



D2L

The Superintendent's Guide to Teacher Burnout

With frontline stories from K-12 leaders navigating the crisis.

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Schools Are Getting Smaller: The Inequitable Toll of Teacher Burnout

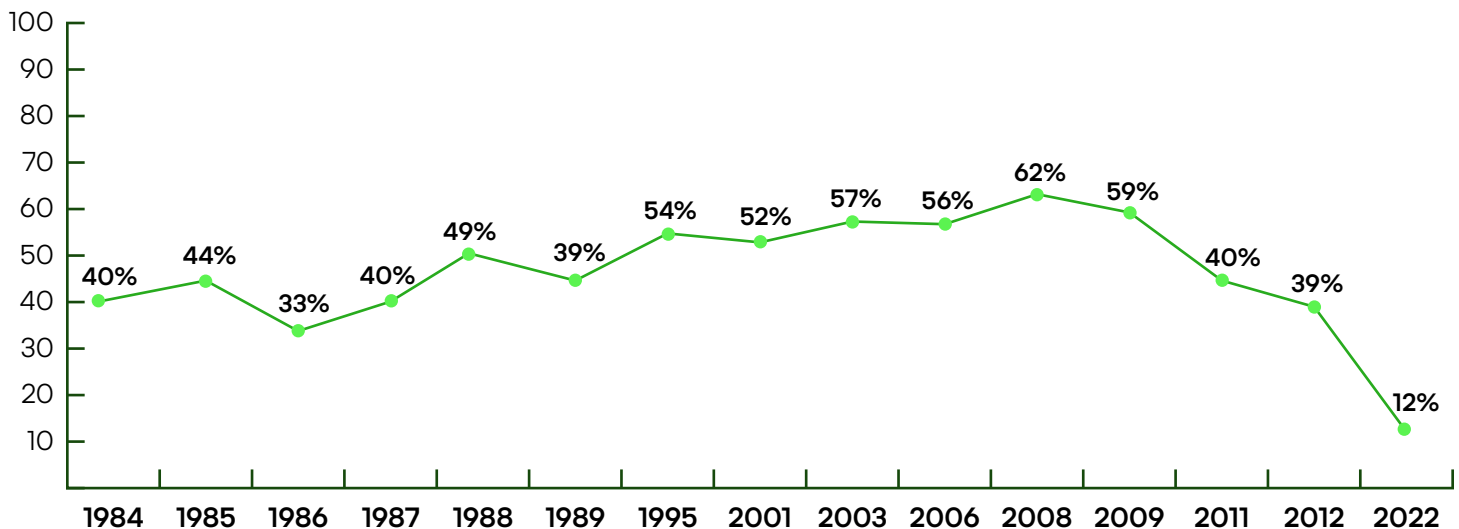
As educators continue to quit the profession in record numbers, we must look for fresh ideas to manage the fallout.

Teacher burnout is the most pressing issue facing K-12 education today, precipitating educator shortages, enrollment losses and declining student performance.

As the data shows, the percentage of K-12 teachers who say they are “very satisfied” with their jobs is plummeting, from a high of 62% in 2008 to 12% in 2022.



