

Teacher Voice on Supporting Student and Teacher Mental Health:

Recommendations from Teach Plus New Mexico

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the importance of mental health. In a recent Teach Plus report, [“Barriers to Bridges.”](#) the vast majority of teachers expressed concern about the mental health and well-being of their students as well as their school’s ability to provide adequate support¹. As educators across New Mexico and Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we recognize the depth of teachers’ concern about the mental health of their students as well as their own.

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) provides significant funding for states, districts, and schools to support students and teachers alike. As policymakers and education leaders determine how best to use these funds to address their schools’ needs, Teach Plus New Mexico wanted to hear directly from teachers across the state on which supports should be implemented to better support student and teacher mental health.

In May 2021, we administered a survey to 149 current classroom teachers from across New Mexico. Teachers who participated in the surveys teach across 42 traditional and public charter schools in the state, with 68 percent currently teaching at a Title I school.

Survey Findings Related to Student Mental Health:

1. More than half of the teachers report that their schools are prioritizing **student mental health** and feel comfortable discussing student mental health issues^{2,3}.
2. When asked how to structure budgets in support of student mental health, teachers identified the following as the top 3 priorities:
 - a. Counselor and social worker positions
 - b. Professional development and resources for families
 - c. Reorganized schedules to include additional breaks/support⁴

During the pandemic, student mental health has been a concern of educators across the state as students shifted from in-person learning to a virtual classroom and there was a pause on in-person extracurricular activities. A variety of training and resources became available to better support students and identify individual needs. Although more than half of New Mexico students have returned to in-person instruction and activities, teachers are still concerned about providing ongoing support for all students to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and address other mental health challenges.

“Social workers and counselors should be available for all students, not just students with IEPs.” —New Mexico teacher.

Survey Findings Related to Teacher Mental Health:

1. Fewer than half of the teachers believe that schools are prioritizing **teacher mental health**⁵.
2. The majority of educators do not feel comfortable discussing teacher mental health issues⁶.
3. When asked how to structure budgets in support of teacher mental health, teachers identified the following as the top 3 priorities:
 - a. Extended lunch/break time during the daily schedule
 - b. Annual memberships to various local classes (gym, dance, cooking)
 - c. Access to professional learning networks outside of the school/district⁷

Although classrooms across the state have done more to prioritize student mental health, teacher mental health has not received the same attention. Along with students, expectations for teachers dramatically shifted, oftentimes demanding more time and planning compared to a regular school year. In addition to the efforts to maintain an effective learning environment and increasing support for student mental health, teachers have had to deal with other issues related to the pandemic from a personal perspective. Teachers see a need for schools, districts, and the state to amplify teacher mental health and support.

“Moving forward we need to shine a spotlight on mental health, taking care of both educators and our students.” —New Mexico teacher.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Require districts to include specific goals in their 90-day-plans to monitor and support student and teacher mental health, such as plans to increase student access to counselors and social workers.**

Although schools and districts are likely making some efforts to support student and teacher mental health, it is not a priority across the state. Schools and districts should develop a plan related to both student and teacher mental health that will ensure actionable steps are being taken to improve mental health in a meaningful way, including discussions with stakeholders on these topics. For example, the addition of social worker and counselor positions should be indicated in this section of the plan.

“Teachers are already expected to do so much and more and more keeps getting added to our responsibilities, but nothing gets removed.” —New Mexico teacher.

2. **Adjust mandatory instructional time to build in time for mental health breaks during the school day.**

Teachers in our survey indicated that redesigning schedules to allow for more breaks would support the mental health of both students and teachers. Many districts partner with their local teacher unions to develop expectations around scheduling. The state should determine a minimal amount of time that should be spent on planning/preparation/break time to ensure all schools and districts have access to protected time for teachers and students. For example, such requirements could include a minimum of 45 minutes for a lunch break.

3. Strengthen communication, connections, and partnerships with parents and families to better serve students

Families are an important stakeholder in the education of their children. Teachers in our survey indicated that professional development and resources for families were a high need. In order to support the academic and emotional needs of their children, many parents will need access to information, strategies and support. The state and district should utilize various tools, like parent surveys, to analyze their efforts and develop plans for ongoing improvement. Empowering families will help develop a strong partnership between families and educators that will benefit students.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in New Mexico have expressed a concern related to the lack of support related to their mental health and have identified specific strategies that should be implemented to support both student and teacher mental health. As New Mexico schools develop plans to ensure that we meet the needs of students and provide them with a quality education, school and district leaders must evaluate all areas of support in the educational system. Attention to mental health should be a key component of the educational plans. The educational environment is no longer a place to only meet the academic needs of students, but a place to meet the academic AND mental health needs of all students.

