

Santa Barbara High School  
Teacher Wellbeing Report

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## BACKGROUND

The purpose of this report is to share what we learned from secondary teachers what may contribute to their experience of wellbeing at school, as reported through a survey and one-on-one interview<sup>1</sup>. Our goal was to listen to the diverse individuals whose task it is to educate our children using the public school curriculum, and who ultimately have a large influence on our youth as they become citizens of the world. We also wished to better understand teachers' lived experiences navigating an ever-changing, data-driven, and increasingly standardized institutional system. We identify factors found to both positively and negatively impact wellbeing among Santa Barbara High School teachers and counselors at the time, as individuals and as a community. First, we begin to explain our motivation for conducting independent and privately funded research on teacher wellbeing, and why it is important. We follow with a description of the methods used for collecting and analyzing our findings, then discuss the key findings, while giving an interpretation using various tables for visual reference. We end the report with valuable anecdotes that were not part of data collection, with reflections and recommendations on steps that may increase teacher wellbeing.

In a preliminary research conducted, Dr. Pulice (2013) listened to students who attended both a small, private middle school, and a large, public high school. Pulice (2013) compared students' experiences through a survey and one-on-one interview. Findings showed four key factors that had a positive impact on retention of learning-- self-motivation, enhanced self-esteem, and enjoyment of the learning process-- which are referred to as the 4 C's: Care, Connection, Community, and Choice. When

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<sup>1</sup> We are choosing to use the term *wellbeing* as one word, as it represents a whole-person experience.

practiced, participants felt these factors contributed to engagement, attendance, and improved classroom/campus climate through humanizing what they felt was an increasingly mechanized, rote, and impersonal process. When these elements were absent, feelings of alienation and meaninglessness were described, and competition among peers and cheating were more prevalent (Pulice, 2013).

Students spoke of the power of familial relationships with teachers at the middle school, and the sense of support those connections provided as they learned. But when asked why their public school teachers may not have provided the same level of care or connection with them, students gave an unexpected answer. They universally declared that it was not their fault; they claimed their public school teachers were “stressed out, overwhelmed, and outnumbered”. In addition, students voiced a distinct curiosity and interest in knowing their teachers personally, but were prevented from greater connection by institutional barriers and, as the students said, “there are way too many of us”. Their empathy was striking, as they further expressed the heavy workload the public school teachers handled, with insufficient time to get it all done (Pulice, 2013).

### **Research Team**

Stacy Pulice is a psychologist, researcher and author. Her research partner, Dr. Rebeca Mireles-Rios, is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), whose expertise in the teacher-student relationship provided experience, academic rigor, and strong collaboration with UCSB, mentoring a team of 14 student researchers who transcribed and coded interviews. The core team included four UCSB graduate students: Katelynn Davis, M.A. who helped develop the

inquiry, assisted with data analysis, transcribing and coding, Miranda Gasenica, M.A. offered key organization, transcribing, coding and research. Elizabeth Mainz, Ph.D. contributed expertise in statistical analysis with regressions and correlations to reveal trends in the data, while Tiffany Ibarra, M.A., a UCSB doctoral student, refined the analysis for this project, contributing important research. Research Associate Ron Pulice, M.A. conducted one-on-one interviews and provided support and guidance on the project.

In 1952, John Steinbeck wrote of teachers in America, “the teacher was not only an intellectual paragon and a social leader, but also the matrimonial catch of the countryside. The family could indeed walk proudly if the son married the schoolteacher” (Steinbeck, 1952). We entrust our nation’s greatest assets to teachers: our children. But what do we really know about the realities of the daily lives of teachers today, or how they feel about their current role in the community? What we do know is what we ourselves looked for in our teachers when we were children, and what we hope for in our own children’s lives. We all want a teacher who is kind, who will encourage us when we make mistakes, and who will inspire us to stretch our minds and bodies beyond what we had previously known. We remember them as heroes and sometimes as villains in our lives, capable of saving or destroying us, at least temporarily. The lifelong impression made by teachers on our tender souls is undeniable, so a deeper understanding of what fosters and what obstructs resilience, resourcing, and growth factors for teachers is a just a good idea.

**Purpose of the Study**

Since children spend much of their young lives in school, the value of teachers who are happy and well supported cannot be overstated. The importance of secure attachment bonds between teachers and students is second only to primary caregivers in the developing child, therefore the opportunity to create such positive bonds in the classroom is essential. In the same way that an emotionally healthy, well-resourced parent is required for a child to form a stable foundation for life, teachers must feel an adequate degree of emotional wellbeing in order to provide positive support to the children in their care. The quality of teachers' lives affects the quality of their students' lives.

Teacher wellbeing has been researched for over a decade (Renshaw, Long & Cooke, 2015), however, most have been conducted utilizing quantitative research methods using self-reported measures such as surveys and questionnaires. In fact, little research has qualitatively examined secondary teachers' sense of wellbeing, allowing them to communicate their insights directly in more depth and detail. We found that, while there are studies that deal with issues related to teacher wellbeing, such as school climate, student engagement, teacher burnout, and test scores, primary research rarely focused on teachers' self-reporting. Through personal interviews, we learned what coping strategies they use to avoid burnout, and what they believe contributes to their own wellbeing. To create positive student outcomes, the simple truth is: the happier, more respected and supported teachers feel, the better their students perform. When teachers feel invisible, overwhelmed, and disrespected, students suffer, and repercussions can be far-reaching. Teacher wellbeing in the workplace has been widely

found to be a factor that influences student academic achievement (Roffey, 2016; Dewberry & Briner, 2007). Thus the context of a teacher's workplace is not only a significant factor to consider for the wellbeing of teachers, but also important for student success, as teacher wellbeing, in turn, can also impact students,

Significantly, previous research shows that when teachers are emotionally exhausted, they are more likely to become cynical and experience declining self-efficacy causing them to burnout and leave the profession (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, when teachers experience a lack of support, whether from administration, parents, students or other teachers, they are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). These factors degrade the student-teacher relationship, and while teacher turnover is a negative consequence, what may be even worse is exhausted teachers who remain on the job. Especially for beginning teachers, a sense of support from administration and their colleagues matter for retention in the profession (Helms-Lorenz, van de Grift, & Maulana, 2016; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Research also shows that there is a clear relationship between emotional exhaustion and classroom climate (Grayson & Alvarez 2008; Jennings & Greenberg 2009). For example, Grayson & Alvarez (2008) discovered teacher-student relationships, administration, and students' academic orientation to be contributing factors to teacher cynicism.

Therefore, the more teachers perceive they are negatively supported or experience student behavior that negatively impacts their teaching, the more exhausted they feel and therefore, burned out. Burnout is defined as "a psychological syndrome that encompasses emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment, and



depersonalization”, with emotional exhaustion being described as “feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Other researchers have also described it as “a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from excessive job demands and continuous hassles” (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Previous research draws attention to the prevalence of teacher turnover and burnout, however, we believe examining the emotional, physical and psychological underpinnings of wellbeing as influential factors that result in turnover and burnout are important to investigate more deeply through listening to teachers themselves. Secondary research has also shown that conditions such as “worn out,” empathic fatigue, and moral distress disorder are common in care-related occupations and there is emerging research in the medical and nursing field that applies to teachers.

### **Study Design**

With this in mind, we designed a pilot study that would enable us to learn directly from teachers themselves about the quality of their lives in and out of school, what specifically encouraged positive, fulfilling experiences, and which factors created stress, overwhelm and burnout.

In the Spring of 2016, we examined factors of wellbeing included an initial online survey of 50 questions completed by 77 participants. The survey included a demographic intake, and assessed relevant factors pertaining to the 4 C’s, which had emerged from the previous student study. Questions targeted whether teachers experienced the freedom of choice both inside and outside the classroom, whether they

felt cared about by students, parents, administration and district, if they felt a part of a community at their school site, and whether they enjoyed a feeling of connection with their students, colleagues, and administration. Furthermore, the survey also measured factors that impact their overall wellbeing, including breaks to recharge, enjoying time off, and the ability to take care of their physical needs during the school day.

