



COVID-19 and Behavioral Health in Education

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Although all sectors have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, education has arguably been hit the hardest.

Most state governments issued stay-at-home orders and closed public schools to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, forcing a rapid transition to distance learning. This transition has likely amplified existing disparities in a variety of ways. Not all children have access to the technology needed for remote learning. And special education services may be significantly disrupted when delivered online instead of in person.

Behavioral Health in Education Before the Pandemic

The Standard completed an initial Behavioral Health Impact Study in late 2019 before the pandemic hit the United States. The results provide a snapshot of how behavioral health issues were manifesting in the education industry at that time.¹ Compared to workers in other industries, employees in education reported more mental health distress. As a result, educators had lowered productivity and missed work at a higher rate than people in other industries.

	General workforce	Educators
WORKERS WHO REPORTED SUFFERING FROM MENTAL HEALTH DISTRESS	39%	45%
WORKERS REPORTING LOWERED PRODUCTIVITY DUE TO MENTAL HEALTH	30%	37%
WORKERS REPORTING HAVING MISSED A DAY OF WORK DUE TO MENTAL HEALTH	24%	29%

Unfortunately, along with this, education workers reported feeling less supported by HR when it came to requesting leave or accommodations. They were also less comfortable seeking help from their employer for addiction issues. The flip side of those issues is stigma: educators expressed more concern than workers in other industries about coworkers treating them differently if they were struggling with a behavioral health issue. Almost half said they would worry about being fired if they disclosed a substance use issue. Prior research has also indicated that teachers are particularly worried about the impact of personal substance use issues on their careers.²

These findings are consistent with other studies that have found that teachers have high levels of stress and depression.

Sources of those issues included:^{3,4}

- New initiatives implemented without proper training
- Job uncertainty
- Salary concerns
- Large class sizes
- Inadequate resources
- Bureaucracy
- Workload

The Impact of COVID-19 on Educators

The most obvious change the pandemic caused in education has been the switch to distance learning. In most cases, it occurred without warning. This may have added to or multiplied existing stress about new requirements for which training was not provided. In addition, large classes can be more difficult to manage via online teaching, especially coping with students who talk or interrupt frequently, versus drawing out quiet students who don't participate.⁵ It's also unclear how online teaching will impact concerns about student aggression, inadequate resources, bureaucracy and workload.

Research since the start of COVID-19 shows large negative effects on mental wellness and coping. The federal Disaster Distress Helpline⁶ and local suicide hotlines^{7,8} have reported huge call volume increases. These trends are also reflected in the Behavioral Health Pandemic Update, conducted by The Standard several months into the pandemic.

61% 

of education workers say that mental health issues have been affecting **their work** more since the COVID-19 pandemic began.⁹

64% 

of education workers say that mental health issues have been affecting **co-workers** more since the COVID-19 pandemic began.⁹

Research has also shown that substance abuse and addiction is a challenging issue among educators. And alcohol sales have surged¹⁰ as hospitals have reported an increase in alcohol-related problems.¹¹

30% 

of education workers say that addiction or substance abuse have affected **their work** more since the COVID-19 pandemic began.⁹

67% 

of education workers say that addiction or substance abuse have affected **co-workers** more since the COVID-19 pandemic began.⁹

Additional Challenges in Education

Surveys of teachers and school district leaders indicate other specific issues for schools, including:¹²

- Lower teacher and student morale
- Higher rates of student truancy and non-participation in lower socioeconomic communities
- Concerns about students falling behind, particularly in math
- Difficulty teaching specific subjects remotely, particularly art and science

Also important are issues that may impact a students' ability to engage in distance learning. These include parental stress related to caring for children at times they are usually in school, and food insecurity for students who rely on school meals.¹³

Questions about how schools re-open will affect teacher mental wellbeing. They will likely be responsible for the solutions and safety measures for a variety of challenges, including:

- Temperature checks
- Social distancing and staggered school shifts
- Masks and/or face shields, as well as disinfecting^{14,15}

- Returning students who are behind academically
- Student anxiety and/or depression
- Students unused to the structure and discipline of in-class learning¹⁶

There are other concerning challenges for educators too. As COVID-19 halted much of the economy, tax revenues dropped and now education funding is likely to decrease. Estimates suggest that state education spending may decline by 10 to 20% in the 2020-21 school year, with a larger drop in 2021-22 because of the delayed effect of lower income tax collections.¹⁷ The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act allocated over \$16 billion for public education, but that accounts for just 1.9 percent of public school revenue across the country.¹⁸ Even the best-case scenarios suggest that educators will be facing increasing stress around possible job loss and no relief with respect to salary concerns.

Education budget cuts may mean the loss of 300-750K teaching jobs.¹⁹

Helping Educators Cope During the Pandemic

Some of the issues causing stress for teachers can only be addressed through broader social and political changes. Still, there are actions employers can take to help teachers cope, even during these difficult times.

