

Building a Culture of Wellness to Retain Female Educators

ISSN: 3068-6695

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17835211

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Abstract

Teacher burnout remains a critical factor contributing to attrition, diminished well-being, and ongoing shortages in the education workforce. This study examines how fostering a culture of wellness influences burnout and supports teacher retention, with particular attention to female educators. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory and qualitative survey responses from South Carolina teachers, the research identifies key contributors to burnout, including excessive workload, inadequate support, and emotional strain. Findings indicate a clear relationship between burnout levels and intentions to leave the profession. Effective school-based interventions include duty-free time, mental health resources, supportive peer networks, and increased professional autonomy, while superficial morale boosters show limited impact. The study recommends systemic changes that prioritize holistic wellness, boundary-setting, and meaningful teacher involvement. Strengthening wellness initiatives may enhance educator satisfaction and promote long-term retention.

Keywords: teacher burnout, educator retention, teacher wellness culture, school culture

Introduction

Teacher burnout is a persistent challenge in education, contributing to alarming rates of attrition. According to Dreer (2023), the past decade has seen a significant increase in publications focused on teacher wellness. The high attrition rates and teacher shortages have researchers scrambling to find solutions to enhance job satisfaction, mitigate burnout, and boost teacher retention (Dreer, 2023). Burnout contributes to teacher wellness and can have serious consequences for educators, including diminished mental and physical health, reduced teaching efficacy, and strained relationships with students (Madigan et al., 2023). While many schools implement strategies to improve teacher retention, the effectiveness of wellness-focused interventions remains insufficiently examined and implemented.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2025) defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. For teachers, burnout is complex and driven by a host of systemic and environmental stressors. Teachers are more than instructors. They are mentors, role models, counselors, and often caregivers for their students. The demands on them are increasing as they are expected to master curriculum delivery while addressing behavioral issues, differentiated instruction for students with special needs, diverse learners, and socio-emotional support for students navigating difficult life circumstances. Meanwhile, many teachers feel they lack a voice in the decision-making processes that affect their classrooms. These conditions contribute to emotional and physical exhaustion, which leads to burnout.

Several statistics emphasize the severity of the problem:

- Forty-four percent of U.S. schools reported teaching vacancies in 2022 (U.S. Schools Report, 2022).
- Over 50% of these vacancies were due to resignations.
- Ninety percent of educators stated burnout is a serious issue (Jotkoff, 2022).
- A 2022 Gallup poll found that 52% of teachers report feeling “always” or “very often” burned out (Marken & Agrawal, 2022).

In response, some states are investing millions into teacher recruitment and retention programs. For instance, Illinois proposed a \$70 million grant to support school districts through signing bonuses, housing assistance, and other incentives. Similar initiatives are underway in Pennsylvania and New Jersey (Merod, 2023).

Current Trends in South Carolina

The South Carolina Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) published its 2024-2025 supply and demand report. This report collected data from 71 of the 75 public school districts in South Carolina. As of November 2024, the following data were reported (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement, 2025):

- There was a 35% decrease in teacher vacancies across the state.
- Teacher departure has decreased 13% compared to the last school year.
- Thirty-seven percent of teachers had fewer than five years of experience before quitting.

Districts saw a drop in job openings at the start of the 2024–25 school year, with nearly 600 fewer vacancies compared to the previous year. There were also about 1,000 fewer teachers leaving or being newly hired. Even without data from four districts, these lower numbers suggest that efforts to improve teacher retention in South Carolina are showing some progress.

Conceptual Framework

Teachers do not suffer from burnout because of one situation, factor, or behavior problem. Burnout is a combination of many factors within a teacher's life that vary based on each unique individual teacher (Leichtman, 2021). One of the most popular theories is based on Leichtman's concepts. Below are some examples of contributors that may affect teacher burnout. Financial challenges contribute consistently to teacher burnout (Leichtman, 2021):

- Teacher salaries often do not cover the full cost of living.
- Many teachers struggle with paying off student loans.
- Teachers frequently purchase classroom supplies out of pocket.

Mandated testing is another major contributor to burnout (Leichtman, 2021):

- Teachers are held accountable for student performance on standardized tests.
- High-stakes testing creates pressure for both teachers and students.
- Teachers may be unfairly judged based on a student's test-day performance, even if it does not reflect the student's usual abilities.

Inefficient professional development also contributes to burnout (Leichtman, 2021):

- Professional development is a constant in a teacher's career.
- When poorly designed, it can feel mundane, irrelevant, and time-consuming.
- Ineffective sessions take time away from meaningful planning and instructional improvement.

These types of situations can cause high anxiety for teachers and a sense of failure. Also, pervasive contributors to burnout appear out of the blue and can shake a teacher to the core (Leichtman, 2021). Some common examples of a pervasive contributor to teacher burnout would be an intense parent conference, an unpleasant conversation with administration, a student punching a teacher in the stomach, a student having a temper tantrum in the middle of class, a student having a seizure in class, or working with an incompetent colleague. These are just a few pervasive contributors throughout a teacher's day.

