

# Letter from a teacher: A plea for school-university partners to rethink educator burnout and attrition through an ethic of care

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Guided by several of the 9 essentials of what it means to be a PDS (NAPDS, 2021), authors share a plea to rethink the teacher burnout-attrition-staffing crisis with a call toward a moral imperative of recentering an ethic of care. Many schools are operating under anti-care practices which directly undermine teacher wellness in part due to secondary traumatic stress, rising workload demands and intensive student needs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Reflecting a compilation of teacher voices, including participants from three research studies and the collective decades-worth experience of educator scholars, this paper presents a synthesis of educator burnout and the role of educator wellness within trauma-informed social emotional learning initiatives.

**Findings** – The practical model of educator resilience offers a potential solution to burnout and attrition by prioritizing care for teachers individually and collectively prior to addressing care for students.

**Originality/value** – The model articulates educator resilience as the motivational force of life within a school community focused on an ethic of care that drives the collective and individuals within the collective to be their best. This aligns with foundation principles of PDS schools and Goodlad and colleagues' decades-old call to foreground the moral dimensions of teaching in school reform (1990).

**Keywords** Ethic of care, Anti-care practices, Teacher resilience, Teacher motivation, Teacher stress, Job satisfaction

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

This manuscript reflects a compilation of teacher voices, including participants from three research studies (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Drew *et al.*, 2024a, b), and the collective decades-worth experience of educator scholars. We ask school-university partners to rethink the issue of educator burnout with a call toward a moral imperative of recentering care in our schools,



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prioritizing the humanity of educators. This call harkens back to [Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik \(1990\)](#) call to foreground the moral dimensions of teaching in school reform efforts.

PDS Partners:  
Bridging Research  
to Practice

Dear Principal,

The past few years have been incredibly challenging for everyone in education, especially teachers. I am required to adhere to new programs that seem to change just when we get comfortable with the old programs. I continuously try to build relationships with hard-to-reach parents and students, plan high-quality, culturally responsive lessons, deal with discipline issues, read and respond to seemingly never-ending emails, skip lunch, and attend hours of professional development. Students exhibit characteristics that are difficult to manage. They can be disrespectful, manipulative, work avoidant, and refuse to follow rules and procedures. They talk back to adults, use profanity, walk out of class, and disrupt the educational environment. Parents question teachers' ability and take their child's side when there is an incident. Most days, it seems like I do not get to teach the curriculum because I am too busy putting out fires. Finding a balance between work and life has been my greatest challenge. To manage my workload, I often stay late and still find myself bringing home student work to grade or lessons to plan. Teaching does not bring me the joy that I thought it would, and I find myself wondering if this is the right career path for me. I have decided to take some time away from the profession to reconsider teaching and will be taking a leave of absence next year. . .

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The issues teachers report as leading to burnout and attrition have remained consistent for decades ([Drew et al., 2024a](#)). We argue that the solution to the teacher burnout-attrition-staffing crisis needs to shift beyond band-aid approaches and instead empower educators to reform schools into moral centers of care for themselves and students. Caring is at the heart of effective teaching ([hooks, 2023](#); [Rogers & Webb, 1991](#)), yet currently, teachers are demoralized and without emotional reserves to do the important work of care.

Representing the collective voice of thousands of teachers, we assert that leaders need to re-center an *ethic of care* beginning with teachers ([Owens & Ennis, 2005](#)). Educational leaders may understand what an *ethic of care* looks like when focusing on the social and emotional needs of students but have less of an understanding of what standards of care look like for themselves and their teachers. Educational settings governed by an *ethic of care* prioritize relationships for mutual growth and empowerment to build interdependent communities ([hooks, 2023](#); [Owens & Ennis, 2005](#); [Rogers & Webb, 1991](#)). This imperative is guided by several of the 9 Essentials of What It Means to be a PDS ([NAPDS, 2021](#)). First, prioritizing schools as centers of care can be articulated in the collective mission of school-university partners (Essential 1). Second, centers of care can be the backdrop of professional learning initiatives – not replacing other initiatives, but in being the foundation from which other professional learning initiatives are offered (Essential 3). Third, collaborative and reflective practice can guide the work of establishing schools as centers of care (Essential 4 and 7). Fourth, school-university partners can share resources and establish routines for creating centers of care that recognize, enhance, celebrate and sustain the unique work of all partners (Essential 9).