Percentage of K-12 Teachers Who Say They Are ‘Very Satisfied’ With Their Jobs



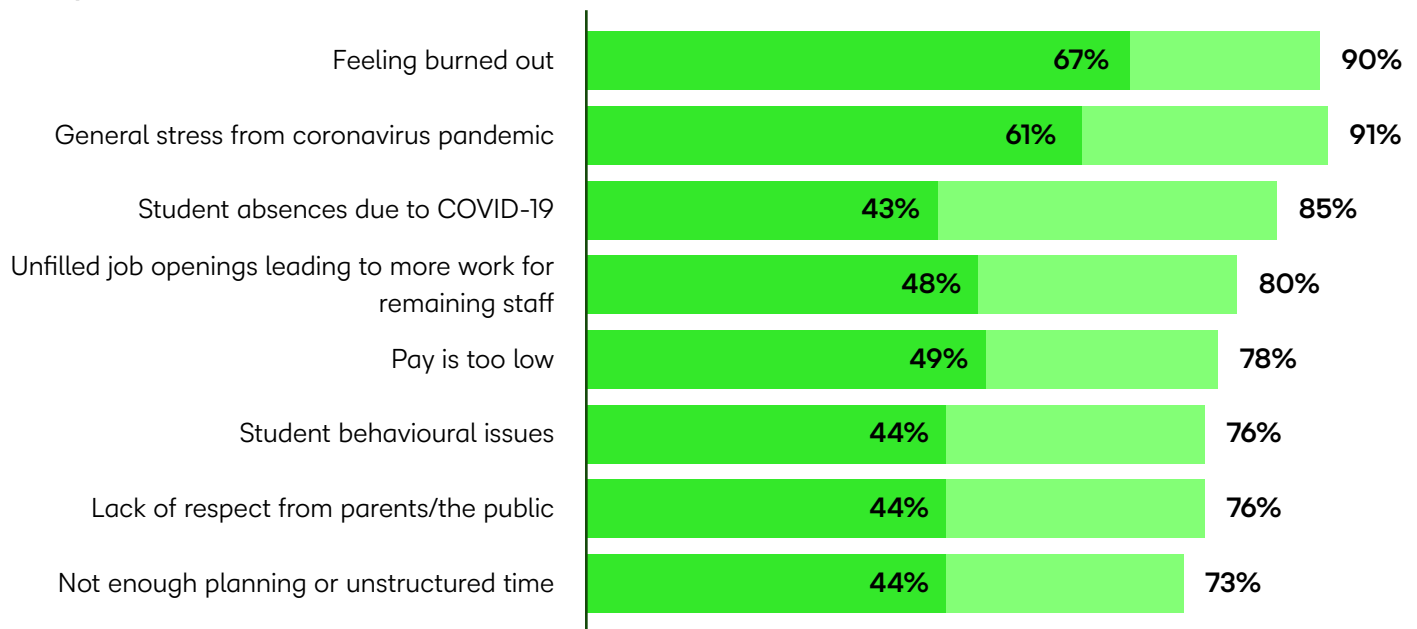
Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2022 Results, conducted by the EdWeek Research Center

Survey data from the [National Education Association \(NEA\)](#), the U.S.'s largest union, representing nearly 3 million educators, confirms this troubling picture, showing 90% of educators consider burnout a “serious problem” as they continue to quit the profession in record numbers.

Issues Facing Educators

Below is a list of issues or problems some school employees have experienced during the coronavirus pandemic. For each one, please indicate how serious of a problem this is for you.

● **Very Serious** ● **Total Serious**



[National Education Association Member COVID-19 Survey Summary](#)

The knock-on effects of the teacher burnout crisis have disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations. Lower-performing students experienced greater test score decreases than did high-achieving students—exacerbating existing achievement gaps; and in the NEA survey, Black and Hispanic educators said they are more likely than their white counterparts to retire or leave the field early.

With student absenteeism skyrocketing and the teacher shortage still growing, the number of people who attend school is declining. The stall in development for both teachers and students is enough to make anyone question the purpose of schools.

To better understand the weight of teacher burnout on schools, we talked to three education experts about the challenges that have arisen and the ways in which they have worked to overcome them. Read on for a series of profiles that shine a light on the district leader’s experience, offering insights into how you can manage educators who are struggling.



Why are educators leaving the profession?

Teachers go into education expecting:

- **Purpose** (motivated to make the world a better place).
- **Impact** (seeing a positive difference in their students’ lives and the positive effect on their community).
- **Joy** (from working with children day to day and long-term fulfillment from witnessing the impact of their work).

