

WHAT EDUCATIONAL LEADERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT  
STRESS AND BURNOUT:  
BOTH FOR THEMSELVES AND FOR THEIR TEACHERS

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Principals must be “heroes” (Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). They must be instructional leaders, visionaries, effective professional development planners, teacher recruiters, morale supporters, strong disciplinarians, event attenders, transportation coordinators, as well as the many other roles that come with leading a learning community. They must attack incoherence (Bryk, A., Sebring, P., Kerbow, D., Rollow, S., & Easton, J., 1998) and navigate the “Bermuda Triangle of innovations” (Fullan, 2001, p. 137)). Last, but certainly not least, these professionals have their personal lives to live and manage as well.

Similarly, teachers must be “all things for all people” and do everything, for everyone, in every way—NOW! Within the context of the school environment, the various roles and overwhelming responsibilities of the classroom teacher are widely publicized and generally acknowledged in today’s society. The stress of managing a classroom of students with individual academic, social, physical, and emotional needs is just a snapshot of a teacher’s job description.

An emotional tide of stress and exasperation is moving through our schools and many educators are finding it easier to leave the profession than to cope with the challenges ahead. Stress and burnout are frequent topics around the schoolhouse. Primarily, this dialogue among educators focuses on school-related stress factors like large class sizes, discipline problems, and the lack of time to adequately do the job well. School-related research supports the

idea that if these “in school” issues can be adequately addressed, some teacher stress can be alleviated (Holloman, 1998). However, such attempts do not address the whole person. The outside of school factors that educators face on a daily basis have direct implications on their professional state of mind and their level of stress in the workplace.

Factors contributing to educator burnout continue to be researched and analyzed, however, according to various sources (Gold, 1989; Holloman, 1998; Rayfield, R., Ughrin, T., & Meabon, D., 2004) little is currently being done to prepare teachers and administrators to cope with job dissatisfaction and the stress of the present school environment. As an example, first-year teacher attrition represents a significant loss to the profession. The first year experience is quite a stressful test for both teachers and administrators. Many principals and teachers become disillusioned during their first few months and their attitudes and outlook suffer irreparable harm. According to Holloman (1998) many new teachers become emotionally exhausted, are unable to develop a sense of accomplishment, and begin to depersonalize from their students which results in burnout and leaving the profession early in their career.

Educational leaders must be equipped with the tools necessary to “attack incoherence” (Bryk et al., 1998) and the significant burnout and stress dynamics within the school environment. Our challenge is to better understand the concepts of stress and burnout so that structures, programs, and the appropriate dialogue will find their way onto school campuses and into board conference rooms, and district policy manuals.

### *Definitions of Burnout and Stress*

Burnout has been variously defined. Maslach and Jackson (1986) suggest it is the realization of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and reduced personal accomplishment (PA) that can occur as the result of unsuccessful attempts to cope with stressful circumstances.

Formal research and examination of stress and burnout have occurred since the beginning of this century (Jacobson,

1978). Such research has attempted to distinguish between the two concepts and arrive at a better understanding of how to address the stressful factors that can ultimately lead to feelings of perceived burnout.

The present research focuses on the “cause and effect relationship,” and studies perceived burnout as a phenomenon that occurs as a result of stress from daily experiences. The recognition of constant job-related stress causing greater implications for individuals has fostered much investigation (Freudenberger, 1974; Greenberg, 1984; Maslach, 1982).

### *History of Burnout and Stress*

Initial research on the concepts of stress and burnout focused on the symptoms that resulted from tense circumstances. Bloomfield (1975) described the causal nature of stress when he reported that the biggest health problems during that time period were caused by stress, and that the psychosomatic illnesses that were reported during that time were also a result of stress.

Selye (1977) recognized stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it” (p. 7). He emphasized the importance of relaxation, however, he felt that stress was inevitable. Selye believed that the gradual impact of stress on an individual would result in physical fatigue, which is recognized today as a form of burnout.

Similarly, Jacobson (1978) recognized the negative effects that stress can have on an individual’s body. He observed muscle tension as a symptomatic disorder that was the result of one’s experiences. He felt that if individuals could avoid tense situations, and use relaxation techniques, then they could prevent or postpone the onset of this muscle tension.

Freudenberger (1974) was one of the first researchers to describe the accumulation of stress as leading to “burnout.” He described burnout as “the feelings of failure and being worn or wrung out, resulting from an overload of claims on energy, on personal resources, or on the spiritual strength of the worker” (p.159).