ENDNOTES

¹ (August 20, 2020). *Barriers to Bridges: Teacher Perspectives on Accelerating Learning, Leadership, and Innovation in the Pandemic*. Retrieved from https://teachplus.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Documents/teach_plus_barriers_to_bridges.pdf

² Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: My school leaders prioritize supporting **student** mental health." Responses: (n=148) "Strongly Agree" (26.3 percent), "Somewhat Agree" (43.2 percent), "Somewhat Disagree" (17.6 percent), "Strongly Disagree" (11.5 percent), "Unsure" (1.4 percent)

³ Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel comfortable discussing **student** mental health issues in my school." Responses: (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (37.4 percent), "Somewhat Agree" (38.1 percent), "Somewhat Disagree" (15.7 percent), "Strongly Disagree" (7.5 percent), "Unsure" (1.4 percent)

⁴ Question: "Which of the following supports do you believe should be added to the district and/or school level budget plan to support student mental health?" Responses: "**Counselor and social worker positions**" (n=148) "High Need" (81.2 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (13.5 percent), "Not a Need" (4.7 percent), "Unsure" (0.7 percent). "**Schoolwide adult-led club/event/activity**" (n=146) "High Need" (43.2 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (42.5 percent), "Not a Need" (11.6 percent), "Unsure" (2.7 percent). "**Peer led program**" (n=145) "High Need" (33.8 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (42.1 percent), "Not a Need" (15.2 percent), "Unsure" (9.0 percent). "**Curriculum that can be used for mini-lessons in core classes**" (n=143) "High Need" (38.5 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (39.2 percent), "Not a Need" (16.8 percent), "Unsure" (5.6 percent). "**Professional development for school staff**" (n=146) "High Need" (51.4 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (34.9 percent), "Not a Need" (9.6 percent), "Unsure" (4.1 percent). "**Professional development and resources for families**" (n=146) "High Need" (68.5 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (28.1 percent) "Not a Need" (2.7 percent), "Unsure" (0.7 percent) "**Reorganized schedules to include additional breaks/support**" (n=147) "High Need" (64.6 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (22.5 percent) "Not a Need" (8.8 percent), "Unsure" (4.1 percent). "**Online programs/activities that can be accessed during class and personal time**" (n=145) "High Need" (35.9 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (39.3 percent), "Not a Need" (17.2 percent), "Unsure" (7.6 percent).

⁵ Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: My school leaders prioritize supporting **teacher** mental health." Responses: (n=147) "Strongly Agree" (11.6 percent), "Somewhat Agree" (34.7 percent), "Somewhat Disagree" (25.2 percent), "Strongly Disagree" (27.9 percent), "Unsure" (0.7 percent)

⁶ Question: "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel comfortable discussing **teacher** mental health issues in my school." Responses: (n=145) "Strongly Agree" (16.6 percent), "Somewhat Agree" (29.0 percent), "Somewhat Disagree" (24.8 percent), "Strongly Disagree" (29.0 percent), "Unsure" (0.7 percent)

⁷ Question: "Which of the following supports do you believe should be added to the district and/or school level budget plan to support teacher mental health?" Responses: "**Self care tips via training and resources**" (n=146) "High Need" (28.1 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (41.1 percent), "Not a Need" (24.0 percent), "Unsure" (6.9 percent). "**School wide club/event/activity**" (n=148) "High Need" (21.0 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (45.3 percent), "Not a Need" (20.3 percent), "Unsure" (13.5 percent). "**Access/information about community support organizations**" (n=143) "High Need" (31.5 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (41.3 percent), "Not a Need" (22.4 percent), "Unsure" (4.9 percent). "**Gift card to purchase a self care item**" (n=146) "High Need" (45.9 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (34.9 percent), "Not a Need" (8.2 percent), "Unsure" (11.0 percent). "**Annual memberships to various local classes (gym, dance, cooking)**" (n=148) "High Need" (64.9 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (26.4 percent), "Not a Need" (5.4 percent), "Unsure" (3.4 percent). "**Have access to professional learning networks outside of the school/district**" (n=143) "High Need" (49.7 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (35.7 percent), "Not a Need" (11.9 percent), "Unsure" (2.8 percent). "**Extended lunch/break time during the daily schedule**" (n=147) "High Need" (70.1 percent), "Somewhat a Need" (24.5 percent), "Not a Need" (2.0 percent), "Unsure" (3.4 percent).