After taking the survey, 66 of the 77 teachers participated in one-on-one interviews that lasted 30-60 minutes, which allowed the researcher to develop a rapport with each participant. Taking this time provided teacher reflexivity, and captured participants' experience of teaching in a more in-depth way. Each answered the same seven open-ended questions, providing a structure, and ample time and a conversational format offered an opportunity for them to further elaborate on their quantitative survey responses, as well as offer experiences that were not part of the research. These interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and a participant number was assigned to each for confidentiality.

### **Mixed Methods Research**

While it is less common in academic research to use mixed methods, both the process and the data have proven to be of value using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and our findings stand out as unique in a field where online surveys are the norm. Results point to participants' limited ability to fully communicate their experiences when responding to preselected questions via an online survey, yet the impact of statistics allows major trends to come to the fore easily and be grasped. In terms of the process, the combination worked well; the survey gave them a

sense of the direction and scope of the research, and interviews gave them the freedom to fully describe their experiences via in-depth response to a limited number of open-ended questions. This produced a greater variety of data, greater context for understanding, and more aptly described the diversity of their lives and emotional status both within and outside of school.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The online surveys were conducted on Google Form, and data analysis was conducted through tests to obtain the frequencies, means and correlations for responses. The greatest number of responses related to teachers' perception of connection with students, perception of administration, perception of the district, the 4 C's, and perception of class size. Additionally, a series of correlation analyses were performed to examine relationships between key survey statements (more detail is available upon request).

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Teachers were most frequently interviewed in their classrooms, while a few preferred to meet at a local coffee shop or private outdoor space for additional confidentiality. As we settled and got comfortable, they were informed that the interview would be taped and were assigned a participant number so their identity would remain anonymous. Seven open-ended questions (Appendix I) were asked in a semi-structured format, where answers to one question often flowed into or answered another question. Two specific questions are worth mentioning since they garnered noteworthy responses: the first question asked was "how are you?" which took many by surprise, as though they were not used to being asked how they are. Some took a moment to fully

understand the question: “which part of me?” one asked, while others asked, “who me?”. The other question of note was “If you had a magic wand, what would you change and why?” I found this invitation to do a little blue-sky thinking increased their energy and vitality, and they spoke with more excitement. Surprisingly, teachers did not come up with impossible changes or requests, but rather offered modest preferences such as “reduce class size to 35 students.” I had to remind many that the wand was *magic*, and some were challenged to engage in truly expansive brainstorming, which we speculated was a possible symptom of burnout. When combined with other responses, it appeared many teachers may have lost the ability to dream big in the context of such a large institution. This is of concern, as such creative thinking is a necessary ingredient for children to vision a better future, and to stay inspired to solve the big problems our society faces.

Participants were offered to choose 2 \$10 gift certificates in appreciation of their time, many choosing gifts for their loved ones. Thinking of how they might help others is a common trait we saw in teachers.

To analyze the interview data, transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)), a web-based data analysis software program developed by researchers. Together with the research team, we developed a coding schematic based on recurring themes that were discovered in a line-by-line reading of the transcripts. As a group, the team read through the same 5 interviews and discussed significant topics that came up, why they were important, and assigned a definition for each code. Through this process, we came up with approximately 265 codes for the Dedoose software program.

To raise our level of confidence in our shared understanding of the data, we met again as a group to code an additional 5 interviews together before dividing the field notes and coding on our own. We then met weekly with the team to share themes discovered and to raise any questions about categorization. Once coding was complete, Dedoose then provided us with the most frequently occurring themes that emerged through the interviews. As a team, we reviewed the main categories until we were in agreement that they accurately represented and captured the teachers' voices.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

Using the 4 C's framework we identified 5 areas that emerged from both the interviews and the survey data. We found that the absence or presence of the 4 C's provided significant influence regarding many factors of wellbeing for teachers. The following themes were identified: Connecting with Students, Perceptions of Administration, Perception of District, Perception of Class Size, and Coping Strategies for Burnout.

- **Connecting with Students** - When asked what they love the most about their job, teachers overwhelmingly stated that engaging with students inspired them the most. Our interview findings showed that the majority of teachers felt committed to their students holistically, and made an effort to connect with and mentor them beyond class-related work. Teachers reported being aware of various barriers to learning that some of their students' experience and they showed a desire to accommodate their

students' needs by individualizing material and extending assignment deadlines when possible.

- **Perception of Administration** – Our survey findings showed that administration surfaced as the main influence on teacher satisfaction. Teachers' positive or negative experience of administration affected multiple measures of their wellbeing at work. Leadership style is a function of this finding, and teachers seeking a sense of care, connection, community and choice primarily looked to their admin team for support.
- **Perception of District** – In our interviews, teachers expressed that based on communications and actions taken, the district does not appear to understand what they do nor do they understand the realities of the classroom. They also mentioned that the district provides professional development that often is not relevant, especially given the intense demands on their time, and does not ask the teachers what they believe is needed to enhance student learning and engagement.
- **Perception of Class Size** – The majority of teachers considered reducing class size as the highest priority. They reported class size as an “impossible task” – especially in College Prep courses. They reported that class size has a strong, negative impact on practicing care, connection, community, and choice with their students. Thereby, class size diminishes their ability to deliver quality teaching because classroom management is increased, and student learning is lost.

- **Coping Strategies for Burnout** – There were three primary coping strategy themes that emerged in connection with teachers' methods of avoiding burnout, which is connected to compassion fatigue, and moral distress disorder. The primary themes were: establishing boundaries, social support, and physical self-care

### **Expansion of themes:**

#### **Connecting with Students**

Survey data showed that while teachers felt they were able to generally connect with students, creating personal connections, and caring for each student was not possible with their current class size (Table 1). This finding was supported in interviews, where class size was the most frequently mentioned negative influence on their sense of wellbeing. Teachers said they were committed to the “whole person” when working with their students, and reported connecting with and building rapport with students by asking about their lives and interests, both on and off campus. Teachers mentioned asking questions about students' jobs, extracurriculars, and home life. A teacher stated, “They go ‘well you know I’m having trouble at home’, or you know this or that. I go ‘oh, you know what?’ I can understand that. Let’s deal with it, let’s figure out what we can do.” Most reported that they consistently offer help on academics beyond class time. For example, teachers mentioned that they make visible to the students their willingness to be available during breaks, lunch and after school for extra help.

Similarly, teachers believe it to be important rapport-building to attend student's activities outside of class, and many enjoy it. For example, when describing the value of making personal connections with students, one teacher reported, "I love, you know, going to their after school things, sports activities that the kids do, and helping them even outside of the classroom." Additionally, teachers reported being aware of barriers to success that some of their students' experience, such as a challenging home life, as well as difficulty with academics due to different native culture and language. One teacher stated, "The challenging parts of it are you have thirty-eight students, not all of them are on the same track. Not all of them come from the same background. Not all of them have the same circumstances at home. Not all of them have a home, you know, so there's a lot going on outside of the classroom that we don't know." Teachers showed a desire to accommodate their students' needs by individualizing material and extending assignment deadlines for those who may be experiencing hardships. For example, teachers stated they have students who have low reading abilities and they, therefore, "assign, like, two pages of reading a week" and explain, "for some students that's really overwhelming because just even getting through the first paragraph is like digging a lot." Table 1 shows the breakdown in teacher responses to survey questions about connecting with students.