But what they get is:

- **Administration**—teachers only spend 50% of their time actually teaching.
- **Culture wars**—teachers are expected to engage in local and national political debates.
- **Outsized expectations**—there is pressure for teachers to improve student learning outcomes beyond what is possible.
- **Responsibility for student wellness**—teachers are expected to care for their students when they don’t get enough time to meet their own mental and physical needs.
- **Focus on testing**—emphasis on “teaching to the test” can reduce the quality and enrichment of lessons.
- **Fatigue**—this results from a call to complete an increased list of adjunct duties and covering for staff shortages.

The wide-ranging burdens on teachers are deterring people from entering the teaching profession and driving many others out.



CHAPTER ONE

Find, Communicate and Deliver Value

How Dr. Scott J. Hunt, Executive Director of Field Relations at the Ohio Department of Education, harnessed data to inspire and motivate his teachers.



DR. SCOTT J. HUNT
Executive Director of
Field Relations

Ohio Department of Education
Perry, Ohio

Dr. Scott J. Hunt has over 30 years of experience in education. After starting out as a fifth grade teacher, he subsequently became principal and then superintendent of Cardinal Local Schools in Middlefield, Ohio, before joining the Ohio Department of Education as executive director of field relations.

Having witnessed the challenge of teacher burnout develop alongside the evolution of the U.S. public school system, Hunt takes the long view. He notes teacher burnout was not specific to the pandemic but rather is a decades-old phenomenon that school districts have been falling short on addressing since he became a teacher in 1989. Hunt argues burnout seems to be inextricably intertwined with education, remarking he used to take his job home with him from the earliest days of his career.

Over the course of his career, Hunt found the most successful way to mitigate teacher burnout was to find the most efficient way to “do good.” Hunt believes education can change the arc of every child’s life for the better, which is what motivates him as a leader. He tells us in his own words how he harnessed data to inspire his teachers and what he thinks leadership means when it comes to managing educators.

THOUGHTS ON LEADING THROUGH THE TEACHER BURNOUT CRISIS

I will say this upfront, because there's a lot of talk about how you've got to have a work-life balance: If you're looking to me to be that role model, look somewhere else because that's not me. Even when I took on a school administrator's role in my early 30s, education-related jobs were the ones you'd take home with you. Being a superintendent, you don't have time off—you're "on" 24/7.

I found the pandemic highlighted the challenges we've been talking about for years, including teacher burnout. If I'm honest, I think we're still falling short on a lot of the challenges K-12 is facing. And it's not just teachers who suffered. Many of my former colleagues who were superintendents are now no longer superintendents or even working in a school building. This all negatively impacts children's learning.

I think leading is about supporting teachers and making sure you get them what they need, which differs from district to district. You need a superintendent who has a combination of understanding how to lead an organization and knowing how to frame up district goals so everyone's rowing the boat in the same direction.

As you can imagine, it sounds simple, but it's work. And it's work you should feel compelled to do. We're in a people business. If you don't take care of your people, then you're probably not going to last very long. In my opinion, you stand for something, and you follow through on it because it's in the best interest of the kids.

RECONSIDER TEACHER WORKLOAD AND DUTIES

We know teachers are the number one factor in a student's achievement and progress. If you don't have good teachers and teaching, kids don't achieve. So, as a leader, you need to give teachers as much time as possible to teach.

Because of the way our school days were structured in Cardinal Local Schools, I was able to "early release" our students 28 Wednesdays out of the year, which meant teachers had time to meet, collaborate and get professional development on a Wednesday afternoon without having to leave the building.

Another initiative that was favored by my staff was the Ohio Improvement Process, which is a system in which teachers are convened into teams where they can collaborate and team teach. So, you'd typically have a group of three teachers who taught the same grade, and they'd discuss how they're going to support their classes, how they will assess student performance and so on. Being able to rely on one another—and even just share thoughts—helped lighten their workload and give them more time to spend actually teaching.





