Building a Culture of Faculty and Staff Compassion Resilience

A trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school honors the need to prioritize the well-being of all staff. Compassion fatigue and burnout are increasingly prevalent when staff members work daily with students who are impacted by trauma and toxic stress. The reality of public school education is that it is both exhilarating and stressful, and staff do well if they are able to within that environment. Education is a realm full of organizational and professional changes, expectations, and uncertainties that are often continuous, fast-paced, sometimes contradictory, and usually in response to economic, social, and political demands. Over time, the effect of that demanding work takes its toll. Trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools have parallel processes of supporting students and supporting staff to build resilience.

Increase Awareness and Understanding of Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Compassion Resilience

These are not concepts widely discussed among faculty and staff, but they need to be. All individuals need to have strong compassion resilience skills to balance out the stress, toxic stress, and trauma they experience in their lives. It is helpful to plan to address the needs of staff while addressing the needs of students. Staff, like students, need:

» A physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe environment to work in.

» Healthy relationships with peers, administrators, mentors, and supervisors, as well as students and families.

» Instruction on how to implement new strategies to take care of themselves.

» Support from building and district leadership to implement these self-care strategies.

» Building and district processes and procedures to follow when in need of more support.

ACTION STEPS

» Increase awareness and understanding of compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion resilience

» Encourage wellness assessment and seek feedback from staff on resilient culture

» Implement individual and district-wide adaptations to promote resilience

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

» ProQOL

» Safe and Secure Environment Staff Survey

» Questions for Leaders about Workplace Psychological Health and Safety

» Developing a Self-Care Plan

» Building a Culture of Educator Compassion Resilience Professional Development Slide Deck
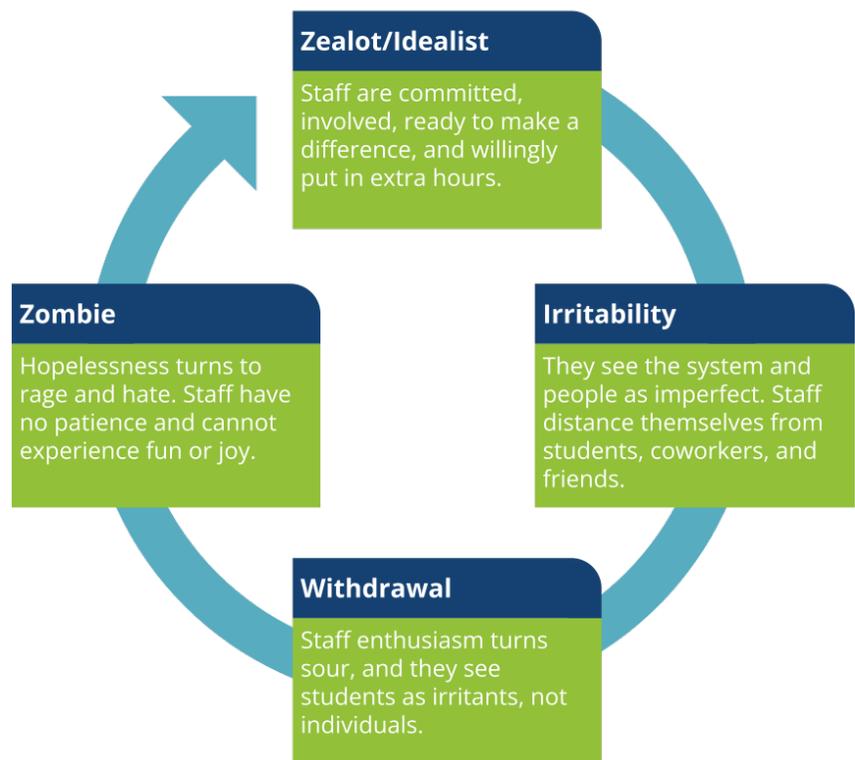
An intentional focus on building faculty and staff resilience is both an individual and organizational responsibility and opportunity. Educating staff on these concepts is an important first step toward addressing them and building a culture of resilience within your building and school.

It is common for faculty and staff to experience stress; this is a demanding job. It is important to understand when stress becomes toxic. Look out for the following symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue:

» Chronic fatigue, insomnia.

» Forgetfulness, impaired concentration.

» Physical symptoms, illness, loss of appetite.

» Mood changes, anxiety, anger, depression.

» Isolation, detachment, pessimism, apathy, hopelessness.

The development of compassion fatigue happens in a circular, logical path. Faculty and staff enter the field as Zealot/Idealist.[1] They are committed, involved, ready to make a difference, and willingly put in extra hours. Once educators start to see the system and the people in it are not perfect, they enter the stage of Irritability.[2] They start to distance themselves from students, coworkers, and friends. They may avoid student and parent contact and speak unfairly about their challenges. Sometimes, they feel anger, cynicism, sadness, and hopelessness.