Table 1

*Survey Responses for Statements about Connection with Students*

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>"I am able to personally connect with every student in my class"</b>	15 (21.7%)	25 (36.2%)	20 (29.0%)	9 (13.0%)	2.33
<b>"In general, I connect with the students in my class"</b>	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.9%)	35 (50.7%)	32 (46.4%)	3.43
<b>"I am able to care about each of my students with the current student to teacher ratio"</b>	28 (40.6%)	30 (43.5%)	7 (10.1%)	4 (5.8%)	1.81

In addition, correlations showed the significance in the degree to which teachers thought their own wellbeing was impacted by their ability to connect to students. In general, if teachers felt that their wellbeing mattered to their students, they were more likely to connect with students in their classes, felt that they learned from their students, and spend time helping students during their breaks (Table 2 ). The correlations worked both ways, such that if teachers spend time helping students during their breaks, they are more likely to feel appreciated by students, feel supported by students, and are more likely to learn from their students (Table 3). Further, when teachers felt a general sense of connection with students in their class, they were more likely to feel that their

wellbeing mattered to their students, and they were able to personally connect with the students in their class.

Table 2  
*Survey Responses for Statements That Show Relationships Between Teacher Wellbeing and Connecting With Students*

<b>"My wellbeing matters to my students"</b>	
<u>Correlated with:</u>	<u>Correlation Coefficient</u>
"In general, I connect with the students in my class"	0.39***
"I learn from my students"	0.33*
"I spend time helping students during my breaks"	0.27*

Table 3

*Survey Responses for Statements That Show Relationships Between Teachers Helping and Feeling Supported by Students*

<b>"I spend time helping students during my breaks"</b>	
<b><u>Correlated with:</u></b>	<b><u>Correlation Coefficient</u></b>
<b>"I feel appreciated by students"</b>	0.27*
<b>"I feel supported by students"</b>	0.37*
<b>"I learn from my students"</b>	0.32*

**Perception of Administration**

Some teachers expressed that they personally liked administration, and felt that when the team arrived, they improved standards of behavior and enhanced the site itself. As one teacher explained, "I feel like the positive has brought... some higher accountability, for teachers and for students... and more, I guess structure and like continuity." At times they felt provided with support and guidance, for example, one teacher mentioned "some people are a little intimidated but when they say "come talk to me, we'll have a discussion about it," I really feel like they want to and I feel comfortable to go to them and say "I'm having problems with this" or "this is not working so well."

Many teachers, however, mentioned less-than-desired relationships between themselves and administration. A number of teachers expressed that their administration often did not support them when they were faced with challenges

regarding discipline and parental support. Specifically, they claimed administration “hung you out to dry,” protecting the parent’s interests over the point of view of the teachers when conflicts arose, most frequently regarding a grade. Echoing a sentiment reported by many, one teacher stated “I’ve never seen an administrator turn to a parent and say “I’m sorry, I trust my teacher, I like what my teacher is doing and I am going to have to stand with my teacher.” This tied to a larger national trend teachers expressed, being increasingly blamed for student failures over the past two decades (Yonezawa and Jones, 2006). Another consistent concern expressed by teachers was a reluctance to approach administration for support when struggling with Restorative Approaches because they “don’t trust that there’s going to be any positive result writing them.” We have described this in more detail below (pg. 20).

A significant theme that emerged from our interviews with teachers was a pervasive sense of fear and uncertainty regarding administration. Specifically, they were concerned about job security and expressed feelings of being targeted, of seeking invisibility, and alluded to an administration that micro-managed their staff. For example, one teacher said, “I feel like admin needs to trust us more, and kinda let go of their reins a little bit” and “they shouldn’t be looking down on us, and hovering as much as they do.” Of note was that during the first 2 years of the current administration team, there had been a staff turnover rate of about 50%, with no clearly understood criteria for dismissals and early retirements due to confidentiality requirements. At the time of the research, it remained a residual concern for job security that impacted staff’s sense of wellbeing with administration. This finding was shared informally with leadership early on, and while it was initially met with surprise, unofficial teacher feedback indicated the

administration made adjustments. Communication and transparency were increased and fear was reduced somewhat over the following 2 years, which improved trust between teachers and administration. In our recommendations, we discuss admin-teacher connection circles.

Teachers also expressed the demands from the administration could be overwhelming, and sometimes found the teaching techniques and professional development meetings unhelpful. There were expressions of being overwhelmed with mandates, “Do-Now’s,” and interactive lessons every day while also being asked to “fill out all these surveys.” We gathered feedback from teachers after our Professional Development training, where they were asked what would be most helpful for them.

Despite at times being seen as approachable and willing to support the teachers, administration, overall, was viewed as hard to connect with, was not approachable, and did not provide a platform for the free expression of teachers’ voices. Teachers referred to the administration as “not interested in our opinions”, and “not knowing how to support us,” and that casual “communication like “how’s it going?” has been dropped” between administrators and teachers. Teachers also expressed they felt they cannot be friends with the administrators and “must keep a professional distance from them.”

Due to uncertainty and fear in their relationships with administration, many spoke of coping mechanisms that helped get them through their school day, such as “flying under the radar”, seeking more autonomy and withdrawing, and “becoming invisible.” For example, “Teachers come up with this term ‘fly under the radar’... which is a pretty terrible way to think about your job in which “I am just trying to keep flying under the

radar.” However, teachers also expressed empathy towards administration, understanding that they have to fulfill mandates from the district and state, and they believed “[Admin] are overwhelmed by what they have to deal with, and just their daily workload.”

Data from the survey showed the following teacher responses about administration:

- 55% of teachers agreed “Teachers’ voices are heard at school”
- 61% agreed “I feel appreciated by administration”
- 55% agreed “I feel supported by administration”
- 52% disagreed “School policies are fair and consistent among admin, staff, and faculty”
- 67% disagreed with the statement “I am encouraged to question status-quo ideas”

Results from correlations revealed teachers generally feel valued at school, cared about at school, and feel that all aspects of themselves are known and appreciated. This is true, in particular, when they feel heard and considered, appreciated by the administration, supported by the administration, when school policies are fair and consistent among administration, staff, and faculty, and when they are encouraged to question status-quo ideas. Moreover, teachers do not feel valued when they feel questioning administrative policy might affect their job. Table 4 shows the relationship between teachers feeling cared about and perceptions of administration (See Table 4).

Table 4

*Pearson's Correlation of Administration Statements with Three Care Statements*

	<b>I feel valued at school</b>	<b>I feel cared about at school</b>	<b>I feel all aspects of myself are known and appreciated</b>
<b>Teachers' voices are heard and considered</b>	0.53***	0.49***	0.36**
<b>If I question administrative policy it might affect my job</b>	-0.50***	-0.48***	-0.34**
<b>I feel appreciated by administration</b>	0.64***	0.55***	0.38***
<b>I feel supported by administration</b>	0.54***	0.44***	0.29*
<b>School policies are fair and consistent among admin, staff, and faculty</b>	0.37**	0.39***	0.26*
<b>I am encouraged to question status-quo ideas</b>	0.43***	0.51***	0.36**

**Perception of District**

While there was only one question on the survey asking the teachers about their experience of feeling cared about and listened to by the district, 80% responded negatively. During interviews, teachers voiced an impression of a lack of district support and connection. The majority of teachers felt that the district did not fully comprehend

the realities of the classroom. For example, teachers stated that the “district really doesn’t understand what goes on in the daily classroom” and they felt the “district doesn’t understand what we’re doing because they come in and go ‘well you need to do this, this and this, you need to change this and this, and they don’t realize that we’re already over contract.’”

Teachers also expressed that the district did not realize the time and effort teachers put into their job. For example, “[the district] doesn’t realize that I get here at 6 am and I leave at about 4 or 5 every single day. And then I work at home and on weekends.” They also mentioned that the district gives them mandatory professional development that can be irrelevant and unhelpful, taking valuable class time away from students. For example, the district employees require teachers to implement specific teaching strategies into their classrooms, but teachers express other, more pressing needs, such as prep time, as one teacher stated, “they would not give us any time; they think that by offering these workshops, that’s support. But that’s not support.” They also reported that the district does not ask what the teachers need and “is not being really supportive,” expressing that they “are at an impasse with the district now,” referring to a salary negotiation that resolved successfully midway through the interview process.