### **Redefining the problem**

Through the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, many pervasive issues facing all schools were illuminated to a degree that cannot be ignored – yet, none more predominant than teacher burnout and subsequent attrition. Many schools have long operated by upholding what we are terming *anti-care* practices which have resulted in teacher *ill-being*, or a lack of teacher wellness in schools ([Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2021](#)). The rise in teacher ill-being is attributed in part to secondary traumatic stress, or stress created by teacher exposure to student trauma ([Lawson, Caringi, Gottfried, Bride, & Hydon, 2019](#)), as well as changes in the educational landscape, rising academic demands and student audience, as described in the

opening vignette. For decades, educators have cited workload, stress and finances as some of their largest emotional burdens (Stapleton, Garby, & Sabot, 2020). Pre-pandemic studies warned of the ill-being of educators resulting from *anti-care* practices long before the mental health crisis became a post-pandemic trend (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

Secondary traumatic stress has been further exacerbated (Lawson *et al.*, 2019; Luthar & Mendes, 2020), as educators experience the consequences of working with a changing youth population: students with mental instability, first-hand trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), that cover a range of potential exposure to trauma including environmental factors such as household abuse, neglect, poverty, or exposure to a family member suffering from mental illness (Brunzell *et al.*, 2021). The struggle to manage students' trauma and adverse behavior is perhaps the greatest *anti-care* trigger, as it greatly contributes to the vast unseen workload of teachers: emotional labor and the burden of caregiving (Luthar & Mendes, 2020; Wall, 2021).

#### *Educator burnout and attrition*

Extreme and chronic stress often leads to burnout, a psychological syndrome characterized by gradual exhaustion and loss of commitment that develops in response to workplace stress particularly within the helping professions (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Teaching is among the helping professions at the highest risk for burnout, as 46% of American educators report high stress daily (Luthar & Mendes, 2020). Turnover is one of many undesirable results of *anti-care* practices that lead to compassion fatigue, depersonalization and secondary traumatic stress (Brunzell *et al.*, 2021; Lawson *et al.*, 2019). In a recent report on teacher attrition, 54% of educators surveyed commented on being "somewhat" or "very likely" to leave the teaching profession within the next two years (Loewus, 2021).

Professional demands on educators are numerous: classroom management, lesson planning and delivery, grading, attending meetings and responding to parents. Teachers comply with students' individualized education and/or accommodation plans, modifying assignments, assessments and classroom environments to help each student succeed. The inability to keep up with daily teaching tasks, and trying to do so without solid mentorship, negatively impacts many new teachers' decision to remain in the profession (Bennett, Brown, Kirby-Smith, & Severson, 2013).

Student behavior is one of the largest strains on teacher energy (Chang, 2009). The rise in ACEs, and their effect on student behavior, is directly connected to educator burnout. Reports of student trauma and high ACE scores are at an all-time high (Wall, 2021) and educators are struggling to keep up with the burden of care for students without the necessary supports of care for themselves.

Many schools are adopting trauma-informed practices to support intense student needs without first supporting teachers. The full adoption of trauma-informed practice requires commitment from the entire faculty to change the very culture of the school community (Maynard, Farina, Dell, & Kelly, 2019). The emotional preparedness of educators and other school professionals must be carefully considered while undertaking such a large reform, as the current state of *anti-care* practices have resulted in an overloaded, fatigued workforce (Brunzell *et al.*, 2021).