Support can be provided through employer-sponsored benefits such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and health insurance with adequate coverage for mental health and addiction treatment benefits. School administrators, like other managers, must be flexible and adaptive, recognizing the additional stress educators face.²⁰

30% 

of education workers say that **it has been harder to get help for mental health issues since the pandemic began**

37% 

of education workers say that **it has been harder to get help for substance abuse or addiction issues since the pandemic began.**

School administrators can benefit from working with their vendors, particularly those offering wellness services, EAP, workers compensation, disability insurance and health insurance. These vendors may have expertise and services that can be utilized to help create a more supportive environment for educators.

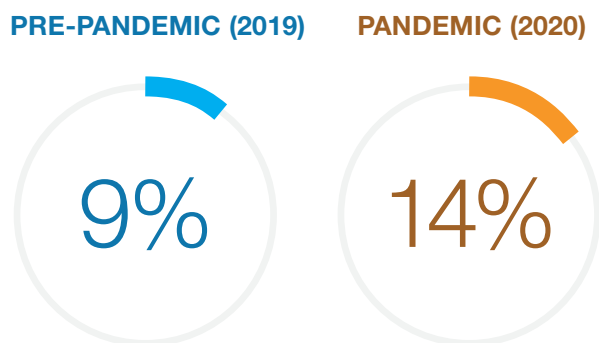
Teaching Tolerance magazine surveyed nearly 2,000 educators in March 2020 to ask what they needed. In addition to resources — online sources, printable materials, guidance on distance learning and so on — the respondents said they wanted emotional support.²¹ It's important for school leaders to both promote and enable educators to embrace basic self-care and coping skills: getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, exercising and staying connected with supportive others.²²

Educational employers may consider other offerings to help build coping skills, such as resilience training,²³ yoga and mindfulness meditation.²⁴ Schools may also consider training staff members in Mental Health First Aid to learn how to identify, approach, assess and assist coworkers who are struggling with a mental health or substance use crisis.²⁵

Helping Educators Cope During the Pandemic

Another innovative approach is to offer peer support networks for teachers.²⁶ Peer support has been shown to be an effective way to help workers in high-stress jobs with significant professional isolation, such as police departments²⁷ and hospitals.²⁸ Coworker peers are trained to offer support to individuals under stress using empathic listening skills, risk assessment to identify potential danger to self or others, reassurance and guidance for appropriate treatment options.

IN 2020, MORE EDUCATION WORKERS AVOIDED SEEING A DOCTOR OR THERAPIST FOR THEIR MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS BECAUSE OF WORK CONCERNS:



Research has demonstrated that peer support can improve employees' coping strategies, provide a sense of shared experience, offer validation, and lead to greater self-confidence and resilience.²⁹ Although similar approaches, such as Teacher Assistance Teams and Teacher Support Teams,³⁰ were pioneered in the 1980s, those typically focused on teachers working with students with special needs.^{31,32,33} Recent efforts have been more broadly applied and suggest that peer support can reduce the sense of isolation many teachers felt even before the pandemic. But they've also found that effective peer support programs require formal training, a sense of ownership among the participants, and ongoing encouragement and funding from school administrators.³⁴

Another resource unique to educational institutions is the potential support of parents, even as parents are dealing with many of the same stressors as the teachers working with their children. Recent research has found very high support for teachers among parents and that they don't expect teachers to carry the burden alone.³⁵



An Opportunity for a New Start

More flexibility, less hands-on management and a greater ability to review and update processes and procedures may have changed the workplace forever. But as lifelong learners, teachers might have an edge when it comes to developing new routines and practices.³⁶

The role of teacher, student and parent has changed. Parents are more aware of the importance of teachers and the difficulty of their job. That could translate into greater community support for educators and education.³⁷

Remote learning has required parents to take a greater role in their child's education, which means there may be less reliance on teachers for basic instruction moving forward. Much of the everyday classwork is now online in formats that could prove more effective at meeting a student's unique needs. And, freed from having to cover material with all students at once, teachers may function more like mentors or coaches, providing children with more individual support and guidance.³⁸

Racial disparities that existed before the pandemic are now impossible to ignore. Social unrest has amplified inequality, forcing schools to adopt a “color-kind” approach to diverse student groups.³⁹

The classroom, which has been unchanged for centuries, may be reimaged and schools may transition from a teaching culture to a learning culture.⁴⁰

About the Author

Dr. Dan Jolivet started working in the behavioral health field in 1980 as he was completing a degree in mathematical statistics and wanted to get some hands-on experience in an applied scientific discipline. His first direct service job in the field was a 1981 work-study position at a Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) in Seattle, where he quickly became hooked on trying to understand how people change.



Dan has held a variety of roles throughout his career. He has worked in inpatient hospitals, residential treatment centers, partial hospitalization programs, intensive outpatient programs, employee assistance programs and in private practice. He moved into supervision to multiply his impact and began working in managed care soon after that. He joined The Standard as its Behavioral Health Director in 2016 and says his favorite part of the job is still helping people — both claimants and people on his team — find solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Dan received his bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Washington, and his master's degree and doctorate in clinical psychology from Georgia State University. In his spare time, Dan plays baritone saxophone in a local concert band and he enjoys spending time with his two daughters and his cat.

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