(See Table 5)

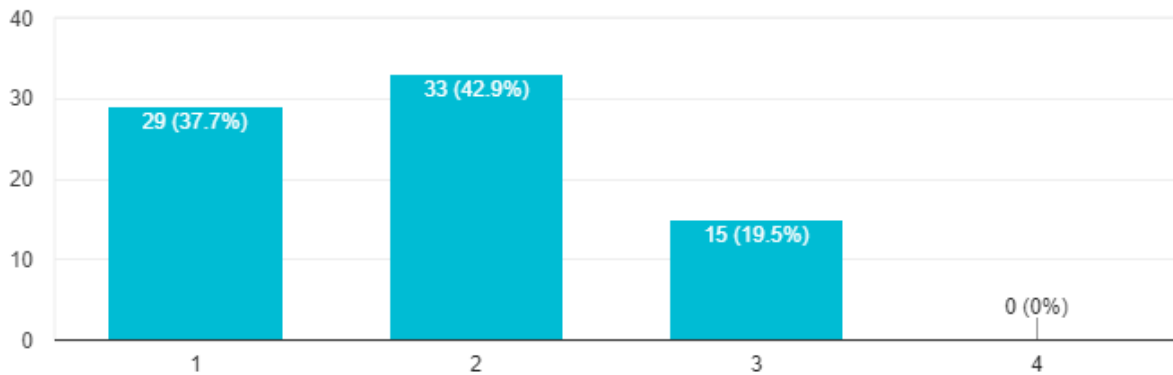


Table 5

*Survey Responses for the Statement That shows the School District Being Attentive to their Teachers*

The school district listens to and cares about its teachers.

77 responses



**Note: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree**

### Perception of Class Size

A consistently expressed frustration among teachers during interviews was the negative impact of large class sizes, which were capped at 38 students per class at the time of the study. Teachers asserted that too many students in their classrooms negatively affected relationships with students and with parents, impacted their time for teaching and prepping, limited their resources and materials, and hindered the quality of their teaching. There were teachers who referred to not having enough desks and textbooks for students and believed they could not build classroom community and relationships with students because of the large class sizes. Teachers felt “valuable time was spent managing rather than teaching” in these large classes. For example,

one teacher proclaimed, “when there are too many kids in a class, it's not teaching anymore, it's crowd control... and even if it is 30 percent crowd control, that's 30 percent of the time that you're not teaching.”

Teachers asserted they spent more time “managing” these students than getting to know them individually and truly teaching them, despite wishing it were otherwise. Such a dissonance between one's desire to care for those in their charge, with institutional barriers getting in the way of their ability to carry out the necessary care, is called moral stress disorder. Moral distress occurs “when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action”(Mealer, M., & Moss, M., 2016). More specifically, moral distress requires three situations: (1) a need for a morally responsible action; (2) the individual determines the best strategy based on their own morality; (3) the individual is then prevented from implementing their plan of action due to internal and/or external constraints . This is in addition to compassion fatigue and burnout, which are all recognized as occupational hazards for doctors, nurses, and firefighters. Teachers believed that their inability to make positive connections with students ultimately reduces learning, as “[students] are the ones getting hurt, it's their education.”

Teachers described that having over 35 students per class creates a chaotic environment, one that can feel more like a “circus,” and that it can feel as though their role is to “babysit” and “keep them under control” rather than focusing on content. Many teachers felt that having too many students creates an environment that makes the goal of actually teaching an “impossible task.” In response to further inquiry, teachers generally claimed that 25-30 students is an ideal number of students per class, although

they claimed any reduction would be helpful. Table 6 highlights the frequencies in teacher responses to the survey items about the student to teacher ratio.

Table 6  
*Survey Responses for Statements about Student to Teacher Ratio*

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>“I am able to care about each of my students with the current student to teacher ratio”</b>	28 (40.6%)	30 (43.5%)	7 (10.1%)	4 (5.8%)	1.81
<b>“I am able to personally connect with every student in my class”</b>	15 (21.7%)	25 (36.2%)	20 (29.0%)	32 (46.4%)	2.33
<b>“In general, I connect with the students in my class”</b>	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.9%)	35 (50.7%)	32 (46.4%)	3.43
<b>“I often feel overwhelmed with my daily workload”</b>	3 (4.3%)	11 (15.9%)	20 (29.0%)	35 (50.7%)	3.26
<b>“The current student/teacher ratio a school is stressful”</b>	1 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (36.2%)	43 (62.3%)	3.59

Results from correlations revealed that in general, when teachers are able to care about each of their students with their current class size, they are also able to connect with every student. However, they are unable to care about each of their students with their current class size when they feel overwhelmed with their daily workload (Table 7).

Table 7

*Correlations of Survey Responses for Statements about Teachers/Student Connection and Workload*

<b>“I am able to care about each of my students with the current student to teacher ratio”</b>	
<b><u>Correlated with:</u></b>	<b><u>Correlation Coefficient</u></b>
<b>“I am able to personally connect with every student in my class”</b>	0.48*
<b>“I often feel overwhelmed with my daily workload”</b>	-0.25*

### **Coping Strategies**

Focus on participants' coping strategies that help them prevent burnout can enhance our understanding of what provides renewal and resilience for the known occupational stress of teaching. Similar to other helping professions, like medicine, nursing, and firefighting, occupational stress is inherent in teaching, and includes the mental and emotional demands of the job, students' behavior, excessive workload, and workplace environment, even public image or prestige of the teachers (Grīga & Linda, 2015), and can lead to burnout and disengagement (Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). Teachers may not just survive overwhelm, but thrive in their profession through awareness/intention and multilevel self-care practices. Positive relationships with students buffer the effects of burnout and therefore increases job satisfaction.

Coping strategies have been researched for decades stemming from leading researcher Lazarus (1966), although most have been conducted utilizing quantitative research methods, most commonly through the use of self-reported measures such as surveys and questionnaires. Teachers can increase their sense of wellbeing by incorporating their own coping strategies based on their appraisal of stressful situations, which aid in preventing their burnout (Wilkerson, 2009). Little research has qualitatively examined secondary teachers' coping strategies for burnout through data obtained by in-depth, open-ended inquiry, and including this data can help us broaden and share our understanding and awareness of such strategies.

There were three main strategy themes that emerged in the interviews in connection with teachers' methods of coping with burnout. The primary themes were: establishing boundaries, social support, and physical care.

**Establishing boundaries.** Research has demonstrated that teacher workload is associated with increased stress and burnout (Sonnetag and Undine, 2006; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014). Research has shown that establishing boundaries in the workplace, such as setting limits on time and tasks, can allow teachers more time for engaging in activities that pertain to their quality of life such as fostering their health, and thereby reducing stress and enhancing their wellbeing (Sharplin, O'Neil, & Chapman, 2011).

Research has demonstrated that when one can psychologically detach from work at the end of the workday, detachment can serve as a buffer for the day-to-day contributors to burnout (Sonnetag and Undine, 2006). As one teacher expressed, "I

mean it's a great job but you do have to, you know, do what you can and then you call it." Another reflected, "being okay with not being perfect and... there's always more to do, so setting up the boundaries of like... I could invest another twenty hours of my week into it... so I just have to be okay with being the best that I can be right now, that helps a lot...cause then I don't feel stressed about things."