A teacher's mental capacity and professionalism can be diminished throughout the day while dealing with these unpredictable situations and trying to educate a classroom full of students. Teachers may be responsible for school duties, including bus and car duty, joining school committees, organizing school functions, organizing student groups, attending after-school functions, and attending after-school meetings. These are just a few of the additional responsibilities that come with the education system. Teachers may become overwhelmed, exhausted, and mentally drained from the additional educator responsibilities. Understanding burnout and the many factors that contribute to teacher burnout is essential in understanding why many teachers live in

constant burnout. Burnout does not happen in one single instance. It occurs as each instance or situation builds upon another and becomes too much for one person to handle. This can be true in many occupations, but teaching has a high attrition rate and a need for new candidates to join the education system.

Problem Statement

The growing mental and emotional burden placed on educators is resulting in burnout and increased attrition. Teachers must navigate demanding workloads, diverse student needs, limited resources, and a lack of administrative and parental support. Chronic workplace stress can escalate into more severe psychological issues such as anxiety and emotional exhaustion. According to Gray et al. (2017), when teacher expectations do not align with their workload or institutional support, burnout intensifies. Without targeted wellness interventions, this cycle of burnout and attrition will continue to deplete the education workforce, undermining student outcomes and community well-being.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the impact of fostering a culture of wellness on burnout and enhancing teacher retention rates. While extensive research exists on the causes of teacher burnout, such as low salaries and student behavior, less is known about how schools attempt to mitigate it and whether those measures are effective from the perspective of teachers themselves. This study aims to:

- investigate how burnout influences decisions to stay in or leave the profession
- identify strategies schools are implementing to alleviate burnout
- assess the perceived effectiveness of these strategies by the educators who experience them

Research Questions

To guide the study, the following research questions have been developed:

1. What is the suggested relationship, if any, between the level of burnout and the decision to stay in or leave the profession?
2. What strategies, if any, are schools implementing to alleviate teacher burnout?

Literature Review

Understanding the causes and components of teacher burnout is crucial to finding effective interventions and solutions to promote teacher wellness. Research has shown that specific characteristics of burnout are prevalent within the education system (Nygaard, 2019). A renowned researcher, Christina Maslach, has extensively studied burnout in various occupations. Her research has been instrumental in leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to recognize burnout as an occupational phenomenon (Mills, 2021). The WHO defines burnout as a high frequency of the following conditions that have not been managed effectively: exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy (WHO, 2025).

Strategies for Combating Teacher Burnout

Supporting teachers enhances both educator well-being and student outcomes. In addition to engagement prevention measures (strategies to prevent negative outcomes), organizational assessments are a valuable prevention tool to measure the well-being of employees regularly. An organizational assessment is the process of collecting data to measure the factors that affect the performance of an organization. It is essential to administer an organizational assessment regularly and analyze the strengths and weaknesses throughout the

workplace (Maslach, 2011). Organizational assessments include financial data, technology, a program, a product, and policy (Martz, 2008). “When an organization, through its deliberate actions, incorporates the evaluative attitude into its operations as outlined above, returns are maximized, and the organization thrives. In other words, the organization is effective” (Martz, 2008, p. 10).

A needs assessment can be the foundation for improved communication in a school environment (Kipps-Vaughan, 2013). A needs assessment can be beneficial for identifying the need for stress management and wellness services. Addressing the input on a needs assessment with open communication and a problem-solving mindset can make teachers aware of their value in their school environment (Kipps-Vaughan, 2013). Data collection on the effectiveness of wellness programs should continue after programs are implemented. Using data to target gaps in the interventions will enable the staff to receive a tailored program to fit their needs (Stratford, 2021).

New Ways of Considering Burnout

Dr. Pooja Lakshmin has recently published several articles and a book on burnout and self-care. Her work covers new territory in intrinsically reducing burnout. Dr. Lakshmin (2023) discourages quick fixes such as meditation, yoga, or bubble baths. Leading a rewarding life by setting boundaries, having self-compassion, aligning values, and exercising internal power are encouraged. Essentially, life decisions control a relationship with burnout. Authentic self-care is making hard decisions to lead a fulfilling and empowering life. Educators may benefit from this new approach to promoting self-wellness with self-care.

New teachers generally enter the profession wanting to please their peers and

administrators. However, pleasing the people in a workplace can often result in an overwhelming number of responsibilities. A new teacher who wants to please is less likely to refuse a request than a veteran teacher with boundaries. Setting boundaries within any profession is one of the steps to achieving self-care and preventing burnout.