USE DATA TO INSPIRE AND MOTIVATE YOUR TEACHERS (AND YOURSELF)

When I was superintendent in Middlefield, Ohio, one of our elementary buildings was singled out by the federal government for having students who were underperforming in literacy. The system we originally had in place meant reading teachers in the district would go from classroom to classroom, pull students out of their class and work with them in the hopes that this would improve their reading skills. However, we did an audit on the whole district and found through research this wasn't working.

So, we took another approach. We decided not to pull children out of the classroom, and instead to put the reading teacher in the classroom—which you might know as “push-in support.” Rather than interrupt the child's learning, the reading teacher could support them and also form a relationship with the general education teacher. This is something that really motivated my staff and me, because we did the research and found a practical solution for what would do the most good. Doing that work took three years, but we turned things around. The next year, we were able to remove the government's designation of having a low-performing group of students in reading.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

HUNT'S TEACHER BURNOUT CHECKLIST:

- **Have a vision:** Being able to communicate a plan places purpose upon goal setting, which can unite and invigorate your team.
- **Be transparent:** Transparency fosters trust and open communication, strengthening relationships and creating an environment of collaboration.
- **Prioritize professional development:** Giving teachers the opportunity to attend professional development courses will increase their expertise and confidence, which will carry over into the classroom and positively impact students.
- **Encourage team teaching:** Working in teams encourages creativity, deepens collaborative spirit and builds community among teachers while alleviating their workload.
- **Restructure teacher time:** Making changes to educator duties and work processes is essential to preparing teachers to meet the needs of their students in a rapidly changing educational landscape.



CHAPTER TWO

How District Leaders Can Help Prevent Teacher Burnout

Mitigate educator burnout, boost engagement and strengthen organizational resiliency with strategies designed to help district leaders succeed.

IDENTIFY EDUCATOR BURNOUT WARNING SIGNS

Burnout is a state of chronic stress experienced by professionals that can manifest itself in several ways, including physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Look out for these key indicators so that you can intervene early.



Sick days

Burned out employees may be suffering physically and emotionally and consequently take more sick days.



Irritability

When the atmosphere feels tense because other members of staff are worried this person will erupt.



Cynicism

When the educator lacks faith in their own efficacy and criticizes any kind of change.



Decreased Productivity and Quality of Work

The staff member is performing at a lower rate than previously, perhaps missing deadlines.



Mistakes

Based on prior performance, the member of staff is making more mistakes due to a lack of concentration or engagement.

ACT EARLY AND RECOGNIZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISTRICTWIDE CHANGE

If your staff exhibit burnout symptoms, have one-to-one conversations with each impacted individual. Your employees might not even be aware they are experiencing burnout. And if they are aware they're suffering from burnout, they might feel a sense of embarrassment or shame about their low performance and needing help.



Show empathy

Give your staff your full attention when in meetings, be genuinely curious about their behavior and offer constructive feedback that meets them where they are.



Communicate effectively

Communicate often and with purpose. Don't sacrifice clarity in an attempt to show compassion, as having unclear expectations can exacerbate burnout.



Maintain and share your vision for success

Your leadership vision for your district provides your staff with inspiration and motivation to work hard and exceed expectations.



Offer professional development

Professional development courses give educators an opportunity to upskill and network while reviving their interest and joy in their careers.



Restructure staff duties

Alter your staff's job responsibilities in order to leverage their strengths and lighten their workload.



Consider your district's use of resources

Ensure all resources are being used efficiently in order to maximize the support they offer staff.

Note: All of the solutions presented above can be scaled and applied to school districts.

Engaging with educators suffering from burnout will give you invaluable insight into the issues they are struggling with and the solutions they believe could fix their capacity challenges. The information you gain during these one-on-one meetings can also help inform some macro-level improvements available to you as a district leader, such as restructuring staff duties.

A systems-change approach is sometimes more appropriate for problems such as teacher burnout, because it is complex and context-dependent. Systems-based solutions will also have a disproportionately larger impact on your district because they will affect whole groups of staff.