#### *Effects of teacher ill-being on students*

Educator well-being affects every facet of the classroom, from student emotional well-being to academic learning and behavior. Emotional exhaustion influences educators' ability to prepare students to meet curriculum standards and perform well on standardized testing (Klusmann, Richter, & Lüdtke, 2016). Educators who feel emotionally encumbered may also

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experience feelings of boredom or a lack of inspiration to do their job well, which impacts instructional practices and decreases student motivation and joy due to the cyclical effect of shared emotions within a group (Frenzel, Becker-Kurz, Pekrun, Goetz, & Lüdtke, 2018; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

When educators experience secondary traumatic stress for prolonged periods of time, they encounter vicarious traumatization or shared trauma occurring repeatedly between educators and students. Vicarious traumatization impacts educators' cognitive schema by changing their behaviors and beliefs about the world (Lawson *et al.*, 2019). This can induce feelings of depression, despair and hopelessness that negatively affect teachers' mental wellness and job satisfaction. When educators are unwell, they may use maladaptive coping strategies (Stapleton *et al.*, 2020). These destructive habits include drugs, alcohol or gambling, which only serve to compound their emotional state. Without healthy coping mechanisms, teachers are emotionally depleted, prompting stress feedback that loops within the classroom and decreases student performance. Ultimately, without course correction, teachers will continue to rely upon maladaptive coping strategies, decreasing their life satisfaction and overall happiness (Stapleton *et al.*, 2020).

#### *The role of educator wellness in SEL programs*

The implementation of social emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools continues to gain favor as a way of addressing students' intensive social, emotional and behavioral needs. Evidence-based research has shown that students who practice the five SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making are more likely to show increased academic performance, better citizenship and fewer behavior issues (Schonert-Reichel, 2017). There is a large body of work derived from the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) that supports how SEL, when implemented with fidelity, can have a lasting impact on students in terms of their ability to form healthy relationships and improve overall mental health (CASEL, 2012). Although SEL programs are implemented to address student needs primarily, SEL strategies can also be implemented to address teacher well-being. SEL research reveals that educators might show a more significant commitment to teaching when the school community values the social and emotional well-being of the faculty (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011). Educators, especially those new to the profession, benefit from SEL competencies when supporting students and managing job-related stress. Recent work by Flushman, Guise, and Hegg (2021) revealed that "the SEL of teachers is vital to reducing stress and burnout, improving job satisfaction, and enhancing teachers' ability to support the SEL of their students" (p. 86). When teachers are more enthusiastic, student engagement and teacher enjoyment increase (Frenzel *et al.*, 2018). Teachers who report higher levels of enjoyment engage in more desirable teaching behaviors such as clarity and variety in instruction, acceptance of errors and teacher caring and support after failure (Frenzel *et al.*, 2018). Educators who have a better relationship with students report lower stress and greater job satisfaction (Ferguson, Lorraine, & Hall, 2012). Leaders can examine creative ways in which SEL supports for educators can be delivered and practiced, including structured time for faculty, departments and colleagues to connect during the school day. Additionally, SEL strategies should be included in quality induction and mentoring programs designed to support new educators.

#### **Educator wellness centered on caring for teacher needs**

SEL interventions for teachers must robustly address the complex issues leading to extreme burnout and attrition, or teachers may perceive the interventions as insufficient or ineffective – too little too late – as in the case of the opening vignette. Such interventions must begin with

an *ethic of care* centering teacher needs as a precursor to addressing student social, emotional and behavioral needs. Borrowing the lens of feminist scholars Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, schools may be better at exemplifying *anti-care* practices as forms of moral injury (Gilligan, 2014, p. 91) rather than *ethics of care* that prioritize nurturing and reciprocal relationships for the adults in the building. Care begins with a recognition that our call as humans within community is to nurture each other as a way of exchanging life and fostering mutual growth (Noddings, 1988). Further, esteemed feminist scholar bell hooks (2023) called for a *love ethic* that is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust to create a new vision for working interdependently. She called this a “mutual practice of partnership” (p. 131) which humanizes schools, opens minds and hearts, creates optimal conditions for learning and exemplifies community. These moral dimensions are the responsibilities of schools (Goodlad *et al.*, 1990), yet are often overlooked.

