

THE COST OF CARING

How 'Compassion Fatigue' Affects Educators



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA *Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety*

Being a principal is one of the hardest and most rewarding jobs in the world! It means that I'm a representative of education, tasked with creating a culture that ensures school safety, all while aligning the curriculum, improving instruction closing the achievement gap, dealing with angry parents and concerned teachers and staff.

Yes, I do think being a principal is hard; it's damn hard. But I wouldn't trade it for anything else!

(At least that is what I tell myself.)

As a school leader, I focus on creating a "culture of caring" to solve problems. I try to do this with patience, compassion and understanding.

'A FIGHT TO CARE'

These days I am filtering stimulus from all directions. I have to take into account competing interests not only of the students I'm charged with but those of the staff, the community we serve and of course those of the district. It's a juggling act that seems simultaneously impossible and a joy.

“Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those who help people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped.”

Keeping all the plates spinning in the air gives me personal satisfaction and hopefully allows my school a certain measure of success.

Creating a culture of care in a school setting is something that I do without much thought.

Students and staff deserve to enter the school building and feel safe and valued. I want parents to trust that school is the place for their children to grow and thrive, regardless of their circumstances.

Spending a Saturday interviewing one of our families about their school experience, wiping the tears of a kindergartener who thinks she will go to jail because she slapped her classmate, and sitting after school with a child whose parent was not at the bus stop, is me caring. I give my whole heart because I would want the same for my children.

Sometimes, it is a fight to care. There are moments I feel helpless when I don't reach everyone. I do fall short, but I will never fail, because I will never give up! All I have to do is find a source to tap into so that I can remain the giant I imagine they need.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

Performing at the highest levels takes balance, focus and stamina. On some days my school seems like I'm managing an emergency room; one crisis after another with no end in sight. Students are in and out of the main office with tears, scraped knees and dinged elbows, not to mention any number of offenses to the rules of the classroom. Parents call or come in mad as hell, demanding to speak to the principal. Teachers complain about loss of planning time and substitute shortages. And already conversations are starting to surface about next year's staffing. There is

little wonder why administrators and teachers burn out — not to mention support staff.

This daily pressure can lead to burnout or compassion fatigue. This compassion fatigue is often the “cost of caring” for others who are in physical or emotional pain. These symptoms are collectively associated with medical professionals, first responders, educators and counselors. According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (CFAP), “Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those who help people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped. It can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.” Dr.

Charles R, Figley is one of the leading researchers on compassion fatigue and was one of the first to explore how secondary trauma affects the mental health of first responders and caregivers.

For educators, especially in troubled schools, compassion fatigue may be a factor in staff and teacher performance because of the seemingly impossible challenges they are confronted with daily. There isn’t any need to elaborate on the issues; we have all experienced them.

As principals, we attend professional development in an effort to understand and prepare us to deal with children who have experienced traumatic events and how they might

behave both socially and academically. There are systems in place to support the social and emotional health of these affected students. Unfortunately, there is not much discussion relating to child trauma and how adverse circumstances of students affect the health of teachers, support staff or administrators. There is little support for those of us on the front lines who deal with traumatized children on a daily basis.

MAKE TIME TO RECHARGE

I am not saying that attending to the “nuts and bolts” of running your school should take a backseat to caring. I am saying that the energy that we put into caring for our school community should be protected and nourished. Mistakes are made and opportunities are lost when we aren’t at our best. Compassion fatigue affects how we do this work.

There are days when I ask myself, “How can I face another crisis with a smile?” It’s hard to stay balanced. For me, I have to have a bucket full of love, hope and happiness. When times get rough, I like to visit a classroom, have lunch with a teacher, or supervise recess. When I really need a boost, I reach out to a trusted colleague or friend outside my building. These are always good ways to fill my bucket.

Summer is here. While this would be a good time to see your doctor, maybe a short vacation would do as much good. Even a staycation with a massage will do wonders. Take this time to recharge your batteries and become well again. Renew yourself. ■

Teleah Bell-Davis is the Assistant Principal at Sheridan Elementary in the Tacoma Public Schools. She is a military spouse, dedicated mother, and lifelong learner who values family, education, and service!

For more information about stress and compassion fatigue visit: www.stress.org