DISTRICT LEADERS ARE ALSO LEAVING EDUCATION

Teachers have understandably been the focus of the teacher burnout crisis, but turnover among superintendents in the 100 largest U.S. school districts is as high as it's been in the past seven years—and [**Education Resource Strategies**](#) argues more retirements and resignations are on the way.



CHAPTER THREE

Redefine Education to Attract and Retain Strong Talent

How Dr. Margareth Legaspi, Chief Education Strategy Officer at Verite Educational Services, uses creative strategic planning to combat teacher burnout.



DR. MARGARETH LEGASPI
**Chief Education
Strategy Officer**
Verite Educational Services
Washington, D.C.

Dr. Margareth Legaspi served as a special education teacher, researcher, and deputy and interim assistant superintendent of early learning in Washington, D.C., before taking on her current role as the chief education strategy officer at Verite Educational Services. She currently helps Verite's clients improve the efficiency and efficacy of early childhood programs and schools.

As part of her work providing technical assistance to local and state educational agencies, Legaspi understands the importance of creative strategic planning to combat long-term systemic issues such as teacher burnout. Her views on the crisis are informed not only by her personal experience within schools, but also through research and conversations with early childhood and school district leaders across the U.S. who have been on the front lines for years.

Here she shares her thoughts on how she is approaching teacher burnout from different angles to provide both short- and long-term solutions.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

One of the challenges that keeps coming up in our work is this: solving the educator shortage. I spoke with an educational leader recently who has hundreds of staff positions to fill. So, we've really had to think outside the box about how to fill vacancies in the short term and how to bring people into the talent pipeline through expanded and innovative workforce development.

One of our solutions is to facilitate virtual instruction. For example, a highly qualified virtual teacher from another country works full time with a classroom teacher, providing the needed support (e.g., help with lesson planning) as well as individualized virtual instruction for the students.

Additional creative solutions include assigning highly qualified virtual teachers to serve as mentors to pre-service teachers or to new teachers adjusting to their first year of teaching. I'm not suggesting these solutions work for every program and school district—just that there is a spectrum of innovative and adaptable options schools can consider.

WE MUST HELP TEACHERS SHIFT THE PARADIGM WHEN IT COMES TO TECHNOLOGY

When I ask teachers leaving the profession why they are quitting, I consistently hear that they don't have enough dedicated support to manage their expanding workload. When I was a special education teacher, I had a dedicated support professional who helped me provide individualized and personalized instruction to my students—so I understand their position. But with the current teacher shortage, hiring additional staff to assist every teacher may not be realistic.

We can support teachers in other creative ways. Currently, we're focusing on addressing the twin challenges of student learning loss and teacher burnout—which are closely interconnected—and how to leverage technology to support the work of the teacher.

Unfortunately, the rapid and often disruptive shifts that were implemented during the pandemic, where programs and schools switched from in-person to online learning, have been challenging for many teachers—which is completely understandable. If you're accustomed to teaching in a stable environment with predictable routines and then you have to make a wholesale change with little time to prepare or receive adequate training, you might find it disorienting and highly stressful.

But with the right tools, infrastructure, training and technical support that can allow teachers to deliver one-on-one personalized instruction to students, I can see a future in which teachers flourish and students thrive in the virtual or blended learning environment as well as in person.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

LEGASPI'S TEACHER BURNOUT CHECKLIST:

- **Grow the talent pipeline:** You'll be able to think more strategically about staff vacancies and hire the best possible candidates.
- **Make use of technology:** The effective use of technology supports educators with their teaching and administrative work.
- **Efficiently use resources:** The proper use of resources helps prevent staff from underperforming or feeling overburdened by work that doesn't seem related to their jobs.
- **Restructure teacher time:** Making changes to educator duties and work processes is essential to preparing teachers to meet the needs of their students in a rapidly changing educational landscape.



CHAPTER FOUR

How Systems and Processes Can Help Build Teacher Capacity

Three leadership skills can help change the game: having a vision, communicating that vision transparently and actively listening to staff concerns.