Caring relationships focused on reciprocal awareness of each other’s basic needs is the foundation for this *ethic of care* – leaders supporting teachers, teachers supporting each other, teachers taking care of themselves and all educators caring for students. Economist Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn (1992) identified nine stable human needs that can be extended into needs for being, having, doing and interacting: subsistence; protection/security; love/affection; understanding/empathy; participation/contribution; idleness/play; creativity; identity and sense of belonging; and freedom/autonomy. While what motivates a teacher to enter and stay in the profession is multifaceted, albeit rather consistent (Drew *et al.*, 2024a; Han & Yin, 2016), we argue these motivations are directly influenced by these fundamental human needs. Extrinsic factors, such as salary, working conditions, physical workspace, leadership, policy and rules, are related to needs for subsistence and security and are more important for preventing dissatisfaction (Nickerson, 2021). However, true motivators of job satisfaction align with deeper needs such as belonging, recognition, sense of competence, job status, responsibility, autonomy, opportunity for growth and advancement and meaningful work (Dweck, 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2022; Maslow, 1943). Meeting these needs within teacher work would create more optimal conditions and “match” between teachers and their work environment, which can help to stave off burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2022).

While many school professionals would agree with an *ethic of care* in theory, many are not enacting an *ethic of care* through practice – perhaps, because it does not align with the culture of schools or the regular activities of the school day. Therefore, a shift toward an *ethic of care* needs to be explicit and practical. One possible solution that has emerged in our research as a potential buffer to burnout and subsequent attrition is a concrete model that exemplifies an *ethic of care*: the model of educator resilience (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019, Drew *et al.*, 2024a). This model aligns with the goals of school-university partnerships and aims toward simultaneous renewal, shared inquiry, meaningful reflection and a continuum of deep professional learning (NAPDS, 2021).

### *Defining educator resilience*

In a post-pandemic environment, it is imperative to convey teacher-specific components of educator resilience and align resilience with hope (Roselle, Hands, & Brosnan, 2022). Our definition of resilience emerges as a post-pandemic, post-postmodern one that extends beyond the three waves of resilience theory (Richardson, 2002) – beyond phenomenological descriptions of resilient individuals (first wave resilience theory), beyond protective factors and the resiliency process (second wave resilience theory), beyond postmodern exploration of motivational forces within groups and individuals (third wave resilience theory) – toward the enactment of an *ethic of care* centering the individual and collective needs of educators so they have more capacity to support children. In this sense, resilience is the motivational force of life within a school community focused on an *ethic of care* that drives the collective and

individuals within the collective to be their best: to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom and harmony from an inner source of strength (adapted from Richardson, 2002).

As such, educator resilience is a malleable construct that can serve as an internal resource for mitigating negative effects of stress and maintaining emotional wellness through adversity (Leppin *et al.*, 2014). Educator resilience can lead to overall motivation and increased well-being, sense of belonging, passion and engagement in teachers' work (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). It is the mechanism behind teacher motivation because it provides a pathway for centering care of self and colleagues in order to better meet student needs.

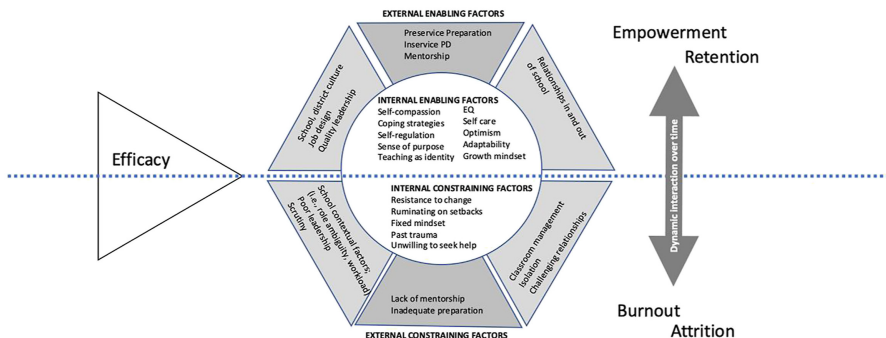
Resilience is often described as the capacity to bounce back, yet we argue that this definition is incomplete and inadequate in a teaching context. Instead, we have synthesized the following definition from an extensive literature review and our own research (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019).