Development of Compassion Fatigue

Zealot/Idealist
Staff are committed, involved, ready to make a difference, and willingly put in extra hours.

Irritability
They see the system and people as imperfect. Staff distance themselves from students, coworkers, and friends.

Withdrawal
Staff enthusiasm turns sour, and they see students as irritants, not individuals.

Zombie
Hopelessness turns to rage and hate. Staff have no patience and cannot experience fun or joy.

As the complexity of need and unrealistic expectations placed on educators grows, they enter the stage of Withdrawal.[3] Their enthusiasm turns sour, and they see students as irritants, not individuals. Colleagues make complaints about their work. They may have problems in their personal life, are tired all the time, and no longer wish to talk about work. This can lead to absenteeism. If these concerns are not addressed, the educator can enter the Zombie stage.[4] Here, hopelessness turns to rage and hate. They have no patience and cannot experience fun or joy. They have a sense that they cannot ever do enough, but no one else can do what they do.

Fortunately, it is possible to interrupt this cycle by building a culture of compassion resilience for educators. Compassion resilience is "the ability to maintain physical, emotional, and mental well-being while responding compassionately."[5] It can be fostered on the individual, building, and district levels and serves to respond to and prevent burnout and compassion fatigue among all staff. Efforts to support educators will have positive effects on students and families as well; supported teachers support students. Compassion resilience is comprised of four components: the heart (relationships and emotions), the spirit (core values, rest, play), strength (care for the body), and mind (school, work). Before you can address these four components in your environment, you must assess the needs of your staff and seek their feedback on your organizational culture.

Encourage Wellness Assessment and Seek Feedback from Staff on Resilient Culture

Staff Wellness Assessments

Once faculty and staff have a better understanding of these concerns, it is appropriate to encourage staff to assess their wellness related to work. There are several faculty and staff well-being assessments available, including the Professional Quality of Life Measure (ProQOL). This tool is widely used across all helping fields and is available in several languages. Panorama Education also offers a free well-being survey designed specifically for teachers. It is a lengthy survey, but portions of it can be pulled out for different assessment purposes.

Staff may be sensitive regarding their responses, not wanting to be negatively assessed or criticized for issues pertaining to their emotional, mental, and work-related well-being. Consider how you will encourage these assessments without perpetuating stigma. One strategy to prevent feelings of targeting or judgment is to ask all staff to complete the assessments and normalize the idea that anyone may be feeling toxic stress at work.

Additionally, consider what response and resources are available to staff whose results indicate compassion fatigue and burnout. Do not ask staff to publicly report their scores on these assessments. There is a self-score version of the ProQOL available, which allows staff to interpret their results without sharing widely. Provide guidance to staff about resources available, such as Educator Assistance Programs, community-based services, policies for using sick days for mental health, and services provided by their union.

Seek Feedback on Current Culture and Ideas for Improvements

In addition to understanding individual-level well-being, it is important for school buildings and districts to assess their culture for compassion resilience. Individual efforts to build resilience can be amplified or hindered by the culture of the building and district. And so, it is important to understand what is going well and what can be improved. Staff members are the best resource available for the

administration to understand the underlying culture at the building, and seeking their input is deeply aligned with the Principles of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools. Ask staff to complete the Safe and Secure Environment Staff Survey or other assessments, such as sections of Panorama Education's well-being survey mentioned earlier. Be sure responses are anonymous and free of retaliation for negative assessments. If not, staff may not feel as comfortable being truly honest about what is going on at the building.