We interviewed superintendents and education experts across the U.S. to find out how they are leading their communities through the teacher burnout crisis, and many emphasized the importance of three leadership skills: having a vision, communicating that vision transparently and actively listening to staff concerns.

Notably, some district leaders said it was the combination of strong leadership and key system redesigns that helped increase staff retention in their districts. System redesigns can help implement wholesale change across your school district because they target issues on a macro level rather than on a case-by-case basis.

We spoke to Dr. Scott J. Hunt in Ohio, who reduced his teachers' workloads by reorganizing their schedules; we learned about how professional development opportunities helped improve staff morale from Brett Zuver in Michigan; and Dr. Margareth Legaspi in Washington, D.C., argued for leveraging technology to support teachers and keep school education relevant. What follows is a summary of their top tips.

REORGANIZE TEACHER ROLES TO GIVE THEM MORE TIME AND JOY AT WORK

Teachers have many duties that extend beyond the classroom—providing nonacademic support, managing extensive administrative tasks, and operating a curriculum and assessment system. Offering teachers opportunities to collaborate and team teach can help reduce their overwhelming workload while also allowing them to devote more energy to their strengths.

As a superintendent in Ohio before joining the Ohio Department of Education, Dr. Scott Hunt told us his teachers really enjoyed collaborating and team teaching: “Being able to rely on one another—and even just share thoughts—helped lighten their workload.”

Some teachers may be best at engaging students through direct instruction, others at sharing meaningful feedback, and some at teaching literacy or numeracy, while others excel at counseling or mentoring. By streamlining your educators’ duties so that every teacher does more of what they’re best at, you will maximize the effectiveness of the group while increasing individual job satisfaction.

CREATE AND OFFER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Teachers increasingly seek professional learning that is relevant, on demand and essentially embedded in their regular schedules, whether through team planning time or access to online modules. Personalizing professional learning to each teacher’s needs requires a shift in culture that invites teachers to shape and pursue their continuing education and balances districtwide compliance or initiative training with individual needs.

When Brett Zuver joined Grant Public Schools as a superintendent, he showed his teachers how much he valued and could support them “with initiatives and professional development opportunities, not by bringing cupcakes or inviting them to parties (though obviously they can be fun!).” Pastoral support is important, but Zuver found personalized professional development appealed more to his teachers.





SHIFT CERTAIN TASKS TO TOOLS OR PARTNERS

Teachers have increasingly less time and capacity relative to the variety of student needs and administrative requirements. Adjusting teacher tasks and tools can help them repurpose their limited time for their most value-added role of connecting with students to support their academic development and social and emotional maturity.

Technology can help automate many instructional and administrative workflows such as reminding, nudging or supporting students in their learning and task completion. Rather than teachers needing to manually identify incomplete assignments or pinpoint remediation needs or enrichment opportunities, preconfigured workflows in a learning management system can help notify and engage students so teachers can devote more time to focusing on directly building student trust, dialogue and understanding.

Dr. Margareth Legaspi worked in the state of Virginia's superintendent office and now makes strategic recommendations to state and federal governments for solving prevalent issues in education, such as learning loss and teacher burnout. She believes in leveraging technology in order to alleviate the workload of educators: "We live in a world of technology. We don't know what jobs will be available for children in the future because there will be so many technological advancements that those jobs don't even exist yet. We need to embrace technology and embed it in education so that it can support teachers, but it's going to require a shift in mindset—and that's going to take time."

PRO TIP

Don't forget about your needs as a leader. You need to maintain your own energy levels in order to lead your team through challenging times. Don't overstretch yourself by tackling more than one system redesign at a time. In our interview with superintendent Brett Zuver in Michigan, he mentions he didn't enact many initiatives in his district and focused more on what he's good at: listening to his staff in order to build trust and confidence.



CHAPTER FIVE

Communicate Openly to Rally Your Staff

How Brett Zuver, Superintendent at Grant Public Schools in Michigan, builds strong, cohesive teams and positive environments that enable everyone in his district to be at their best.