Teacher resilience is better defined as the “capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching” (Gu & Day, 2013, p. 39) and to “maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency” (p. 26). Arguably, teachers who have left teaching have done so in part due to a lack of resilience. . . . Resilience develops through a dynamic and interactive process. (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019, p. 493)

Rather than merely bouncing back, the goals of teacher resilience are to center care for self and others as a means to overcome obstacles, navigate everyday adversities and reach beyond challenges toward thriving and agency (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). The number of years teaching does not positively influence resilience; instead, day-to-day job satisfaction is the strongest driver of resilience. In the international literature, teacher resilience has been shown to boost effectiveness, job satisfaction, motivation and teacher efficacy (Gu, 2014; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016).

*Model of educator resilience*

The model of educator resilience was developed from a thorough review of research and adapted based on focus groups and survey data (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019, Drew *et al.*, 2024a). Many educators recognize that teacher resilience is an important issue –yet it is often reduced to teacher self-care. While we agree that teacher self-care is an essential component, it will only get the profession so far when addressing the seismic challenges teachers are currently facing without necessary systemic supports. Fostering resilience is a delicate and complex balance of building up enough empowerment or affirming elements of a teacher's work life, termed enabling factors, to offset the negative ones, termed constraining factors as individuals and the collective seek meaning through their work. In the model (see Figure 1)



**Figure 1.**  
Model of educator  
resilience

Source(s): Reprinted with permission author (2019)

resilience is akin to a balance scale. If there are too many negative factors persisting over time without positive ones to offset them, the teacher's motivation, confidence and overall attitude may get stripped to such a degree that burnout and then attrition are more likely. Whereas, if a teacher has built up enough positive aspects, or enabling factors, in their professional life they will be more likely to persist despite challenges. The enabling factors reflect many deeper elements of care – care for self (i.e. self-care, self-compassion) as well as care for others (i.e. relational resilience, positive leadership). Oftentimes the constraining factors reflect *anti-care* practices – *anti-care* for self (i.e. self-neglect, ignoring past trauma and triggers) and *anti-care* in school-based relationships (i.e. unsupportive leadership, unfair scrutiny from families or community, lack of mentorship, extreme student behavior without support).

Internal and external factors are given equal weight in the model because both environmental and personal factors shape professional behavior and career decisions reciprocally (Bandura, 1983; Scott *et al.*, 2022). The model emphasizes the role of the collective in educator burnout to the same degree, if not more so, than the individual (as in Kruse & Edge, 2023). Burnout is contagious and is a symptom that heralds organizational ill-being more so than individual ill-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Yet, intrinsic elements of teacher motivation (i.e. recognition, responsibility, opportunity for growth and advancement and meaningful work) tend to be more determinant of teachers' retention decisions and job satisfaction compared to external elements such as salary, physical workspace, policies and rules (Maslow, 1943; Nickerson, 2021).

