



Critical conditions: Safeguarding teachers' mental health and wellbeing

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In times of human crisis, as witnessed recently in the aftermath of Puerto Rico's hurricane, Canada's wildfires, and New Zealand's earthquakes (O'Toole & Friesen, 2016), public school teachers often act both as 'first responders' and post-crisis caregivers for children and youth in their communities. Their particular professional role and pedagogical relationships compel them to attend to their students' immediate and long term physical, emotional and educational needs alongside—and often at the expense of—their own.

Less dramatically, and more insidiously, deteriorating working and learning conditions, couched within neoliberal governance cultures, have taken a deep and pervasive toll on public school teachers globally. Fiscal austerity has left a legacy of systemic fatigue evident not just in crumbling physical infrastructure or shuttered school buildings, but also in chronic burnout and psychological weariness amongst a significant number of teachers. Teachers' mental health and wellbeing has emerged as an increasingly important international advocacy focus for teachers' unions in recent years. A 2016 survey conducted by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), for example, indicates that 86% of UK teachers expe-

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rienced increased workplace stress in the previous year (NASUWT, 2017). The NASUWT mainly attributes the crisis in workers' mental health to the impact of long term economic austerity measures directed at UK's public education system (NASUWT, 2016). The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) 2014 work-life balance study similarly indicates respondents' stress was associated mainly with student and administrative services cuts, resulting in workload increases and diminished sense of practitioner effectiveness (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2014). Such findings suggest that safeguarding teacher mental health and wellness is deeply connected to advocating for manageable working conditions. In May 2017, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) conducted a province-wide survey of its 38,000 members inquiring into the state of teachers' mental health and wellbeing. The baseline survey occurred at a fortuitous historical moment, just as the BC Liberals—a regime with a strong record of austerity funding and anti-union legislative tactics (Hales, 2015; Poole, 2007)—ended their sixteen-year run as the Province's governing party. In its first months, the newly elected New Democratic Party (NDP) government has signalled its intention to restore public education services, facilities and staffing to adequate levels. The BCTF's baseline survey, therefore, provided a timely opportunity to consider what, if any, relationship exists between past neoliberal education policies and teachers' current states of mental health and wellbeing.

A preliminary analysis indicates that approximately two-thirds of BC teachers report feeling stressed (65%) and emotionally exhausted (68%) all or most of the time.¹ When asked to characterize main factors influencing their mental health, responses coalesced around three major themes:

- 1) **a culture of disrespect** (from government (92%), public media (72%) and district level administration (50%))
- 2) **inadequate working conditions and professional support** (planning and preparation time (69%), workload (68%), access to resources and professional learning support (63%), and opportunities for collaboration with colleagues (53%)).
- 3) **insufficient student services and learning conditions** (student services (89%), classroom composition (85%), behavioural challenges (82%))

The long-term effects of increasing workload and deteriorating student services—coinciding with major curriculum reform initiatives—has left a significant number of BC teachers burned out and questioning their future in the profession. Four in ten respondents indicated they had seriously considered moving from their current position—or leaving teaching entirely—in the past twelve months. These results echo similar findings in Saskatchewan, where just over 50% of teachers indicated they would consider leaving teaching for another career (Martin, Dolmage, & Sharpe, 2012). As Loeb, Darling-Hammond, L. and Luczak (2005) outline, continual teacher movement and attrition have serious consequences on “school stability, curriculum coherence, instructional quality and efficient use of resources” (p. 45). With BC already facing a serious teacher shortage, addressing their mental health concerns seems, if nothing else, a prudent human resources retention strategy.

When teachers do seek support, however, they face **additional barriers**. Just half of those requiring mental

¹ BCTF Teachers' Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey (May 2017, unpublished). Margin of sampling error +/- 3.75 percentage points with 95% confidence level.

health services indicated they accessed them. The main obstacles? Time and money. Intensification of teacher work, coupled with lagging salaries, means vital counselling and therapy services often go untapped. The very systemic conditions that contribute to exacerbating teacher stress, anxiety and depression (respondents' top three mental health concerns) appear to be the same temporal and financial barriers that prevent them from acquiring the supports they need.

The BCTF's survey also suggests that, despite a prolonged period of political antagonism and diminishing funding, most BC teachers still find teaching an engaging and rewarding endeavour. They find sustenance in their collegial connections (88%) and engagement in their daily classroom work (90%). They feel respected by their union (86%) and their students' families (85%). Moreover, teachers thrive when they feel empowered and able to carry out work they deeply value: building strong pedagogical relationships and communication with their students.

Nonetheless, these vital wellsprings of resiliency can only sustain teachers to a limited extent when their teaching environment remains fundamentally unmanageable. The long-term preservation of teachers' wellbeing requires a restorative combination of progressive public education policies, adequately funded schools and student services, and improved professional work and learning conditions that safeguard public education as a democratic institution, and teachers as professionals. As the CTF concludes, "teacher work conditions are student learning conditions" (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2014). Ultimately, governments' 'first response' to addressing the current crisis in teachers' mental health should be maintaining properly funded and serviced public school systems—not relying on teachers to exhaust their final reserves.

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