**Social Support.** Research has shown that social support within and outside of the workplace (e.g. colleagues, family, and friends) contributes significantly to a teachers' ability to cope with stress (Schlichte et. al., 2005; Retallick and Butt, 2004; Kyriacou, 1987). Through social support, individuals develop a sense of belonging and these supports provide the opportunity for the reappraisal of work-related stressors, thus reducing burnout (Gold and Roth, 2013; Chang, 2009; Kahn, et al., 2006). One teacher from the study stated, "Yeah that definitely helps. I have a great community surrounding me, my husband obviously and fabulous friends and a lot of family here in town, and so it's nice." Another said, "I'll do you know, I'll meet with friends for tea after work or sometimes on Friday we'll go to happy hour after work... I have a very good group of... friends. And whenever I get a chance I spend time with my friends and my family."

**Physical Self Care.** Research shows that engaging in exercise as a form of physical self-care lowers teachers levels of burnout and stress (Gmelch, 1983; Seidman & Zager 1991). Seidman & Zager (1991) suggest that physical exercise (ie., walking and swimming) may be associated with lower teacher burnout. Teachers throughout the study mentioned how they incorporate physical self-care into their everyday lives as a way to prevent burnout: "I think you really do have to recharge over summer to avoid

the burnout...regular workouts and trying to stay as healthy as you possibly can is one way to do it... I try to stay healthy and do fun stuff in my spare time.” Another said, “Music, running that’s what’s my big like safe haven, where it just gives me “Ohh I can, ya know, just think”. Sometimes you just gotta think, and give yourself that time. So that’s what really creates anti-burnout.”

### **OVERALL CARE, CONNECTION, COMMUNITY, AND CHOICE- 4 Cs**

In addition to the above analysis, we specifically examined how the care, connection, community and choice helped contribute to our understanding of teacher wellbeing. Below we expand on the four sectors:

**Feelings of care.** Research shows that the more support teachers receive from the administration, the less likely they are to burnout (Russell, Altmaier & Va Vaelzen, 1987; Sirisookslip, Ariratana & Keow Ngang, 2015). On the other hand, research also shows that the more teachers are restricted by the administration, and less cared about, the more likely they are to leave the profession, creating higher turnover rates (Loeb 2005; Brown-Stallone, Gonzalez, & Slate, 2008). These findings suggest that if teachers experience more support from administration, there would be an increase in teachers’ job satisfaction, which in turn, increase teachers’ wellbeing. One teacher who felt positive support mentioned, “I feel a lot of job security. I feel very encouraged in my job to try new things, and to be better. They are always willing to give us professional development.” Another stated, “So I’d say administration works with me. They do ask us what we want to teach during the day and they do ask us when we want our periods.

They pretty much honor what we ask for to teach, so I feel like the majority of the time I am feeling valued.”

### ***Perceptions of Care***

- 80% agreed “I feel valued at school”
- 73% agreed “I feel cared about at school”
- 56% disagreed “I feel all aspects of myself are known and appreciated”
- 61% agreed “I feel appreciated by administration”
- 80% disagreed “The school district listens to and cares about its teachers”

Table 8 highlighted the frequencies in teacher responses to the survey items about perceptions of care.

Table 8

#### *Survey Responses for Statements about Perceptions of Care*

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>“I feel valued at school”</b>	3 (4%)	11 (16%)	7 (61%)	13 (19%)	2.94
<b>“I feel cared about at school”</b>	3 (4%)	16 (23%)	38 (55%)	12 (18%)	2.86
<b>“I feel all aspects of myself are known and appreciated”</b>	10 (14%)	29 (42%)	28 (41%)	2 (3%)	2.32
<b>“I feel appreciated by administration”</b>	8 (12%)	19 (27%)	29 (42%)	13 (19%)	2.68
<b>“The school district cares about its teachers”</b>	27 (39%)	28 (41%)	14 (20%)	0 (0%)	1.81



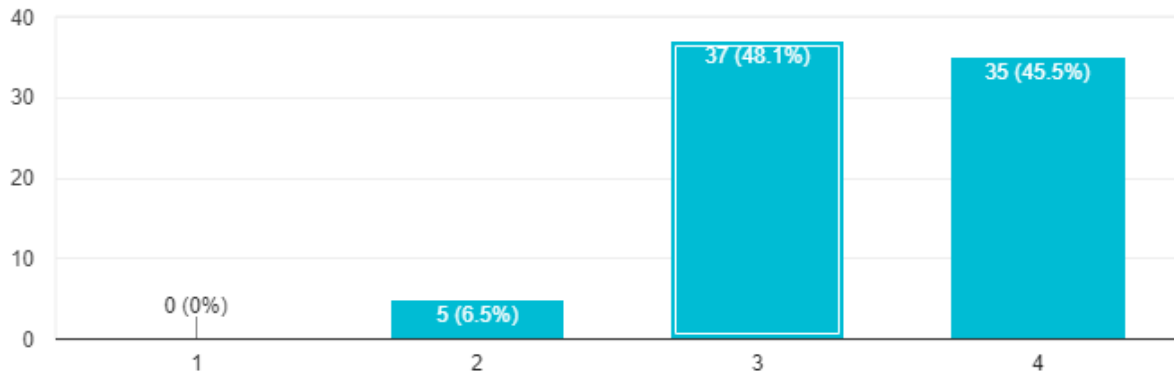
**Feelings of connection.** Research shows that having a school culture that promotes collaboration among colleagues, as well as students and parents, can benefit teacher wellbeing and decrease levels of burnout (Retallick & Butt, 2009; Kahn, et al., 2006). Positive connections with colleagues are also beneficial for teachers' relationships with students (Retallick & Butt, 2009). For example, teachers who perceived relationships as positive with other teachers felt more positively about their teaching experience and as a result, students exhibited positive behaviors (Retallick & Butt, 2009). Most teachers felt they had positive connections with colleagues, which adds to feelings of wellbeing at school (see Table 9). One teacher from our study stated, "I love the people that I work with here. I work with them and they are amazing and they have always been very willing to work with each other. When I first got here as a teacher, everyone was very supportive, jumping in there and saying 'hey what do you need, I have taught this class before.' Things like that, that's been huge and some of my best friends are in the department."

Table 9

Survey Responses for Statement that Shows Connections

### I have positive connections with colleagues at school.

77 responses



**Note: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree**

**Feelings of community.** In two international studies of teachers, one in Beijing China (Zhu, Devos, & Li, 2011) and the other in Hong Kong (Cheng 1993), researchers discovered that teachers' wellbeing improved when they felt their school had shared values, clear goals and a collaborative environment. In addition, researchers Spilt, Koomen, and Thija (2011) found that teachers not only need autonomy, belongingness, and skill, but they also need a positive relationship with their students in order to be satisfied with their role as an educator. This research supports the value of not only building community with administration and colleagues, but also with students, which are all important factors in helping teachers feel cared about, appreciated and therefore enhanced their wellbeing. One teacher expressed, "This is my community. It's the teachers, it's the students, everyone. It's nice to see them, it's the routine but it is also the sense, I don't want to get too corny, but like family." (See Table 10)

**Overall, teachers agreed that there was a sense of community at their school:**

- 78% agreed “I feel part of a community at school”
- 69% agreed “My school is a community of learners”
- 82% agreed “I work collaboratively with other teachers”
- 85% agreed “I feel free to express myself to other teachers”
- 72% agreed “My colleagues and I share the same values”
- 54% agreed “Differences are seen as assets at school”

Table 10 highlighted the frequencies in teacher responses to the survey items about perceptions of the community.