Consider assembling a team of administration, faculty, and staff to review the aggregated responses and develop a plan to build on your strengths and address needs and gaps. As a team, discuss the Questions for Leaders about Workplace Psychological Health and Safety. This tool is designed to prompt further discussion about common barriers to well-being at your building or district.
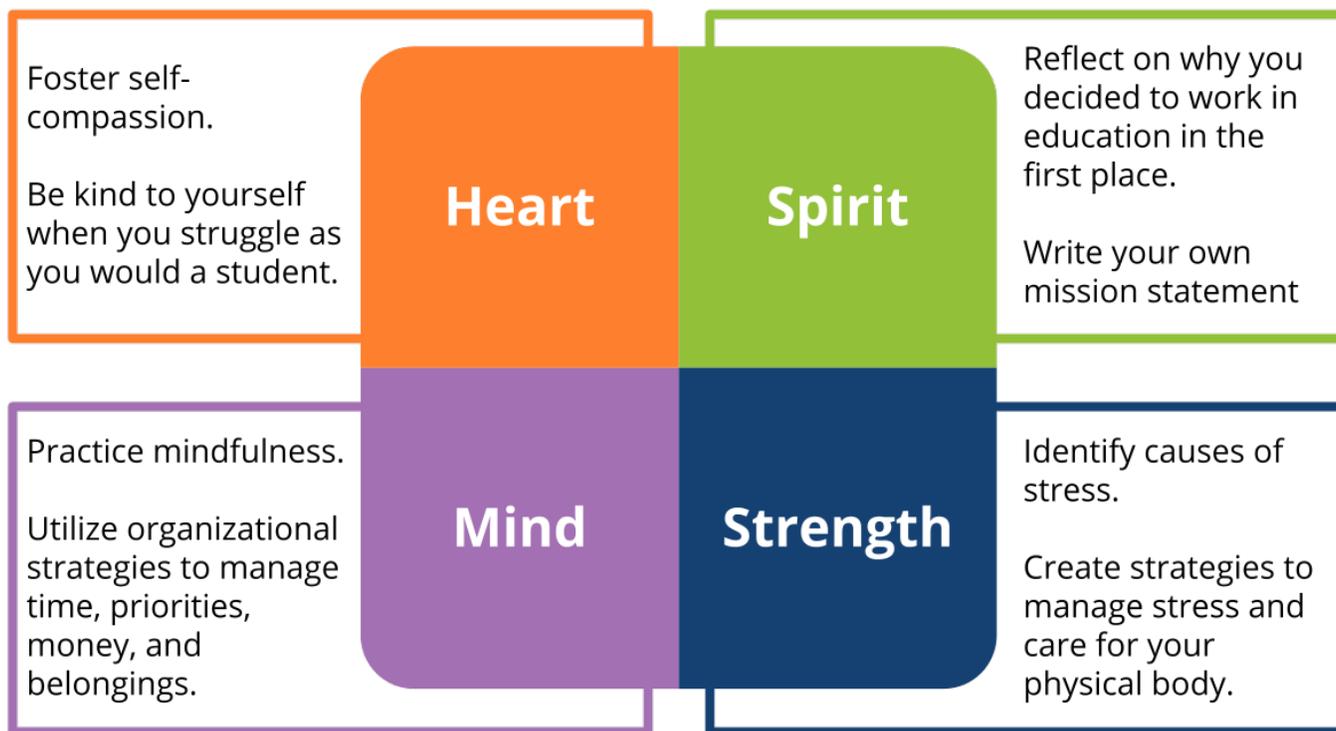
Implement Individual and District-Wide Adaptations to Promote Resilience

To effectively build a culture of compassion resilience, adaptations are needed on the individual, building, and district levels. Adaptations to one level only are insufficient to promote widespread and deep culture change. Efforts to foster one level should also support the others.

Individual Strategies to Promote Compassion Resilience

Faculty and staff can start to foster compassion resilience in themselves and among their peers by focusing on the four components: the heart (relationships and emotions), the spirit (core values, rest, play), strength (care for the body), and mind (school, work).[6]

Components of Compassion Resilience

Foster self-compassion. Be kind to yourself when you struggle as you would a student.	**Heart**	**Spirit**	Reflect on why you decided to work in education in the first place. Write your own mission statement
Practice mindfulness. Utilize organizational strategies to manage time, priorities, money, and belongings.	**Mind**	**Strength**	Identify causes of stress. Create strategies to manage stress and care for your physical body.

An additional, helpful strategy for individuals is to [develop a self-care plan](). This activity prompts faculty and staff to proactively take care of themselves when they are so accustomed to caring for others. This tool also includes a small card template for strategies to use in moments of crisis. Completed at a moment of calm, this can quickly be referred to when stress is at an all-time high to help manage in the moment.

Building- and District-Wide Adaptations to Foster Resilience

The building's and the district's roles are to encourage and facilitate individual efforts to build compassion resilience. Using the responses from surveys, seek to address the barriers to resilience in your building or district. As a team, create an action plan to take this on intentionally and continuously seek staff input on strategies and implementation. One strategy may be to weave relationship-building activities into existing professional development days. Another may be to celebrate weekly wins with each other via email. Reconsider your policies and benefits, and partner with the teachers' union to improve your response when a staff member is having well-being challenges, including burnout. Explore opportunities in your community to support staff wellness; for example, ask a gym in town to offer an educator discount on memberships. Finally, be sure to facilitate ample opportunities for staff to grow in their role, including utilizing mentorship, encouraging additional certifications and endorsements, and promoting teacher leadership.

✴ Inclusion and Engagement Action Steps

It is important to acknowledge that strategies to support individual resilience may differ based on culture, gender, and abilities. Create space for individuals to pursue the strategies that resonate the most for them and never assume you know what will work best for someone.

Ensure activities are inclusive of staff with differing religious practices, cultures, and holidays. Encourage staff to share their culture and celebrate together.

Nurture involvement in their communities, support networks, and individual spiritual practices to promote well-being.

Be wary of stigmatizing language, like "crazy," when discussing stress and burnout and set up recovery-friendly staff bonding events without alcohol.

REFERENCES

To return to your place in the toolkit, click the number of the endnote that you followed to this page.

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