Setting boundaries is about making decisions that protect one’s well-being (Lakshmin, 2023). Boundaries are essential limits that portray how we want to be treated and protect us from mistreatment. A lack of solid boundaries can contribute to burnout. Learning how to say no and realizing the responsibility to make those internal decisions is hard work. Overworking is one of the most common boundary-setting problems (Martin, 2022). Teachers are likely to take work home, stay at school late working, and work on classroom-related items during the weekends. Many people do not realize that setting boundaries gives them the option to say no or make a compromise. Internally, it is hard to make tough decisions and possibly disappoint others. Many people may feel ashamed or less productive by setting boundaries, but it is essential to prioritize mental and physical health (Lakshmin, 2023). Typically, people who identify as perfectionists or people pleasers are particularly vulnerable to burnout because they sacrifice their well-being to please others. Examples of boundaries could be not checking work email on weekends or after hours, taking an entire lunch break, asking for help, advocating to protect personal time, leaving work on time, clarifying responsibilities, prioritizing personal mental and physical health, speaking up when ignored, or negotiating less responsibility (Martin, 2022).

Once boundaries are set, Dr. Lakshmin recommends practicing self-compassion. Self-compassion focuses on

positive self-talk and high self-regard (Lakshmin, 2023). Self-compassion can improve self-efficacy, which can be severely lacking in some cases of teacher burnout. We are often our own worst critics. Self-compassion can foster the realization to understand yourself, care for yourself, and act to help yourself (McKee & Wiens, 2017). Permission to be good enough is a thought process that replaces self-judgment with self-kindness. Cultivating self-compassion from within promotes proactive change in a positive direction. A clear understanding of what is needed from within will ensure that boundaries are enforced (Lakshmin, 2023).

Establishing boundaries and self-compassion can help many teachers begin to have fewer symptoms of teacher burnout. Furthermore, identifying values encourages clear life choices, leading to a strong sense of purpose and fulfillment. Values are desired qualities of action that align with essential life aspects (Lakshmin, 2023). Understanding personal values can help align decisions to guide a happier life (Cozma, 2023). Once you align values, productive decision-making will flow through all aspects of life. Values will shift just as boundaries and goals will shift. Remembering that flexibility will occur with each season of life is important. Changing values throughout life shows growth and change (Lakshmin, 2023). Many values and boundaries will last a lifetime and manifest a deeper understanding of self-care.

Establishing values can lead to great self-reflection. Self-reflection can lead to exercising an internal power to sustain your values and boundaries. Genuine self-care is an assertion of power and self-preservation. Asserting power can lead to choices that cause inner conflict. Inner conflict can lead to learning more about the self-care that is needed. Using coping skills to problem solve, regulate emotions, and cope with

inner conflicts is self-care. Investing time and thought into personal self-care can cultivate a connection to inner power. Self-care is a skill that is built over time and looks different based on an individual's needs and season of life (Lakshmin, 2023).

Methodology

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions, offering rich data to inform solutions for improving the teaching profession in South Carolina (Saldana, 2021). This study utilized a mainly qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers experiencing burnout. Phenomenological research aims to understand the emotions and perceptions of participants regarding a specific phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015).

Data Collection

This study employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to identify teachers experiencing high levels of burnout. For the purpose of this study, burnout is defined as high scores in exhaustion and depersonalization and low scores in personal accomplishment. Teachers fitting these criteria were invited to share their experiences through open-ended survey questions. MBI scores were not included in qualitative data analysis but were used solely to identify eligible participants.

The qualitative data for this study were collected via Google Forms. Participants received a Google Form with open-ended questions about their experience with teacher burnout. The Google Form did not collect emails to ensure anonymity. The researcher analyzed the results from each survey. According to Saldana (2021), thematic analysis is suitable for research questions that gather data on people's experiences, perspectives, and factors determined by a specific context. The thematic analysis allowed the responses to

be coded by themes and patterns that were consistent with the results. The researcher discovered how themes are similar and different and what connections may exist. Themes were extracted through a two-step coding process, starting with descriptive categories and culminating in overarching thematic statements that relate directly to the research questions.

Instrumentation

Christina Maslach created the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) in 1981. The MBI has been identified as a leading measure of burnout. The MBI includes three questionnaires: Human Services, General, and Educators Survey. For this study, the Educator's Survey was used. The MBI is the prevalent burnout inventory used in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, European Union countries, Latin America, and Asia. The MBI has been extensively researched and has a verifiable history of validity and reliability in these countries (Coker & Omoluabi, 2009). Gilmonite (2005) conducted a study on the factorial validity of the MBI and found adequate factorial validity and sufficient internal consistency of the scales. Coker and Omoluabi (2009) conducted a study in Nigeria and reported that the MBI has reliable coefficients and valid reliability properties.

