

Getting a Handle on Teacher Stress: How Bad is the Problem?

It's not a devastating problem for the majority, but take a closer look at the prime victim—the middle-aged high school teacher, working in an urban environment, with a few problem kids per class.

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Two principals are discussing what it means to be a teacher in today's schools. One comments that technological improvements have made it easier to present ideas to students. The second counters with, "But today's teacher is really under a great deal of stress." The first disagrees. One of these administrators will have a two-hour inservice program on stress management; the other will not. Neither really knows if the teachers she supervises are more or less effective because of their level of perceived stress. Neither principal knows if her school is a more stressful place to work than other schools.

To determine the real seriousness of stress, to establish some numbers that could be used for comparison, we collected data from more than 3,300 K-12 public school teachers.

How stressful is it to be a teacher?
The results of our survey of public school teachers were surprising. In general, teachers perceived their jobs to be less stressful than we anticipated. Of the sample, only 16 percent responded that their "job environments" were either "very stressful" or "extremely stressful." A majority of teachers, 76 percent, rated their jobs as being either "moderately stressful" or "mildly stressful," while 7 percent indicated their jobs were "not at all stressful." These results contradict the impression generated by the mass media that teachers are overwhelmed by stress on their jobs.

What causes stress in most teachers?
The majority of teachers, 58 percent, ranked "individual pupils who continually misbehave" as the number one

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cause of job-related stress. One might anticipate that a "difficult class" of students or a general "inadequacy of school discipline policy" would rank as leading causes of stress. However, teachers ranked these causes fifth and seventh, respectively. It seems that teacher stress was produced more often by one or two students who chronically misbehave, rather than general lack of discipline or widespread student behavior problems in the school. These findings contradict the popular notion that teacher stress is caused by overall poor quality of pupil behavior.

Do high school, junior high, and elementary school teachers have similar levels of job-related stress? No. However, the level of stress for high school, junior high, and elementary school teachers conformed to an expected pattern. For example, 19 percent of the high school teachers surveyed reported that their jobs were either very or extremely stressful compared to 16 percent for junior high and 13 percent for elementary school teachers. As we expected, the data showed that the higher the grade level, the more stressful the job.

Are teachers in urban schools under more stress than teachers in suburban or rural schools? Yes, substantially. Of those urban teachers surveyed, 20 percent indicated that their jobs were very stressful compared to 16 percent in suburban and only 14 percent in rural schools.

Do teachers at various ages perceive different levels of job-related stress? We expected that as teachers got older they would perceive their jobs to be more stressful, but results of the survey did not support this expectation, although age was a critical factor. Teachers in the 31-44 age range reported higher levels of stress than either teachers under 30 or those 45 years and older. Of those surveyed, 18 percent of the teachers between the ages of 31 and 44 reported that their jobs were either very or extremely stressful; whereas only 13



percent of those under 30 and 17 percent of those over 45 reported similar conditions. Additional research is needed to determine why middle-aged teachers have the highest level of job-related stress.

How much stress do first year teachers perceive in their jobs? Beginning teachers must adjust to a new job environment; establish totally new relationships with supervisors, colleagues, pupils, and parents; and develop curriculum, teaching materials, and tests. Yet only 16 percent of the 81 first-year teachers surveyed indicated their jobs were either very or extremely stressful. In addition, 77 percent of those teaching for the first time indicated their jobs were either moderately or mildly stressful. Furthermore, 7 percent of this group reported that their jobs were "not at all stressful." Although confronted with the challenge of establishing a new career, beginning teachers associate a relatively low level of stress with their first year in the classroom.

Do teachers near retirement perceive their jobs as stressful? Approximately 350 teachers within five years of retirement reported the stressfulness of their job environments. As a group, teachers near retirement reported a great deal of variation in job-related stress. For instance, 18 percent indicated their jobs were either very or extremely stressful, while 12 percent reported that teaching was "not at all stressful."

What are the major symptoms of teacher stress? Teachers reported snappiness, general uneasiness, and depression as major symptoms. However, these symptoms of job-stress may form a cause-and-effect relationship with the major producer of stress, misbehavior of individual pupils. One could speculate that the symptoms of snappiness, uneasiness, and depression may, in turn, influence teacher-pupil relationships in such a way as to cause pupil misbehavior and thus increase teacher stress.

How do teachers cope with stress? Teachers resorted to a variety of coping methods. The majority of teachers indicated that they read, watch TV, think about alternatives, and talk with a friend, as methods for coping with stress. Of these, talking with a friend appeared to be the most popular coping strategy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The development of norms or averages

for stress for teachers can be of help to teacher groups and administrators/supervisors. There may be important implications for teacher educators, as well. As has been suggested by Cardinell (1981), there is a desperate need for a longitudinal study of teachers, investigating those who experience stress at different levels and what happens during different periods of their careers.

What happens to beginning teachers who experience high stress in their first year of teaching? Do they quit? Do they manage and stay in teaching? Does their level of stress decrease with experience? Although the data indicate that as a group first-year teachers have a relatively low level of stress, those who have a high level need more supervision and help in developing suitable coping skills.

Recommendation 1—Identify the relative stress levels of staff, especially new teachers. Provide more supervision and coping skill training for those who experience high levels of stress.

The data present serious problems for those who place teachers. Teachers from the 31-44 age group experience the greatest amount of job-related stress. If our hunch is correct, these teachers also have classrooms with a high level of stress. Yet these are the teachers at the peak of their careers. They are experienced; they are mature; they may have recently taken advanced training in education; they are not approaching retirement age.

The stress reported by these mid-career teachers may be associated with factors outside the teaching environment. Although our respondents did not appear to distinguish between general stress and job-related stress, many teachers have had to accept some difficult mid-career realities and adjust to mid-life family crises as well.

Recommendation 2—Mid-career teachers experiencing a high degree of stress require support in getting through this period. Administrators should take into consideration the teachers' ability to cope with stressors and not necessarily give them the most difficult assignments.

The data lead us to suggest that the primary source of stress, "pupils who continually misbehave," is not a general problem, but one perpetuated by a relatively small number of students per class. Our methods for dealing with discipline problems have generally been

group focused; that is, what does the teacher do with the class? This is in contrast to developing skills to work with a student on a one-to-one basis.

Recommendation 3—The "teacher as counselor" concept should be developed, tried, and evaluated. Teachers need skills to diagnose causes, prescribe alternatives, and evaluate results for individual pupils who misbehave.

There appears to be considerable variation between schools; some high schools, though generally stressful, are less stressful than many junior-middle schools or elementary schools. We are currently trying to determine what factors account for these discrepancies. In the meantime, it would be prudent for schools to examine their level of stress and provide inservice training, counseling, or other support for teachers, based on need, rather than falling prey to media alarmists who suggest that teaching is a very hazardous profession. Our data do say that stress may be a serious problem for teachers, but it appears manageable and not as severe a problem as one might believe.

Recommendation 4—Individual schools should systematically collect data about stress.¹ For those with a higher than average level of stress, something should be done; for those below average, no action is required. ■

¹Several survey type questionnaires have been developed to measure perceived levels of teacher stress. Our own questionnaire, "Diagnosing Personal Stress," is a single-page, 19-item checklist based on a study conducted in England (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1979). For information about this questionnaire or detailed results, write to: Fred Feitler, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, OH 44555. Other large studies, using different questionnaires, have been conducted by the Chicago Teachers Union (Cichon and Koff, 1980) and the New York State United Teachers ("NYSUT Teacher Stress Survey," 1980). Other paper-and-pencil measures are also available.

References

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