Table 10

*Survey Responses for Perceptions of Community*

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>“I feel part of a community at school”</b>	5 (7%)	10 (15%)	42 (61%)	12 (17%)	2.88
<b>“My school is a community of learners”</b>	2 (3%)	19 (28%)	45 (65%)	3 (4%)	2.71
<b>“I work collaboratively with other teachers”</b>	1 (2%)	11 (16%)	34 (49%)	23 (33%)	3.14
<b>“I feel free to express myself to other teachers”</b>	2 (3%)	8 (12%)	40 (58%)	19 (27%)	3.1
<b>“My colleagues and I share the same values”</b>	2 (3%)	17 (25%)	43 (62%)	7 (10%)	2.8
<b>“Differences are seen as assets at my school”</b>	2 (10%)	25 (36%)	33 (48)	4 (6%)	2.49

**Note: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree**

**Feelings of choice.** Researcher Hargreaves (1995) discovered that teachers who are part of a school culture that encourages autonomy are more likely to experiment in their classroom to enhance learning. A participant in the study expressed, “I wake up every morning and think about the work that I do, I get to create a lot, I get to

plan lessons and create environments and put together materials for students to then kind of interact with and I just love the creative process of teaching.”

**Overall, teachers felt they had the opportunity to make choices in their work at school:**

- 96% agreed “I am passionate about the subject I am currently teaching”
- 91% agreed “I feel like I can be my true self in the classroom”
- 87% agreed “My preferred teaching style works well with the current curriculum”
- 95% agreed “I have the opportunity to teach in creative ways”
- 93% agreed “I am able to dress how I want at school”

Table 11 highlighted the frequencies in teacher responses to the survey items about perceptions of choice.

Table 11  
*Survey Responses for Perceptions of Choice*

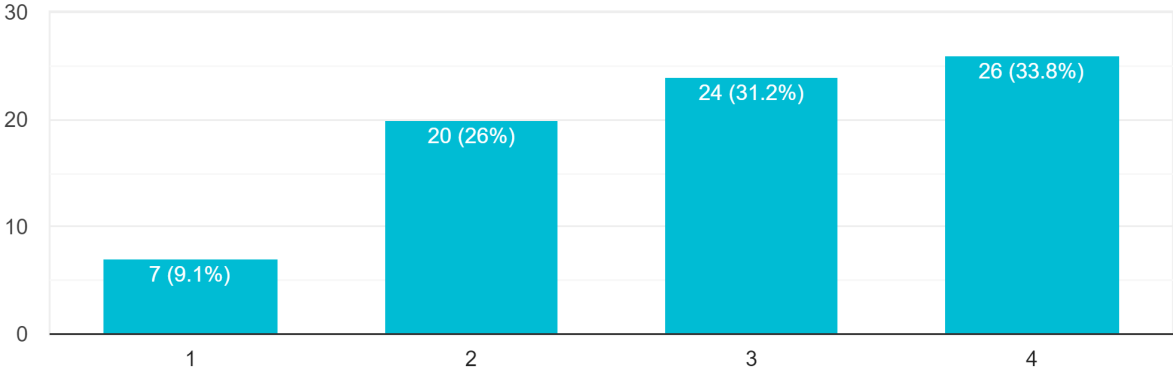
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>“I am passionate about the subject I am currently teaching”</b>	0 (0%)	3 (4%)	13 (19%)	53 (77%)	3.72
<b>“I feel like I can be my true self in the classroom”</b>	1 (2%)	5 (7%)	23 (33%)	40 (58%)	3.48
<b>“My preferred teaching style works well with the current curriculum”</b>	1 (2%)	8 (11%)	27 (39%)	33 (48%)	3.33
<b>“I have the opportunity to teach in creative ways”</b>	2 (3%)	3 (4%)	33 (48%)	31 (45%)	3.35
<b>“I am able to dress how I want at school”</b>	2 (3%)	3 (4%)	27 (39%)	37 (54%)	3.34

In addition, researcher Quaglia (2014) found that while staff want to explore new ideas and have their voices heard, administration is perceived as limiting their ability to do so. Also, staff may feel uncomfortable asking questions or speak their truth to power in staff meetings. In this particular study, choice also represents teachers’ sense of

freedom to speak their truth to power, and their ability to question policies without fear of retaliation (being given extra duties, undesired classes, being fired) for expressing one’s concerns.

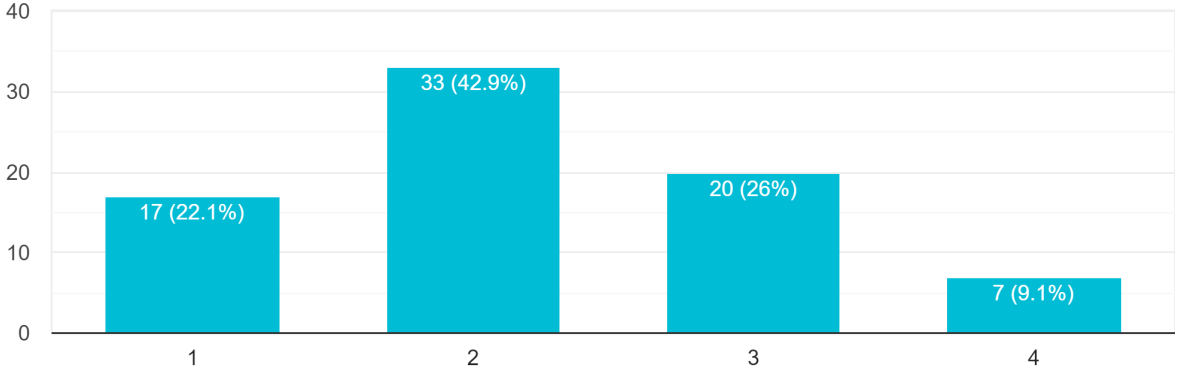
**If I question administrative policy it might affect my job.**

77 responses



**I am encouraged to question status-quo ideas.**

77 responses



Without such freedom from fear, staff concerns can go underground and can fester, making for a less effective team and limiting decision makers ability to make informed choices. Many teachers made reference to this issue, for example; “There is a real fear factor. If you say anything that administration does not agree with, then you are considered negative.” Another teacher also mentioned, “There have been multiple times when I have had an idea about something and I have gone to administration and I proposed an idea and was instantly shot down.” Teachers’ voices can influence changes that positively affect their daily engagement with students in their care.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

It is clear that teachers must incorporate many different roles into one: mentor, entertainer, caregiver, interpreter, and knowledge holder, to name just a few. But importantly, being an effective teacher requires having a voice, not only to transmit knowledge, but to ask important questions. To foster such a liberatory learning environment requires an open and receptive administration that is transparent and approachable, encouraging good communication with their teaching staff, and setting an example for effective feedback. The school community is an ecosystem where each member and each group seeks positive support from all others: students, teachers, admin and parents all contribute to a strong and healthy learning system. Enhancing empathy between groups, and among individuals, not only creates a field of safety where all can feel they belong, but also encourages creative collaboration toward shared goals.

When we empower teachers’ voices, we empower students to find their own voice. Just as students must feel the presence of the 4 C’s in order to learn, where they

are cared about, connected with teachers and peers, experience a sense of community, and feel safe to speak their truth to power, the same is true for teachers. Students look to their teachers for leadership and to set the tone of classroom climate - am I accepted? Is it ok to not know and make mistakes? Can I be myself in this space? Teachers look to their admin team to set the standards for humanizing the school space by practicing the 4 C's consistently. We found that when teachers feel afraid, they tend to hide out, avoid taking risks, and as a result, a degree of wellbeing is lost.

Teachers gain a sense of being cared for when others listen without judgement and provide a sense of support, especially their administrators. Connection and support from parents increase their overall sense of wellbeing, and a large degree of overall support is felt when mutuality and connection are enhanced with students. Teachers specifically wished for open channels of communication with their administration and lost the sense of a two-way exchange when department chairs were replaced by PLCs.

We have a crisis in education and solutions must start at the top while creating more support at all levels. Social and emotional learning practices engaged throughout the school system, from the "top down" (district employees to students), would improve teacher wellbeing, which ultimately translates to better student learning. Enhancing self-awareness, self-care and emotional literacy improves empathy and compassion toward both self and others, making the space safe for a sense of the whole person to feel accepted.

