EDUCATOR EXHAUSTION AND BURNOUT: BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE STAFF CARE CULTURE

Educator and caregiver exhaustion and chronic stress can significantly increase when pervasive societal stressors occur concurrently (e.g., a pandemic, economic challenges, systemic racism, school safety challenges). Because of the continuing nature of these stressors, schools must take action to promote resiliency and reduce burnout among teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and other caregivers. School leaders must actively strive to build a culture that encourages school personnel to prioritize personal well-being.

WHAT ARE CHRONIC STRESS AND SECONDARY STRESS?

- **Chronic stress** involves a constant sense of feeling pressured or overwhelmed over a long period of time; can cause people to be frequently on edge or to experience a decrease in productivity.
- **Secondary traumatic stress** can occur in caregivers who frequently support the needs of others in crisis or stressful situations.
- **Risk factors** include exposure to societal crises that have no discrete beginning and end (e.g., a pandemic, systemic racism, civil unrest). Minoritized populations are more likely to have experienced a high degree of trauma and may be at particular risk.
- **Warning signs** include changes to physical well-being (e.g., abrupt changes to appetite or sleep patterns), increased cognitive or emotional struggles (e.g., significant irritability, chronic fatigue), and interpersonal challenges (e.g., decreased trust, increased cynicism).
- **Longer term consequences** of unaddressed chronic stress may include the development of major illnesses such as heart disease, obesity, depression, and other ongoing mental health challenges.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO SYSTEMATICALLY?

- Create a 'shout out' wall of gratitude notes.
- Designate calm spaces in school buildings for adults to go when a 'brain break' is needed.
- Build in peer supports (e.g., teacher peer pairing, buddy classrooms, adequate substitute pools whenever possible).
- Provide professional development emphasizing educator/caregiver self-care (e.g., use of calming self-talk strategies and visualization).
- Provide opportunities outside the school to connect or learn (e.g., district-wide programs, support and time for staff membership participation in state or national associations).
- Provide regular time at staff meetings for open dialogue about common realities and creative solutions (e.g., How will we recognize chronic stress and fatigue in ourselves or colleagues and what can be done to assist? How will we address the 'glamorization of busyness' that is so common and reinforced in the workplace?).
- Recognize that individuals from minoritized backgrounds may carry much or all the burden for being the ones to speak up for their unique support needs, placing them at higher risk for burnout. To assist with that challenge, schools must proactively recognize the need for and value of, and provide space for, educator/caregiver affinity groups (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, persons of other diverse backgrounds).

For additional guidance, visit https://www.nasponline.org/care-for-caregivers

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