Other definitions of burnout include the “loss of interest by workers in the persons with whom they work,” as well as “a

psychological distancing from work” (Friedman, 1991, p. 325). Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) defined burnout in such a way that brings to mind some qualities of many first-year teachers, veteran teachers, and school administrators: “[burnout is] the progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose experienced by people in the helping professions as a result of the conditions of their work” (p. 14).

### *Educator Stress and Burnout*

According to Sergiovanni (2001), principals are facing an ever-changing and always expanding job role. School administrators and school teachers alike, are faced with the difficult task of managing a school or classroom successfully, maintaining a healthy family life, and preserving their own individual wellness. This balancing act with students, parents, family, administrators, and peers frequently leads to stress and potential burnout. Subsequently, Ayalon’s (1989) findings indicated that rewards obtained from student progress, and teacher and administrator recognition were the only factors determined to have a significant influence as predictors of end of the year burnout. Ayalon also found that high levels of skill variety in the job did not contribute to less teacher burnout. He concluded that providing positive recognition and adequate time for planning and instruction, as well as reducing class size, may reduce beginning teachers’ burnout and attrition.

Teachers and school administrators have been the focus of stress and burnout studies since the 1980’s. Over twenty-five year ago, Truch (1980) discovered that 90% of all teachers had experienced some level of burnout. Similar studies done by Dworkin (1986) and Schlansker (1987) found that more than 25% of teachers were experiencing severe levels of burnout.

First-year teachers and first-year administrators are certainly faced with enormous challenges. According to Warner (1995), managing stress, managing time, and managing the many hats of a teacher are monumental tasks. Teachers must monitor their relaxation, exercise, eating, attitude, and humor. In terms of time management, Warner suggests that teachers must prioritize, organize, and set goals. Finally, teachers are faced with playing the

roles of parent, friend, social worker, provider, psychologist, nurse, and emergency technician. Presented with a mission to address all of these roles effectively certainly adds to a teacher's professional stress (Warner, 1995).

### *Measuring Burnout*

Attempting to better define the complex concept of burnout, Maslach (1982) divided the causes of burnout into three categories. These three categories were involvement with people, the job setting, and personal variables. Maslach (1982) recognized that "dealing with people can be very demanding" (p. 17). She stated:

It takes a lot of energy to be calm in the midst of crises, to be patient in the midst of frustrations, to be understanding and compassionate when surrounded by fear, pain, anger, and shame...some people have the resources to do it often...it is very hard to do it all the time. (p. 17)

Maslach (1982) also described the influences of job setting on eventual burnout by stating: "To the extent that job characteristics can either promote or reduce emotional stress, they become important factors in the burnout syndrome" (p. 37).

Finally, Maslach (1982) explained how personal variables influence burnout:

What a person brings to the job is just as critical as what the situation brings out of (or puts into) him or her. And what a person brings are individual characteristics such as motivations, needs, values, self-esteem, emotional expressiveness and control, and personal style. These internal qualities determine how someone handles external sources of emotional stress and help explain why Person A will experience burnout in a particular work setting while Person B will not. (p. 57)

Certainly the challenge of defining stress and burnout precedes the next challenge of measuring these concepts within an environment. The most widely used instrument to measure burnout has been the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Schaufeli, W. B., Enzmann, D. & Girault, N., 1993). Maslach and Jackson's burnout inventory suggests that burnout is a three-dimensional syndrome

characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that affect individuals within the helping professions (Maslach & Jackson, 1996).

The burnout inventory, itself, consists of questions related to one of three subscales--emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The Emotional Exhaustion subscale measures the degree of exhaustion that results from the working environment. The Depersonalization (DP) subscale measures the relationship between the giver (teacher) and the recipient (student) of the service. The Personal Accomplishment subscale measures the perceived feelings of accomplishment and success in the working environment (Maslach & Jackson, 1996).

The original MBI was created to measure the burnout levels for individuals in the human service professions (Maslach, 1982). After additional research, the MBI Form ED was developed to measure the perceived burnout levels specifically for educational professionals (Maslach & Jackson, 1996).

The MBI has been used widespread in educational research on burnout, as well as, in various other studies within South Carolina. The frequent use of the MBI seems to suggest somewhat of an acceptance of Maslach and Jackson's concept of burnout. However, the use of the inventory outside of the human services arena requires the rewording of some of the survey's questions. For example, in the Form ED, the word "recipients" was replaced with "students" (Maslach & Jackson, 1996).