#### *The role of the leader in fostering educator resilience*

Leaders play an essential role in helping to design educator jobs for optimal motivation, by prioritizing an *ethic of care* that attends to teachers' core needs for acceptance, autonomy, competence, trust and connection (Dweck, 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Leaders can promote high levels of autonomy, accountability, skill variety and task significance which have been shown to lead to job satisfaction (Drew *et al.*, 2024b). The model of teacher resilience illustrates the relationships among stress, job demands, burnout, retention decisions and empowerment. The goal is for leaders to bolster enabling factors, as we term *ethic of care practices*, which prioritize care and include social, emotional, psychological and behavioral competencies, to help teachers manage their energy productively and offset the growing adversity they face daily (Gu & Day, 2013). The aim is not just to retain teachers and mitigate burnout, but for teachers to develop agency (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Drew *et al.*, 2024a). In the literature, the opposing construct to burnout is seen as engagement (Maslach, 2017), however, in an educator-specific context, we see it as empowerment, or the highest degree of motivation (see Figure 1). Educator empowerment is the backdrop of effective university-school partnerships (Lefever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007).

#### **Ethic of care: components of educator resilience**

Resilience is much more than merely bouncing back. As one of our focus group participants stated, "As the English teacher I want to look it [resilience] up in the dictionary. (laughter) But, um, is it just the opposite of burning out? Is it just coming back every year?" We argue that resilience is both the process and outcome toward an *ethic of care* that becomes the motivational force of life (Richardson, 2002) within a school community. Certain components of resilience must be actively practiced. We have organized these practices into care for self, care for each other and care for students and describe the corresponding opportunities and supportive interventions below.

Following interviews, focus groups and survey studies with hundreds of collective participants (see Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Drew *et al.*, 2024a, b), we developed modules that

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school-university partners can use to guide educators in implementing the following approaches (Drew *et al.*, 2020; available upon request). We recommend that partnership leaders engage in implementing the work through roundtable facilitation (or care circles) using these modules as a guide, or other SEL curriculum for teachers.

### *Care for self*

Nurturing, authentic self-care is taking conscious actions to improve one's health and well-being – addressing the fundamental need for subsistence (Max-Neef *et al.*, 1992). It is common for educators to dismiss self-care as self-indulgent, yet leaders can invite teachers to prioritize small acts of self-care every day. Teachers spend a considerable amount of their day focused on the needs of others, and self-care can help restore balance. Basic wellness is foundational to self-care, including eating well, getting regular sleep and exercising. There are also several research-based stress management strategies to include in a self-care plan: aerobic exercise, yoga, cognitive-behavioral methods, mindfulness training and relaxation training. Self-care needs to be prioritized and scheduled on the calendar because it is often the first to go. Self-care helps teachers mitigate the intense stress they experience each day. Since teachers who are stressed can be less effective in the classroom (Klusmann *et al.*, 2016), leaders can be helpful in encouraging teachers to develop and maintain regular self-care routines.

In one study (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019), teachers in focus groups explained that self-care is all about managing energy – and setting clear boundaries with the time you put into work – because there is never enough time to get it all done. One teacher stated:

For me, especially being a new dad, it's time management. Like the amount of time I put in, and when I put it in, and when I cut it off. . . trying to find that balance because I think time is the most valuable thing you have. And, where you expend that energy and how you use it is big. I know for me once I leave here when school is out, I don't read emails, I don't do grading. I'm done until I come in the morning again. I've found that that's been very helpful for me, but I think that's probably a crucial part of that resilience.

Emotional regulation is another way to care for self. It is a skill that emerges from emotional intelligence and is often neglected in teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development, despite its potential as a key driver of teacher resilience (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to reason with and about emotions to achieve life goals and includes the skills of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing and regulating emotions (Torrente, Rivers, & Brackett, 2016). Recognizing and effectively communicating one's emotions and understanding the need at the center of that emotion is at the heart of any healthy relationship with oneself or others.

Self-compassion is an avenue for caring for self that helps individuals recognize and meet their own needs for subsistence, security, love and understanding. Self-compassion training can also be helpful for teaching educators how to cope with the daily pressures of teaching (Chen, 2022). It is not enough for teachers to use regular self-care strategies outside of the classroom (which is when most self-care is done), they must also give themselves permission to be self-compassionate in the moments of stress during the school day (Neff, 2013).

