultimately, to students; a cycle is created that undermines not only the leaders' own wellbeing but that of the communities they serve.

Emotionally intelligent leadership offers a transformative approach. By creating a supportive environment and modeling emotional intelligence, education leaders can combat teacher burnout, boost retention, and enhance educators' and students' performance.

Here, we delve into the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership and provide practical steps for district leaders to cultivate a positive and resilient educational community.

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How are educators feeling these days?

Over the past decade, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence has surveyed tens of thousands of educators and school leaders across the U.S. asking them to describe their feelings in their own words. The emotions they most frequently mention include frustration, anxiety, worry, sadness, and feeling overwhelmed. Joy and happiness, unfortunately, appear far less often. These findings reflect what we've seen in other research: during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond, educators have experienced alarmingly high levels of anxiety and depression.

One of the major drivers behind these challenging emotions is the sense of being unsupported in meeting the diverse needs of their students. Factors like student behavior, excessive paperwork, high-stakes testing, constantly shifting curricula, struggles with work/life balance, strained relationships with colleagues and administrators, economic pressures, and the broader sociopolitical climate all contribute to educators' stress.

Research makes clear that so-called negative emotions like frustration and anxiety don't just affect educators personally—they also have profound implications for students. When teachers are overwhelmed and burnt out, they experience poorer physical and mental health, which can lead to disengagement from their work. This, in turn, impacts students' motivation and engagement. Moreover, teachers who are struggling emotionally are less able to model effective emotion regulation strategies their students so desperately need.

A growing body of research shows a clear connection between teacher stress and (poor) student performance. For instance, a recent study found that schools with higher levels of teacher stress and burnout see lower student achievement, particularly in key areas like reading and math. The ripple effects of teacher burnout are far-reaching—from disengaged classrooms to poorer academic outcomes. This is a clear signal to school and district leaders that immediate action is needed.

Right now, the teaching profession is facing an exodus of unprecedented scale. Surveys show that nearly 55% of teachers are considering leaving the classroom earlier than they had planned, driven by the same stressors mentioned earlier. The National Education Association (NEA) reports that 90% of its members have experienced burnout, a figure that has skyrocketed since 2020. But this isn't just a staffing crisis—it's an educational crisis. As more teachers leave, the quality of instruction declines, class sizes grow, and ultimately, students suffer.

Teacher retention hinges on the emotional climate of the workplace. Our research at the Center reveals that teachers who work in emotionally supportive environments are more likely to stay in their roles. We find that educators who work in schools with more positive emotional climates and with administrators with more developed emotional intelligence tend to experience fewer negative emotions and more positive emotions. Educators in these schools also have higher job satisfaction and fewer intentions to leave the profession. These outcomes are strongest and sustained when schools adopt an evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning. Emotionally supportive environments help reduce stress, foster positive teacher-student relationships, and contribute to overall teacher satisfaction—factors critical for retention.

How do educators want to feel at school?

Efforts to support educators' emotional wellbeing could be aided by considering how they want to feel. In psychology, we refer to this as "ideal affect," the emotional states people aspire to experience, which can support their wellbeing and personal and professional goals.

Over the last five years, our team has conducted multiple studies to explore educators' ideal affect, using a range of methods, including large samples of educators before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. What we found is that educators' ideal affect varies based on how the question is asked. When educators responded individually in an online survey, the most commonly desired emotion

was happiness. In contrast, when discussing their hoped-for emotions with colleagues, they prioritized feeling supported and respected. When they were asked to focus on their classroom environment, feeling joyful and competent topped the list. Interestingly, educators' ideal emotions also have shifted over time. In the fall of 2020, many wanted to feel excited. By 2021, that shifted to feeling appreciated, and in 2022 and beyond, the desire to feel calm and peaceful became most prominent.

At first glance, many of us might think the solution is simple: help educators feel more positive emotions, more often. But this assumption stems from a common misunderstanding about the emotion system—the belief that happiness is the ultimate goal, and if we're not displaying it constantly, we're somehow falling short. While positive emotions do broaden our thinking, making us more open and flexible, they aren't a cure-all. Unpleasant emotions serve important functions too: they help us narrow our focus and respond to challenges. For instance, joy won't help an educator manage a bullying situation. In that moment, it's a well-directed, non-threatening expression of anger—not contentment—that will empower them to act. Similarly, educators who feel they've been treated unfairly will find strength not in forced happiness but in advocating for themselves. And for the more introverted among us, the pressure to show excitement all the time can feel overwhelming.