### *Outside-of-School Stress Factors*

Maslach (1982) and Costa (1994) recognized the impact of one's personal life on one's professional life. Holloman (1998) examined some of the outside-of-school stress factors that could lead to burnout. Holloman's study of first-year teachers suggests that a significantly large number of first-year teachers experience financial stress. According to the study, stress from school loans and credit cards received the greatest response percentage of 42% and 39%, respectively. Twenty-five percent of the 383 respondents in Holloman's study revealed that moving was of great stress to them.

The two areas of greatest response were finances and relationships. Sixty-three percent of all respondents selected a stressor from this category. The stressors that received the least response were those related to life activities (ex: social life, coaching, time). Only 11% of all respondents selected one of these stressors.

At first glance, these stressors appear to be universal and consistent with all groups of people. However, it should be noted that many of these stressors are being experienced for the first time by these new teachers.

These outside-of-school responses suggest problems faced by first-year teachers may not be addressed in the standard formal training, induction programs, or mentoring processes within the professional environment. In fact, as Maslach (1982) and Costa (1994) suggest, these outside-of-school stressors could greatly impact a teacher's professional performance and either increase or decrease their perceived level of burnout.

### *Recommendations*

Contemporary research in the area of educator stress and burnout has significant implications for other individuals and groups affiliated with education. The following is a list of recommendations for policy makers, educational administrators, training institutions, and suggestions for further study.

#### *Policy Makers.*

Policies must be in place by the turn of the century to ensure that public education has a viable workforce, including both teachers and administrators for the new millennium. Research suggests that such legislation must allow for smaller class sizes and the development of positive mentoring programs and induction programs that provide social/professional support and stress-reduction strategies (Holloman, 1998). In addition, Gold (1989) calls for carefully planned induction programs that help beginning teachers with recognizing stressors inside and outside of the school setting, thus securing our educational workforce of the future.

*Educational Administrators.* Statewide and local educational

administrators must make a commitment to first-year teachers and first-year administrators. Local educational administrators need to prevent a situation wherein first-year teachers are given the “lowest jobs on the totem pole,” and first-year administrators are “thrown to the wolves.”

The area of first-year instructional responsibility needs to be closely examined at the local school level. Teaching above average students is certainly not a guarantee for professional success. However, it is essential that new teachers are given instructional responsibilities that will ensure their initial success, and long-term professional achievement. Farber (1984) contends that preventing burnout is essential to keeping teachers in the profession.

District administrators must make every effort to provide adequate mentoring programs for both teachers and administrators. Cohen and Smith (1989) reported that lack of training and ongoing support were the factors that indicated the highest attrition rate among beginning teachers in special education programs. Holloman (1998) found there to be a statistically significant relationship between mentor relationship and a first-year teacher’s burnout level. Furthermore, Holloman’s study (1998) reveals that participants with poor mentors had higher levels of burnout than those individuals with no mentor. Such a comparison seems to indicate that having no mentor is better than having a poor one.

### *Higher Educational Institutions.*

Teacher-education programs and principal preparation programs must emphasize the likelihood of first-year stress, and make student-teachers and principal interns aware of signs of burnout. Certain courses and internships should be designed to provide these students with as “real-life” situations as possible. Holloman (1998) suggests that outside-of-school issues should also be addressed with first-year teachers. Relationship stress and financial stress were the areas where respondents expressed their greatest concerns. Institutions of higher education should provide classes that present “life skills” training, such as: financial planning, family counseling, and even marital counseling. In fact, professional guidance in these areas should expand into the early years of the

profession, quite possibly throughout a teacher's career.

Borthwick, Thornell, and Wilkinson (1982) found no significant difference in levels of measured burnout based on educational level. However, Holloman (1998) reported that first-year teachers with a Master's degree experience higher levels of burnout. Additional research in this area could help provide insight into present Master Teaching programs. Dialogue between state public school leaders and higher education administrators must include discussion on the effectiveness of these master teaching programs. It is possible that these 5-year programs need to be restructured so that the fifth year is a participant's first year of actual teaching with close supervision and professional guidance from a university supervisor, and local guidance and support from a school-based mentor. Course work for the Master's degree would primarily include a year-long case study of one's experiences along with practical courses that teach effective stress-reduction strategies.

