

Lessons of COVID-19 underscore need for better teacher support, study says

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Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress are among the mental health issues that teachers reported experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new Tulane study.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced New Orleans public school teachers to switch from in-person instruction to a virtual or hybrid setting, the transition left many feeling anxious over their ability to impact student learning, according to a [multi-agency study](#) led by Tulane University.

The study by the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative also revealed that many teachers suffered from anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress — and continue to do so.

Titled [*COVID-19 Impacts on Educator Well-Being and Retention*](#), the study is based on a survey of 171 teachers from 24 Orleans Parish public schools. It includes such recommendations as expanding access to mental health care, improving sick leave and bereavement policies and offering hazard pay.

“Part of the motivation for us to get the survey out is the fear of mass teacher exodus in three to five years,” said Teddy McGlynn-Wright, a social worker and project director of the collaborative’s Training the Trainer program. “If we don’t do things to help teachers, they just won’t be there.”

The study was led by Tulane psychologists Stacy Overstreet and Courtney Baker along with McGlynn-Wright. It included experts from the Louisiana Public Health Institute, Children’s Bureau of New Orleans, Mercy Family Center’s Project Fleur de Lis, New Orleans Health Department, New Orleans Public Schools and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies.

“Educators, like other first responders, have been called upon to go above and beyond to do their jobs and support students during the pandemic,” the report states. “Findings from the survey indicate that the mental health toll associated with this additional work is substantial and should not be overlooked by policy makers and school leaders as they plan for greater support and improved retention of educators moving forward.”

In the survey, teachers reported being affected by multiple COVID-related stressors, the most challenging of which were the demands of hybrid instruction and student learning loss. Although the stressors touched virtually all educators, Black educators worried more about child-related responsibilities and loved ones with high-risk health conditions, while White teachers were more affected by inadequate technical support and reduced ability to have an impact on students.

The findings mirrored those of an earlier study at the beginning of the pandemic that showed that Black teachers were more affected by health-related stressors, while White teachers were more affected by their reduced ability to have an impact on students and families. In the current study, “Black teachers were more likely to experience stress over the possibility of bringing COVID back to their families while

White teachers were more stressed by feeling less effective in their teaching,” said Overstreet, a Tulane professor of psychology.

Other stressors that both Black and White teachers reported were insufficient pay relative to the health risk, inadequate remote instruction materials, less flexibility in their schedule and inadequate safety plans at school.

The majority of educators reported feeling equipped to cope with stress and adapt to change often or nearly all of the time. “Black and White educators reported similar levels of personal resilience supported by connecting with family and friends, self-care habits and routines, faith and faith-based supports, work-life balance, counseling and specific personal attributes,” Overstreet said.

However, the prolonged nature of the stress is beginning to take its toll. Educators reported rates of emotional distress similar to those observed in a national sample of health care workers, with 36% screening positive for anxiety, 35% for depression and 19% for post-traumatic stress syndrome.

“Educators, like health care workers, are bearing the brunt of this pandemic, and we must take action to support them,” Overstreet said.

The report includes recommendations for charter network and school leaders on how they can support the well-being of their faculties so teachers in turn could devote themselves to student learning and well-being. The recommendations include:

- Applying state and federal funds for pandemic recovery to compensate teachers for frontline work during the pandemic and to incentivize retention.
- Improving mental health care benefits by lowering deductibles and partnering with mental health agencies to offer services specific to educators.
- Expanding sick leave and bereavement leave policies.
- Being mindful of the rapidly changing needs for technology and instructional supports for virtual and hybrid teaching.
- Employing creative solutions to support unique staff needs in the face of changing demands, including providing daycare for staff with children and creating policies that explicitly accommodate needs for flexible work schedules and leave policies.

“We put a lot of weight on teachers’ shoulders,” Overstreet said. “They are often called to the front lines to help with the emotional and social needs of their

students.”

She said that while some schools successfully responded to teachers’ concerns, many did not provide enough academic and mental health support. “Teachers really needed flexibility during this time, and the more schools were able to provide this, the more they were able to support the resilience of their teachers.”

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Stacy Overstreet, professor of psychology at Tulane University