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What Is Emotional Intelligence? RULER's Five Key Skills

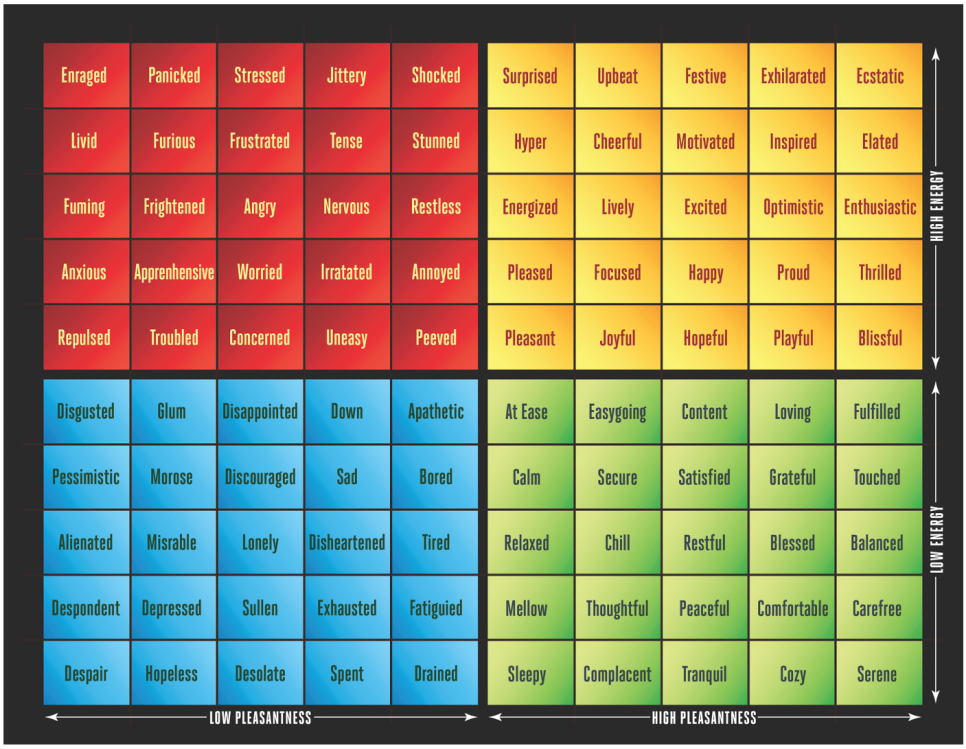
Emotional intelligence is the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action (see Salovey and Mayer). It involves the ability to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions—both your own and those of others. In the context of school leadership (and in life), these skills allow leaders and educators to navigate the complexities of human interaction with grace, compassion, and insight, fostering environments where individuals feel seen, supported, and motivated.

We use the acronym RULER to describe five key emotional intelligence skills:

- **R**ecognizing emotions in our own thoughts and physiology as well as other people's in facial expressions, body language, vocal tone, and behavior
- **U**nderstanding the causes and consequences of our emotions
- **L**abeling emotions with precise feeling words
- **E**xpressing emotions according to social norms and cultural contexts
- **R**egulating emotions with helpful strategies.

Current research shows that one effective approach to supporting educator wellness involves a systemic approach to embedding emotional intelligence into a school or district. This includes developing educators' own emotional intelligence skills *and* supporting school leaders in applying the principles and skills of emotional intelligence to build a positive school climate. Our own research shows that educators with more developed emotional intelligence tend to experience a greater balance of pleasant to unpleasant feelings and report less burnout and greater job satisfaction.

Exhibit 1 **THE MOOD METER**



This Mood Meter was excerpted from the book, Permission To Feel © 2019 Marc Brackett. Reprinted with permission of Celadon Books, a division of Macmillan Publishing, LLC. www.marcbrackett.com

We have seen the benefits of embedding emotional intelligence with our Center's whole-school, evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning called RULER (www.rulerapproach.org). This approach is being deployed in over 5,000 schools across the world. RULER was designed to infuse the principles of emotion science (e.g., there are no bad emotions) and the skills of emotional intelligence, as described above, into leadership and teacher practices. Research shows that RULER has positive impacts on academic performance, social and emotional skills development, classroom climate, bullying, teacher instructional quality, and educator stress and burnout.

Getting Started with the Mood Meter

One RULER Approach tool, the Mood Meter (*Exhibit 1*), is used to help school leaders, educators, and students and their families refine their emotional intelligence skills.

On the Mood Meter, the x-axis represents pleasantness—our subjective, private mental experience. The y-axis represents energy—the physical and mental energy running through our body and mind. The two axes cross to form four quadrants, and each has a color: yellow, red, blue, and green.

- The **YELLOW** quadrant is pleasant and high energy, and contains feelings like happiness, joy, and excitement.
- The **RED** quadrant is high energy and unpleasant, and houses feelings like anxiety, frustration, and feeling overwhelmed.
- The **BLUE** quadrant is unpleasant and low energy, and represents feelings like sadness, disappointment, and loneliness.
- The **GREEN** quadrant is pleasant and low energy, and holds feelings like calmness, serenity, and being relaxed.

Gaining a clear understanding of the definition of different emotions and being able to clearly label our feelings is a critical first step in cultivating emotional wellbeing.

And There's an App for That

Recently, our team collaborated with Ben Silbermann, co-founder of Pinterest, and a team at the How We Feel Project to build an app that is designed to help people learn the skills of emotional intelligence. While an app can't replace a whole-school approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) like RULER, it can be a great place to start emotional intelligence skill-building. At present, over 1 million people across the globe, including many thousands of educators, have downloaded the app with tremendous results. And thanks to generous donations, the How We Feel app (*Exhibit 2*) is available for free on iOS and Android (https://howwefeel.org).