BRETT ZUVER
Superintendent
Grant Public Schools
Grant, Michigan

In July 2019, Brett Zuver joined Grant Public Schools in Grant, Michigan, as superintendent—just one semester before Michigan state public schools pivoted to online learning—with an aim to unite and reinvigorate his community.

Before he became a superintendent, Zuver worked as a basketball coach for 17 years, where he built his counseling skills and realized his passion for elevating the people around him. He talks to us about how he's built strong, cohesive teams and positive environments so that everyone in his district can be at their best.



HELP TEACHERS CONNECT WITH AND LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER

Trust, value and appreciation are three words we live by. Our teachers are experts, and I try to provide what is needed. That's how I view my role.

One thing we're doing some work on—which is part of our strategic plan this year—is being more deliberate about Classroom Learning Labs, where staff can learn from other staff in a more creative and dynamic way. For example, if a math teacher is wondering about how to encourage group work, they can go and observe a history teacher who's nailed it. Teachers therefore aren't needlessly confined to their subject or age group, which makes sense when you consider there are so many elements of teaching that transcend grade and subject.

Sometimes it can be a little lonely when you're the only adult in a classroom, so I'm glad this work can help connect teachers to remind them they're not by themselves and that we're here to help. I think it was my first day here, about three and a half years ago, I sent my cellphone number to everybody and said, "If you ever need anything, give me a call or shoot me a text," and a couple of them were like, "What are you doing, giving out your cellphone number?" But I figured we're all in this together and it was a way I could set an example of the kind of leadership I admire.

MY ADVICE? GET OUT OF THE OFFICE

I would recommend staying as connected with as many staff, students and families in your district as possible. Personally, I'd lose my mind if I sat in my office for eight hours every day and just stared at my computer. Yes, there's stuff to do. Yes, there are meetings. But my priority is our students and our staff, so that's why I get out and visit different classrooms—so that I can really get to know them.

When your staff get to know you, that's when they're more open with you. So, if I'm out and about, and something does arise, like something is going on in one of my teacher's lives or a student is having a challenging time at home, they are more likely to confide in me. And that makes my job of supporting them a lot easier—because they're being open and honest about the challenges they're facing.



I'M FEELING POSITIVE ABOUT THE FUTURE

We're fully staffed now, and we've got some experienced long-term substitute teachers on the roster, so my outlook for the coming years is positive. I'm not sure how to describe it, but this year just feels different—which is a good thing. Students seem happier and a little more relaxed, and parents are in a much better place. Our staff seem pretty good too, so I think to myself, "Okay, we can really do this."

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

ZUVER'S TEACHER BURNOUT CHECKLIST:

- **Empathize:** If you have the ability to connect with your staff and care about their well-being, you will be able to act with compassion—helping everyone get along, work effectively and thrive as a team.
- **Effectively communicate:** Good communication skills are essential if you want your staff to accurately understand your expectations and the information you want to share.
- **Listen:** Listening to your staff will build trust and understanding between you. Strong listening skills underpin good communication overall.
- **Prioritize professional development:** Giving teachers the opportunity to attend professional development courses will increase their expertise and confidence, which will carry over into the classroom and positively impact students.
- **Encourage team teaching:** Working in teams encourages creativity, deepens collaborative spirit and builds community among teachers while alleviating their workload.