## **ADDITIONAL THEMES**

Beyond the larger data groups gathered from surveys and interviews, there were important findings discovered that were not only significant, but were commonly understood by teachers as real issues that impacted wellbeing. We list them here for future research and exploration.

### **Special Education**

Special Education teachers interviewed were significantly stressed, and described having 3 jobs: 1) teaching students, 2) paperwork for “legal defensibility” for the school district, and 3) creating IEPs. Each of these tasks required extensive meetings, coordination, and efforts relevant to the unique issues of each student. It was revealed that Special Education teachers are paid the same as general education teachers, yet work considerably more hours, with a more challenging population. Turnover in the department is high, with burnout occurring faster than General Education teachers’ 5-year average, creating additional disruption within the department. As one teacher put it, “it’s a big task. I’m doing my best man, but it’s, it’s exhausting.”

Due to an adversarial relationship between the district and Special Education teachers over a list of concerns in their department, there was an even greater concern for confidentiality at the time of our research. Teachers felt a degree of support by admin as a result of their having listened to their list of concerns, and attending a meeting with the district to discuss these issues.



Of note, upon arriving on the job, the superintendent at the time had faced 16 separate Special Education lawsuits, which triggered a counter-response resulting in an extensive paperwork process to keep the department legally defensible. This new priority became a huge encumbrance for teachers who already had overwhelming workloads, leaving less time and energy for students who so desperately needed it. Asked if the district empathized with their plight, one teacher replied, “No, and I think the district is well aware of that fact. But the bottom line, I mean Special Ed teachers in our district are spread so thin...” Increasing the number of Special Ed teachers and Aides was requested, and an idea was discussed regarding a program whereby peer tutors could receive community service for time spent working on academics with Special Education students to relieve teachers.

### **Co-Teaching**

While intended to help Special Education teachers, the Co-Teaching model was described as “not working” by both Special Ed and General Ed teachers alike. As one General Ed teacher described, rather than feeling like value-added, it often felt like more of a burden. For example, one teacher said, “my Special Ed co-teacher has a day off today to do paperwork on the Special Ed side. And I feel like we don’t ever get a day off to do paperwork, even though we get paperwork every single day.” What I experienced in such cases were two teachers both willing and able to work cooperatively with each other, but because of the excessive workload, both often felt overburdened and less supported. There were exceptions, but all felt the system could be improved upon.

### **Math Department**

A unique circumstance occurred in the math department when Common Core was adopted but textbooks were not purchased, so with little notice teachers were asked to create their own curriculum. As one teacher said, "I don't mind the changing, but the admin changed math without buying us a curriculum. [They said] "You don't need a curriculum." What? I mean... it's almost impossible to teach without a curriculum. You know, we're not curriculum writers. So we're pulling stuff off the internet." This was an example of a disconnect between the realities of teachers and decisions made at the district level. Teachers concerns remained focused on the students, "I really am sad... because I really... believe that we're gonna have this group of kids right now who are in math who are not going to know a whole lot of math. Because the teachers are floundering and working our tails off".

Despite this challenge, the department remained resilient, and most reported that they worked as a team, sharing resources and supporting each other. These teachers seemed to have a unique site advantage, as the math department occupies an entire floor of the main building, where math classrooms are physically close to each other, enhancing their sense of community. They also have a math faculty room where they meet regularly, and have a long tradition of weekly lunch meetings, increasing the sense of care, connection, and community within the department.

### **Restorative Approaches**

Restorative Approaches was introduced is an alternative way of thinking about addressing discipline and behavioral issues and a framework for responding to these issues. Santa Barbara High was the pilot high school for this program. At the same time

that teachers were being trained in Restorative Approaches, it was announced that teachers would no longer be making referrals to the admin team to handle discipline issues. Teachers were being given information and some training on conducting restorative circles when harm was done, and gathering relevant parties to make repairs, rather than using the traditional referral and detentions, and suspensions.

When they talked about RA, teachers reported one of two ways: either they felt they had “always used” a similar process of processing of issues and repair with students rather than making referrals, and “already have that relationship with the students” , or they felt inadequately trained to conduct the circles, and lacked time to conduct them. Teachers claimed that ultimately the students knew there were no real consequences, so that behavior actually became a bigger issue.

In addition, statistics showing radically reduced referrals were being published on campus to demonstrate the success of the program, but teachers perceived that making disciplinary referrals would result in a negative mark in their file. A consequence was that teachers felt a lack of support from administration, with the addition of work that admin had formerly handled. Many teachers liked the new Restorative Approaches in theory, however, they felt they “don’t have time to do all that,” referring to the time-consuming emails and cumbersome process of reporting that often resulted in students receiving detention they knew they would not attend, without any consequences. Many additionally claimed they had always held private meetings with disruptive students, tackling issues one-on-one and talking it through, as one claimed: “I think it works but I think I’ve always been doing it.”

**ACE's/Trauma**

Teachers expressed awareness of the students in their classes who had high levels of trauma, or adverse childhood experiences (ACE). Some teachers provided emotional support, many made accommodations for students they knew were homeless, had a parent who was incarcerated, or just had “heavy drama at home.” One teacher wished that “every student just had one adult in their life who supports them” so they could come to school ready to learn. Students have become increasingly stressed, anxious, and traumatized in their experience for a variety of reasons, including natural disasters and teen suicides, and this has made the job of teaching more difficult. The constant contact with a traumatized population contributes to secondary trauma, and many teachers and administrators suffer unknowingly.

**Physical Needs**

Early in the research we discovered a well-known fact of teaching, one that has an even greater impact on women teachers: their inability to use the bathroom on a regular basis. In a Quality of Worklife study, “lack of opportunity to use restroom” was cited as the “third worst everyday stressor by a fourth of the respondents [or] 7,500 educators”, following time pressure and disciplinary issues (2015). In our survey, roughly one in two teachers reported having inadequate bathroom breaks, while about the same ratio said they’re unable to personally use the breaks they do get. Bladder infections are a known occupational hazard of teaching, but this finding has much larger implications for teachers’ sense of personal freedom to take care of themselves while on the job.

**Difference in workload by subject**

An issue that gradually became clear through the interview portion of the research, yet is well-known by high school teachers, is that certain subjects have a significantly greater workload than others. Although teachers have similar classroom sizes and behaviors, the grading workload may differ. There is no shortcut for learning writing skills, and English and Literature teachers said, "Students can only learn how to write by writing." English teachers are required to read, evaluate, and give feedback on multiple assignments, which creates many additional hours of work per week. Meanwhile, Math teachers can, without losing any student learning, offer ScanTron tests and quizzes that can ease the process of grading and providing feedback to their students. It shows teachers in different subjects require more time to give assignments back to students while others have materials that make it easier for them. As one projected, "an English teacher who has 36 students in a classroom and has to grade all those papers and still be a good teacher need extra time to provide appropriate feedback."

**Perceived workload versus realities of teaching**

Many teachers believe there is a common misperception, not only by the administration but by the culture at large, that a teacher's workday ends when they leave campus. Most teachers reported working at home after school and on weekends, often wishing for more time to develop lessons and give detailed feedback. Teachers reported working well over 40 hours per week and still having to attend meetings. Many teachers voiced their concern regarding not having enough time during their work day to finish preparing or grading, therefore having to take work after hours and at home. This

information led to our inquiring on a subsequent district-wide study the number of hours participants worked, which was significantly more than is generally known by non-teachers.

### **Writing college recommendations**

There is a voluntary, yet time-consuming, task that some teachers perform that not only adds value to the school, but helps students well beyond their high school years: the highly sought-after college application recommendation. These teachers typically teach AP subject courses (but not always), and the additional workload created during the fall semester can be significant. In addition to their normal coursework, some teachers write dozens of detailed and thoughtful reports to help students get accepted to competitive colleges, taking a great deal of time and effort. While they do this out of their love for the students, it is an additional burden to already stretched teachers, and is not formally recognized.