Leaders can also support teachers in developing self-regulation skills through learning, practicing and internalizing explicit strategies. A strong self-regulated foundation is critical for teachers to model and explicitly teach self-regulation for their students who are often dysregulated themselves. In the modules (Drew *et al.*, 2020), educators learn three self-regulation skills to practice that include reflection, goal setting and self-monitoring. Self-regulation is at the center of focusing on effective actions for setting and achieving goals in alignment to one's core values and needs.

In focus groups (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019), teachers shared that care for self focuses on having the autonomy to manage stress, which Maslach and Leiter's (2022) research has



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shown decreases instances of burnout due to workload demands. One teacher described that unpredictable stress from external pressures is harder to manage.

Just having students is different than the [additional teacher] stress of administration, data collection. . . Getting through that stress is sometimes throwing yourself into what you do as an educator as opposed to thinking about all the BS that comes with it. . . I think that stress is different when you are in the classroom because you have more control over it. It's yours. You're creating that environment. If the kids aren't engaged in what I'm saying it's like alright: what can I do differently to fix this? Where if they give me something and say this is what we need to do, I don't really have control over that. . . . [Overall, teaching is] a profession that allows us more autonomy.

In our research, we found that care for self could be amplified within a supportive community (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Drew *et al.*, 2024b), which we describe further below.

#### *Care for each other: relational resilience*

Relational resilience is how resilience is fostered and actualized within community (Gu, 2014). Social interaction is essential for teachers to build connection, mutuality, empowerment and development of courage to become agents of change (Gu, 2014). Isolation is illustrated as a constraining factor in the model of educator resilience and can be counterbalanced by relational resilience. In our focus groups, many participants expressed that the opportunity to discuss resilience strategies among their community of colleagues was in itself stress-relieving (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). Relational resilience helps foster teacher needs of mutual respect and affection, understanding and belonging. Crafting moments of care for self-centering reflection, pause and judgment-free reevaluation are critical for individual and collective professional growth. The need for collective professional growth and nurturing emerges from the human need for meaning and contribution. One focus group participant (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019) shared that a core component of her resilience is her community of departmental colleagues:

It's a culture. . . as English teachers we are given permission to talk about feelings and all because that's the stuff we talk about in books and so we are able to build that sense of community in our classrooms because we know we are asking kids to write about things that are really hard and difficult sometimes, and so we want them to trust, so we build that rapport. That not only strengthens our classroom—we bring that into the department and that actually strengthens us as a group.

These are also essential aspects of how effective school-university partnerships build mutually-supportive and authentic relationships within communities of inquiry and reflection (NAPDS, 2021).

Souers and Hall (2016) discuss how leaders can support educators by providing an emotionally safe environment that respects the vulnerability required for teachers to come forward and ask for the support they need. Coined as a form of psychological safety, learning cultures that allow people to question and challenge the status quo without the fear of being punished are in the best place to grow (Grant, 2021) toward practices aligned with an *ethic of care*. While teaching educators how to better care for themselves can help to balance stress and burnout, educators can only be as resilient as the community allows. Establishing care circles by implementing our modules or other interventions designed to support teacher social emotional wellness allow leaders within school-university partnerships to prioritize relational resilience and an *ethic of care*.

#### *Care for students*

A sense of purpose is what drives many educators to enter the profession and is often at the heart of a teacher's identity. In our focus groups with teachers, they often shared that a deep

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sense of purpose to make a difference in the lives of children has helped them to persevere despite challenges (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). One participant explained:

It's the idea that you got into this profession for a reason. It's not always how you start (like we were talking about your first few years [are] tough). It's how you continue. It's how you finish. It's that ability to say . . . you are happy to be there because you genuinely can see the good reason why you're there.