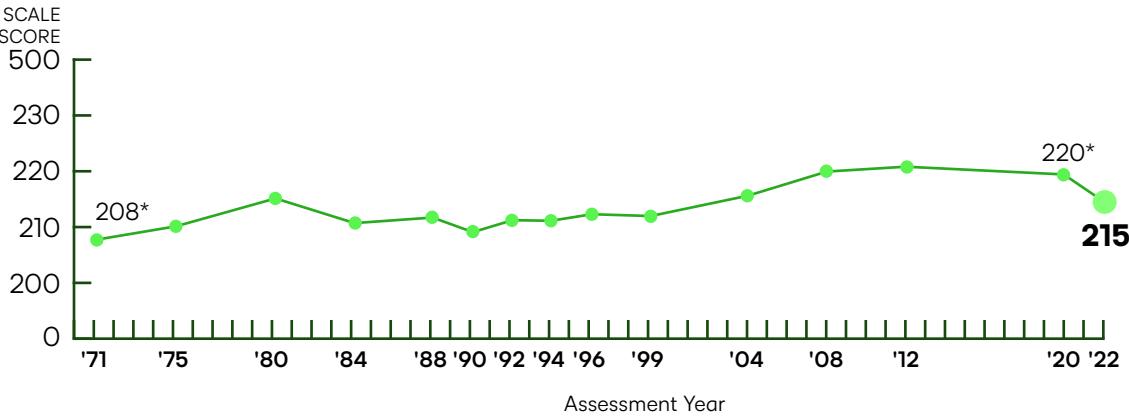
It’s Always Darkest Before the Dawn: Education’s Great Opportunity

As the teacher burnout crisis takes center stage, there’s never been a better time to make lasting change in education.

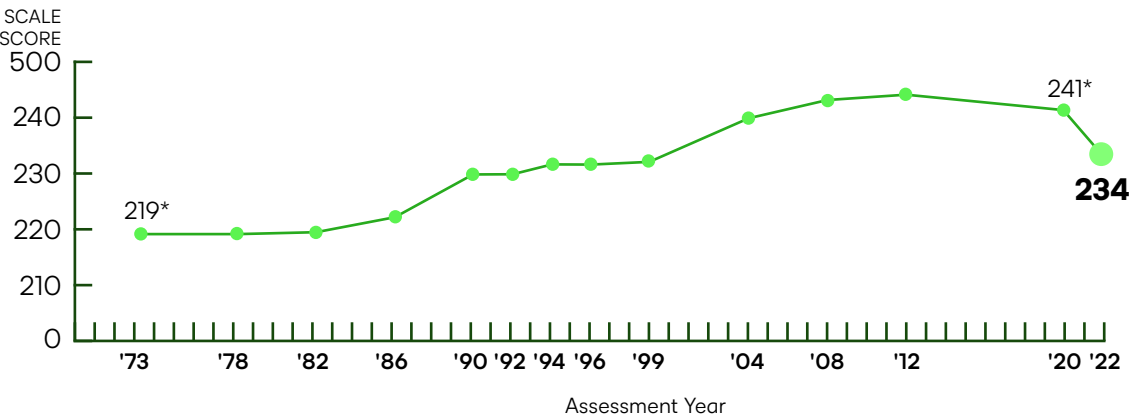
In 2022, the National Center for Education Statistics released data showing profound declines in math and reading scores among American students throughout the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Average

scores for students aged 9 in 2022 declined 5 points in reading and 7 points in mathematics compared to 2020—the largest average score decline in reading since 1990, and the first-ever score decline in mathematics.

Reading



Mathematics



NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics, The Nation's Report Card

While the outlook for public education is undeniably bleak, the teacher burnout crisis has forced the world to take more notice of what is happening inside educational institutions, with schools gaining worldwide press coverage and an unprecedented level of attention from their local communities. This gives district leaders a strong mandate to make the substantive changes needed to reduce the stress teachers feel and improve staff retention—which is vital to improving other aspects of the educational landscape, such as student learning loss.

If you want to make wholesale change as a district leader, now is the time to do it. The suggestions we've made for improving staff capacity outlined in chapter four ("How Systems and Processes Can Help Build Teacher Capacity," p. 13) focus on what lies within your control. If you can tackle one systemic change at a time and make sure to guide your staff through it, you could dramatically alleviate teachers' workloads and increase job satisfaction at a pivotal time in education history.






ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology products—D2L Brightspace and D2L Wave—enhance the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world.


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