

Dealing With Stress and Anxiety

Layoffs, growing demands, and economic challenges can greatly affect the morale and health of employees and students. What can you do to help ease the tension?

“It’s the worst I’ve seen in more than 30 years,” said one superintendent. He wasn’t talking about test scores, board politics, or union issues, but the human toll that stress and anxiety were taking on him, his colleagues, students, and community members.

After one round of layoffs, the superintendent described the remaining employees as “walking wounded,”

grieving over lost friends and straining under the weight of a greater workload.

Growing demands and declining resources in school systems, along with economic challenges faced by family members of employees and students, cause stress that not only adversely influences employee morale and health, but also has a cascading effect throughout the system.



Denial: The worst strategy

Unfortunately, I have seen too many school systems engage in organized denial, looking at multi-million-dollar budget cuts that are inevitable for the 2010-11 school year as a management puzzle to be solved rather than the culmination of stressors affecting staff members.

Forgoing raises, losing some benefits, teaching larger classes, losing school transportation, reducing working hours, and even facing layoffs would be stressful enough for any family. Today however, the budget cuts your district makes take place on top of other factors affecting your staff and community members: grown children, with children of their own, moving into their parents’ homes; spousal job loss; family member illness; retirement plan values dropping; and children’s education savings jeopardized.

The impact of stress and anxiety are real—interrupting sleep, influencing cardiac and gastrointestinal health—and are often associated with higher levels of smoking and alcohol abuse. Therefore, you need safe, effective, and widely publicized ways to help employees and community members know that you are aware of the problems and are addressing them directly.

What you can do now

Educational leaders can do three things, none of which costs money, to help address employee stress.

First, focus teacher and administrator time more effectively. In a national study conducted by Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania, the greatest source of dissatisfaction was not what many people assumed. It was

not money, undisciplined students, or bad administrators. It was that teachers felt they did not have the time that they needed to do a good job with their students.

Therefore, one of the most important things school leaders must do in stressful times is evaluate the different demands on classroom teachers. Be certain that the maximum amount of their time is focused on teaching students and collaborating directly with colleagues in a way that leads to continuously improved instructional techniques.

Creating more time in the day is impossible and paying teachers to work more hours is unlikely due to financial constraints, so it is essential that leaders evaluate critically the way that time is now diverted from these two primary areas of focus: teaching and learning to teach more effectively.

Superintendents and building administrators should conduct a review of every meeting in which teachers were required to participate last year and ask, "What evidence do we have that those meetings led to improved teaching effectiveness?" Other time-saving ideas, from shorter transitions within and between classrooms to faster and more effective ways to give feedback to students, can be cataloged and shared throughout the system.

Without spending one penny from the budget, leaders who can give teachers more time to work with students will address one of the most important sources of dissatisfaction and stress in school districts. Board members, too, can save time by careful agenda planning that limits discussion only to those matters for which there is sufficient information for the board to make a decision.

Second, leaders at every level must communicate widely the mental and emotional health benefits available from your employee insurance plan. These are benefits that districts and their

employees are entitled to right now, typically including short-term therapy and, where appropriate, medication.

Moreover, leaders must be clear that no stigma is attached to using these benefits. In fact, it hurts employees and the entire system when stress and anxiety are untreated and develop into far more serious medical conditions. Certainly not every person with symptoms of stress and anxiety needs psychotherapy or medical treatment. Walking, aerobic exercise, yoga, and meditation are all effective and easily accessible routines associated with significant improvements in stress-related symptoms.

Third, leaders must communicate more often and through more channels than ever before. The information that people in an organization do not have creates a vacuum filled with fear and rumor. A weekly voice mail or e-mail to every employee and similar communication to the community are essential. Three recurring themes should be: "This is what we know, this is what we don't know, and here is another rumor you might have heard that just is not true."

Teachers and school leaders must learn to be models of resilience, helping students bounce back from disappointment and defeat. The stresses of the coming year are likely to reach new levels of impact. While educational leaders cannot necessarily avoid budget shortfalls, they can choose to make better decisions about the use of time, ensure that employees get the mental health care that they need to deal with stress, and communicate clearly and consistently with every stakeholder in the community. ■

Author's note: In my January 2010 column regarding how boards can deal with too many initiatives in school systems, I used the phrase "this is not a libertarian rant against all regulations." My use of the term "libertarian" was cava-

lier and imprecise, and I regret the error.

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