The How We Feel app is equipped with over 500 emotion words, each with its own definition, and it offers tools to help users spot patterns in their emotional experiences over time. These patterns are based on factors like who they're with, what they're doing, and what context, such as home or work, they are in while checking in.

With one tap, the app can support educators in answering complex question like: Do I experience more anxiety or stress at home or at school? If at school, which emotions, specifically, do I feel most often when I'm teaching versus

when I'm working with colleagues? If outside of school, how do I feel while commuting, at home with my family, or doing work at home?

Having these data is extremely useful for understanding patterns and creating action plans to support greater wellbeing, including healthy emotion regulation. The How We Feel app is programmed with dozens of evidence-based strategies to help people learn new ways to deal with their emotions. Strategies include mindfulness exercises, techniques to shift one's thinking, connecting with others, and movement, among others. For example, one educator reported the utility of "reframing" (thinking about a situation from a different perspective) when he was frustrated with a student's behavior. Another educator shared that the "reaching out" strategy was helpful when she was dealing with a challenging parent.

Exhibit 2 **SCREENSHOTS FROM THE HOW WE FEEL APP**

Source: How We Feel app

> *When leaders invest in their own emotional intelligence, they model healthy emotion regulation for their staff, as well as skills and strategies for dealing with whatever comes their way.*

Fostering Emotional Intelligence: Practical Strategies for School Leaders

Emotional intelligence is a skill set that can be learned and developed. When leaders invest in their own emotional intelligence, they model healthy emotion regulation for their staff, as well as skills and strategies for dealing with whatever comes their way. There are several practical strategies for leaders to consider in order to foster emotional intelligence in their own leadership style and across their districts and schools:

1. **Model Emotional Awareness and Regulation:** Leaders set the emotional tone for their school. By being open about their own emotions, acknowledging stress, and modeling healthy emotion regulation strategies, leaders can encourage a culture of emotional honesty and support.

2. **Check In with People's Feelings:** Regularly checking in with staff on an emotional level can open the door for meaningful conversations about stress, burnout, and support. Simple tools like the Mood Meter (or the How We Feel App), surveys, or individual meetings can give teachers a safe space to identify and express their emotional states.

3. **Provide SEL Training for Educators:** Professional development in social-emotional learning for teachers can empower them to better understand and manage their emotions. SEL programs like RULER can also provide teachers with strategies to foster a more emotionally supportive classroom environment, further reducing their stress.

4. **Implement Reflective Supervision Practices:** Rather than focusing only on performance outcomes, adopt a reflective supervision model where teachers are encouraged to discuss the emotional aspects of their work. This approach has been shown to improve teacher wellbeing and retention.

5. **Set Clear Work-Life Boundaries:** Establish policies that prevent after-hours communication, such as limiting emails or messages to work hours. Encourage teachers to disconnect during evenings, weekends, and holidays, promoting work-life balance.

6. **Protect Non-Teaching Time:** Ensure that teachers' prep periods, planning time, and lunch breaks are protected. Leaders can set firm boundaries against scheduling meetings or additional duties during these times, allowing teachers time for rest, reflection, or planning.

7. **Limit Administrative Tasks:** Reduce the volume of paperwork, administrative duties, and unnecessary meetings. Leaders can streamline processes and delegate non-essential tasks to support staff, giving teachers more time to focus on instruction and student support.

8. **Set Clear Expectations Around Availability:** Establish clear boundaries around teachers' availability for students, parents, and colleagues. By providing guidelines for when teachers can be reached, leaders help prevent teachers from feeling overwhelmed by constant communication.

9. **Foster a Supportive Community:** School leaders can help build a strong, supportive teacher community by creating opportunities for collaboration, social connection, and emotional support. A culture of collaboration can alleviate feelings of isolation, which often contribute to burnout.

10. **Encourage and Model Self-Care:** Leaders should not only promote self-care but also model it by visibly prioritizing their own wellbeing. This sets a tone that it's acceptable for teachers to set boundaries around their mental and physical health, reducing the pressure to be constantly available or overwork.

Conclusion

Early in our work with schools, we discovered that most educators were uncomfortable discussing emotions—their own and those of their students. It quickly became clear that we wouldn't be able to reach students unless we first helped teachers recognize the significance of emotional intelligence and secured a commitment from leadership at all levels—principals, superintendents, and school boards.

When school leaders model emotional intelligence, educators report feeling more inspired, less frustrated, and less burnt out. They experience greater satisfaction in their work, and their relationships with colleagues and students become more meaningful. This opens the door to implementing practices that foster a more positive school climate. And when students feel connected to their teachers and school community, they are more willing to take risks, persist through challenges, focus more deeply, and ultimately perform better academically.

We know that when we deny ourselves the permission to feel, the consequences are significant. It's time we fully acknowledge that how school leaders and educators feel—and what we do to support their emotional wellbeing—profoundly shapes the quality of both their own lives and the lives of their students, not only in school but beyond. ◆

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