This sense of purpose stabilizes teachers in the midst of struggles and is a strong enabling factor of resilience (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). Leaders can help teachers connect back to their sense of purpose – which is most often driven by care for the children and a moral imperative. One teacher explained the vision that drives her resilience:

For me, it's the idea that people are always watching you. Like what decisions you make matter. . . I know that everybody always says, don't get into teaching. It's all going downhill. . . If that's what you think this job is, you are missing the real story . . . every time I want to give up and be the guy that delivers mail—it's the idea that what I do really matters [that keeps me here]. It matters to the kids in front of me every day, but it also matters to the kid next to me that I'm trying to raise, too.

When we work with teachers, we take them through several exercises to reignite their sense of purpose such as expectancy-value explorations, consideration of guiding principles that foster a state of flow and ultimate engagement in daily tasks, writing a teaching vision and mission statement, setting mastery goals and examining locus of control (Drew *et al.*, 2020). Collectively, this then helps teachers center students' social and emotional needs as the foundation of their work. From there, a multitiered system of supports can be employed to deliver SEL supports directly toward the care of students.

### Starting the journey

We propose that *ethic of care* practices could make all the difference in retaining and empowering our nation's teachers. Educators must collectively and actively resist the demoralizing *anti-care* practices that persist in our schools, depriving students of a joyful classroom. School leaders must consider educator wellness in school climate and culture reforms. Through modules such as the ones described in the paper (Drew *et al.*, 2020), or other research-based interventions, leaders can connect individual practice to the overall mission of the community, normalize mental health and create cultures of inclusion, belonging and support centering the needs of teachers.

Some actionable steps that school-university partnership leaders can take as a starting point to create centers of care include:

- (1) Adapt your school university partnership mission statement to include an emphasis on an ethic of care including commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust (hooks, 2023; NAPDS, 2021 Essential 1)
- (2) Conduct shared inquiry through focus groups with educators to explore their current needs related to wellness and resilience using the care for self, care for others and care for students framework (NAPDS, 2021 Essential 3 and 4)
- (3) Facilitate a shared book club with the text *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators* by Aguilar (2018) (NAPDS, 2021 Essential 3 and 4)
- (4) Identify a facilitator for resilience circles (note: even if you identify a facilitator, it is very important that you actively participate in the process) (NAPDS, 2021 Essential 3 and 4)

- (5) Unpack the components of student SEL curricula and restorative practices initiatives to develop a list of adult competencies to target during resilience circles; locate free resources such as self-compassion resources from Kristin Neff (<https://self-compassion.org/>) or downloadable *Onward* companion tools (<https://www.onwardthebook.com/downloadable-tools/>) (NAPDS, 2021 Essential 3, 4 and 9)
- (6) Collaborate to create a university class on educator wellness and resilience (NAPDS, 2021 Essential 3, 4 and 9)
- (7) Ensure this content and the competencies are part of new educator mentoring (and use to also support the mentors)

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the ignorance of policymakers and the media to focus exclusively on high-stakes testing, academic accountability and teacher ratings during a mental wellness crisis following the global pandemic. Reframing the school environment toward an *ethic of care* may lessen some of the hardships on teachers. Even in the most difficult of school environments, the effects of strong school leadership on school culture, teacher turnover and school success are paramount (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Loewus, 2021).

Simultaneously, teacher preparation programs must also address this crisis by including content on SEL, positive psychology strategies and authentic self-care approaches. When we implemented the resilience modules (Drew *et al.*, 2020) during pre-service programs, teacher candidates recognized their value and appreciated building a foundation that would help support them through the future ups and downs of the profession.

Starting in preservice education and continuing along the continuum of teacher development across the career, leaders must see it as their primary job to prioritize an *ethic of care* for their teachers. This is an approach that fosters the human potential within each educator rather than a system that attracts but then spits out its best teachers. Robust school-university partnerships are poised to do this work since it aligns deeply with the essentials of what it means to be a PDS (NAPDS, 2021). With the introductory letter in mind, we must take care of our teachers so that they feel supported when they face the inevitable challenges of the profession. The opportunity to shift this narrative falls on the shoulders of school-university leaders to do something different to retain high quality teachers. The next generation depends on it.

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