### *Recommendations for Further Study*

This paper has provided insight into areas of concern regarding both first-year teachers' and first-year principals' professional and personal experiences. However, more work must be done to ensure that these educators are given every opportunity to make their work experience as successful as possible. As our world evolves, so will the educational profession--therefore, further studies will be necessary to address the issues of stress and burnout.

1. Additional studies should be planned to appropriately address, in detail, some of the outside-of-school variables that result in stress for both first-year teachers and first-year administrators. The personal "outside of school" data that were collected in Holloman's study, (1998) provide insight into certain areas that need to be addressed through additional research. For example, the variables of debt, relationships, and moving to a new area were stressors for over 90% of the respondents (Holloman, 1998) Such a response demonstrates a need to address these outside-of-school issues.

2. As aforementioned, the issue of financial stress relating to burnout specifically in first-year teachers and administrators needs to be addressed with further research. Holloman (1998) reported that 63 percent of the first-year teachers who responded in his study indicated that personal finance was one of their top three stressors outside of school. Additional studies on this topic should focus on credit card debt and other loans because many of the respondents perceive these variables as major stressors in their lives. A follow-up study needs to be done to address this issue of student loans for first-year teachers. Research on this topic should investigate if the absence of such debt would lower the burnout levels of teachers and administrators.

3. Additional studies should be planned to create a research and evaluation component within mentoring programs, induction programs, coaching programs and other educator employee support systems. Gold's (1989) findings suggest that induction programs, "assist beginning teachers so that they may have a more positive experience in their first years of teaching and to minimize the stress that eventually leads to burnout and leaving the profession" (p. 67). According to Holloman (1998) educators who admitted to having poor guidance from a mentor had the highest level of burnout in both the Emotional Exhaustion subscale and the Depersonalization subscale. Such an evaluation component would provide for the periodic monitoring of mentor/mentee relationships or coaching relationships and also the burnout levels in first-year teachers and first-year administrators. This structure would be used to determine if burnout levels fluctuate throughout the school year. If so, then burnout problems could be handled immediately, and more effectively.

4. More studies on first-year teacher and administrator burnout from various states would not only increase the body of knowledge on this topic, but it would also allow for valuable comparisons between data. Such comparisons would help in determining the factors that greatly influence burnout in first-year teachers and administrators. For example, a comparison of this study and

one from another state could reveal a difference in how first-year teachers and administrators are treated. If another study of first-year educator burnout indicated lower levels of burnout, then a comparison could lead to a greater awareness of what programs are offered to first-year educators in that particular state. Furthermore, a longitudinal study could reveal if burnout increases or decreases over time.

5. A follow-up study should be done to investigate how well prepared first-year teachers and administrators were when they entered the profession. Such a study would measure burnout levels before their first year, at the end of their first year, and then over a period of time. Research in this area should focus on the following perceptions of teachers and administrators: how confident they feel in their preparation, what they expect from their first-year experience, how they expect to be treated both at school and in the community, and what results they expect from the students and teachers. Follow-up questions would reveal to what extent their expectations were or were not met.

6. Additional studies should be planned that will monitor the level of burnout for first-year teachers and principals in private schools. The data collected from the private school educator studies would be compared to the data collected from public school educator studies to determine if significant differences exist between the two groups. Such data could indicate if a public or private schooling environment influences a first-year teacher/administrator's perceived level of burnout.

7. Additional studies should be done that would investigate how and if different levels of stress and burnout are observed at different times of the year. Further studies could also assess burnout by using various other stress/burnout instruments.

8. Further research involving this study could investigate the differences between those first-year teachers and administrators who returned to the classroom/school, and those first-year teachers who

chose not to return.

9. Qualitative research studies in this area should also be performed. Such studies could include observing and interviewing individual first-year teachers and administrators and coding their first-year journals. Such a study could reveal fascinating patterns and significant qualitative data.

### *Epilogue*

Addressing the needs of educators must first begin with an attempt to determine the circumstances which cause stress and eventually lead to burnout. From the literature that has been reviewed, research seems to support the need for induction programs, mentoring programs, coaching modules and other resource structures that provide first-year teachers and first-year administrators with adequate support.

We must provide first-year teachers and first year administrators every opportunity to make their introductory experience as successful as possible. Burnout creates great conflict both at school and in the home. Providing a positive working environment for educators in the early stages of their career and equipping them with essential coping skills are important steps toward ensuring that tomorrow's children will be taught by a strong and vibrant workforce in the 21st century.

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## Stress and Burnout

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## Stress and Burnout

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