### **Counselor Team**

As the gatekeepers of our children's future success and opportunity, I found this unique team of counselors to be both dynamic and cohesive. Even though the survey hadn't been written for counselors, they asked to take it to the best of their ability, and then requested a group interview. As they spoke, I found them to be unified yet diverse, reporting on their realization that by switching their method of reaching students one-on-one, they found that visiting classrooms and disseminating important information to larger groups of students at a time was more effective. They worked with teachers to be sure students got what they needed, with admin to have the overarching goals

accomplished, and with students to provide guidance and services as needed, making them the hub of the school community. They were interested in SEL, mindfulness, and student empowerment, and worked together to maximize their effectiveness as a team. We found them exemplary, and we would recommend they do outreach to other campuses to share their best practices.

### **Feeling heard**

When the tape recorder was turned off, many teachers expressed sincere gratitude for our taking the time to listen to them. As many described, it felt healing for them to be heard and to have a chance to verbalize their feelings and experiences with a caring listener. As we were often on campus during the Spring of 2016, we encountered teachers who greeted us with smiles and even hugs. Many teachers reported that the interviews felt “like therapy” they desperately needed. Teachers especially want to feel heard by their administration, as one teacher said, “here is what I feel, just validate my feelings, you know?” While trust building was slow, a feeling of working together toward a common positive goal developed. Feeling that you matter, feeling a personal connection, a sense of community and having the opportunity to speak one’s truth, all create a greater sense of wellbeing.

### **Limitations of the study**

Stacy Pulice designed the study as a psychological perspective on educators, and lacked foreknowledge of the lived experience of teachers. This was both a limitation and an asset, as this research required the discipline of holding a “beginner’s mind”, with no preconceived notion of how teachers might respond. While this allowed for

greater possibility due to her independent and non-traditional approach, there are questions a fellow teacher would have known to ask that may have been relevant to their experience.

This study serves as an example of responses from one school at a particular moment in time, whereas other schools have differences, and can be investigated. As a result of this research, we conducted a subsequent district-wide study, including the remaining three secondary schools in the Santa Barbara School District. We sought to discover whether teachers across multiple contexts in multiple settings had similar patterns of experience. Preliminary results are prepared for those sites, as well as all-district preliminary data, which includes SBHS.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

While our aim is to share what we learned about the greatest contributors to Santa Barbara High School teachers' wellbeing, our study was at a particular point in time, and schools are continually in flux. Everything from leadership, to curriculum, to the community surrounding the school has changed since then, yet many factors remain stable. The data does not take into account current budget constraints, current policy restrictions and other limits that add to difficulties inherent in such a massive institution as public education. We found that through making a personal connection, encouraging a sense of safety, and fostering genuine and authentic dialogue, teachers can be emboldened to share their lived experience. Deep listening not only serves teachers' need to feel heard, but also enhances their self-reflection and creative thinking.



The process of inquiry can increase mindfulness, as perspective-taking is engaged in order to reflect, while imagination helps to visualize forward, enhancing the role teachers may take in creating the best possible school environment. Social and emotional awareness is increased, while the use of such practices increases a sense of agency and engagement, reducing feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Our suggestions aim to fuel a sense of hope for improved wellbeing in the hearts and minds of those who work in a traditional system. With a holistic approach, teachers' voices can be included to influence changes that positively affect their daily engagement with students in their care. In the spirit of partnership and dialogue, schools can better guide decision-making in the future.

### **Students**

- Time spent on student/teacher bonding is seen as a priority, as it is an investment in enhanced student learning.
- Mindfulness practices: 3-minute reset at the beginning of each hour, as well as specific times and spaces for teachers and students to cultivate longer practice.
- Non-academic time available for all students, enabling teachers and students to interact and connect as people, beyond their roles of teacher/student.
- Teachers receive ongoing training in group facilitation, to make a big classroom feel small.
- As toxic stress in youth is epidemic, with natural disasters and student suicides locally amplifying the issue, greater emphasis on caring relationships and dialogue in classrooms as safe spaces is a priority.

- Reduce mandates that burden teachers' already scarce time for students.

### **Administration**

- Regular connection circles with teachers and administration, facilitated by a neutral party in order to create a safe container, for sharing thoughts and feelings, and increase empathy between teams.
- When larger themes appear, either positive or challenging, share them publicly as ideas to be worked with by the whole system.
- Without seeming like another mandate, leaders need to help make the space and time for new ideas to emerge, while maintaining an overall sense of direction and purpose for the collective.
- Greater communication and transparency from administration enhances teachers' sense of inclusion, and therefore buy-in with policies and processes.
- Recognize teachers' natural longing for a sense of relatedness and support from their admin team, as they are "on the front lines" with students.
- Administration team communicate to teachers they are open to facilitate and problem-solve in positive and effective ways.

### **District**

- Leadership enhance their visibility on campuses.
- Improve familiarity with individual teachers.
- Use inclusive language (SBUSD is a community/ecosystem).
- Exhibit the 4 C's for all individuals that comprise the district.
- Encourage feedback, both formal and informal, from all sectors.

- District recognize and acknowledge the importance of “soft” issues, and the emotional wellbeing of all within the system.
- Provide support for administrators to create more time for connection with teachers.

### **Class size**

- Talk about this issue honestly. There remains an urban myth that class size doesn't make a difference in student outcomes. Everyone who works with students know differently, and telling a false story erodes trust.
- Teachers train in SEL, the 4 C's, and group dynamics to “make a big classroom feel small.” One example is Gelbach Interest Test, known to increase the connection between teachers and students.
- Without blaming, openly brainstorm and discuss the feelings class size creates, problems that arise, and harms it causes.
- Talk about potential options, both pragmatic and “magic wand.” Include short term and long term ideas.
- Create opportunities for smaller group interaction, especially at the College Prep level.
- Even though teachers have no control over the policies that determine the class size, they can feel empowered to find strategies that create a sense of community and greater intimacy in the classroom.
- Make it a public goal to change policy that determines funding for smaller class size because it hurts education at every level.

## **Listening**

- A wish to be heard was a common theme among teachers, even though they did not feel it was necessary that action be taken in response.
- A specific request from long-term teachers was for leadership to be visible and available as they arrive in the morning to check in, and follow up with them on requests, creating a feedback loop that feels satisfying and empowering.
- Come from a place of curiosity and wonder, which is natural in the child and gets shut down by having to “know”. Remain innocent.
- Through their extensive classroom experience with children, teachers believe their insight into what is needed to aid in student learning should be considered of high value. But at the time of this research, there was not an effective system for listening to teachers voices, unless it was to negotiate a problem.

## **Group Interaction**

- There was a desire for casual social events, to cultivate relationships and a sense of community, which had become more difficult in recent years.
- Emphasize and practice the 4 C’s of Care, Connection, Community and Choice on campus, an easy and cost-effective way to enhance wellbeing in all members of the school ecosystem.
- SEL training for administrators and teachers
- Explore ways of funding therapy for educators, as students are more traumatized than we realize, creating secondary trauma with teachers and administrators.

- Use Professional Development Training time to practice greater connection among staff and administration.

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## Appendix

### ***SBUSD Wellbeing Research***

#### *Teacher Interview Protocol:*

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1. How are you? On a scale of 1 - 10, how are you feeling today?
  2. Tell us about what is really working for you? What do you love about being a teacher?
  3. What isn't really working for you?
    - a. Classroom
    - b. Society
    - c. Family
  4. If you had a magic wand, what would you change and why?
  5. What motivated you to get into teaching?
    - a. A person
    - b. An experience
  6. How do you avoid/prevent burnout?
  7. Is there anything you wish people knew about being a teacher?
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