The MBI measures burnout's three main characteristics: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Twenty-two self-report statements are designed to measure the elements of burnout. The inventory has a dual-column response consisting of a six-point Likert scale frequency column and a seven-point intensity column (Coker & Omoluabi, 2009). The results will reveal scores for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. For this study, the following values will qualify an

educator in the burnout category: a value of 30 or greater for occupational exhaustion, a value of 12 or greater for depersonalization, and a value of 33 or less for personal accomplishment.

Data collection also involved survey questions administered through Google Forms. The survey utilized five questions, four open-ended and one Likert scale, aimed at answering the research questions. The first question was a Likert scale and asked, "To what extent is the current level of burnout prompting you to contemplate leaving the teaching profession?" Respondents were given the option of choosing from five responses: Highly Unlikely, Unlikely, Neutral, Likely, and Highly Likely. The remaining four questions were open-ended and focused on gathering insights into teachers' experiences with burnout, school intervention strategies, and perceptions of institutional support:

2. Please provide details for the contributing factors for Question 1.
3. What specific measures, if any, is your current school implementing to support teachers experiencing burnout? Please elaborate on the effectiveness of these initiatives.
4. Among the strategies being implemented at your school, which ones do you perceive as the most effective and least effective in addressing the challenges or issues they are designed to tackle? Please provide details for a comprehensive understanding.
5. What actions can schools take to have the most positive impact on reducing teacher burnout? Please provide details for a comprehensive understanding.

Anonymous responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify

patterns and themes in qualitative data (Saldana, 2021).

Participants

The Palmetto State Teachers Association (PSTA) assisted in distributing the survey to classroom teachers across South Carolina. PSTA comprises educators from various school levels, making it a representative sample for studying burnout in different teaching environments. Participants were selected based on MBI scores, ensuring they met the study's burnout criteria.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Years Teaching	1-5 years	18.75
	6-10 years	25
	11-15 years	31.25
	15-20 years	12.5
	20+ years	12.5
Level	Elementary	31.25
	Middle	25
	High	43.75
Male or Female	Male	0
	Female	100
Classroom Teacher	Yes	93.75
	No (classroom aide)	6.25

This study employed convenience sampling, a method that selects participants based on availability, willingness to participate, and ease of access (Dudovskiy, n.d.). While this method allowed for efficient data collection, it also posed a risk of selection bias and limited generalizability.

Data Analysis

The first phase of data collection determined the participants for the study. The MBI determined that the participants with the operationally defined parameters of

burnout: a high degree of occupational exhaustion, a high degree of depersonalization/loss of empathy, and a low degree of personal accomplishment, would participate in this study. The remaining participants were disqualified from the study.

The second phase of data collection was the open-ended survey questions. Data analysis followed thematic analysis, which involved coding responses to identify key themes and patterns (Saldana, 2021). The process included:

1. First Coding Cycle: Categorizing responses into broad thematic areas.
2. Second Coding Cycle: Refining themes into specific, meaningful statements.
3. Peer Coding: A secondary researcher reviewed the coded data to ensure reliability and reduce researcher bias.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question One

Teacher responses to the first survey question revealed mixed results. While no respondents stated they were 'Highly Unlikely' to leave the field due to their current stress level, only 12.5% stated that they were 'Highly Likely'. The remaining three categories were divided almost equally as follows: Unlikely = 25%, Neutral = 31.3%, and Likely = 31.3% (see Table 2).

Table 2

Likelihood of Leaving the Profession

Likert Scale Response	Response Rate
Highly Likely	12.5%
Likely	31.3%
Neutral	31.3%
Unlikely	25%
Highly Unlikely	0%

A large percentage of the teachers surveyed (43.8%) suggested that current stress levels experienced in schools are impacting their decision to stay in the profession.

Consequently, one could bring forward that there is somewhat of a relationship between the level of burnout and one's decision to leave the profession.

Research Question Two

As stated previously, the Maslach Burnout Inventory was utilized to gauge the extent of burnout among the study participants. It was discerned from the responses that factors such as excessive paperwork, unrealistic expectations, and challenging student behavior contribute significantly to teacher burnout. In response, participants proposed that to promote teacher wellness, effective strategies include:

- **Duty-free time:** Schools that offered designated mental health breaks and reduced administrative responsibilities reported improved staff morale. Duty-free time enables educators to take mental breaks and focus on self-care, which research has shown reduces stress levels (Stratford, 2021).
- **Supportive peer networks:** Positive relationships with colleagues were highlighted as crucial in mitigating stress. Supportive peer environments have been linked to improved job satisfaction and resilience in high-stress occupations like teaching (Hawk, 2020).
- **Mental health initiatives:** Schools that implemented mental health days, counseling services, and "wellness rooms" experienced notable reductions in teacher stress levels. Resources such as counseling services and mental health support are key in fostering a positive

educational environment (Gray et al., 2017).

Conversely, respondents found initiatives such as themed dress-up days and non-academic activities to be less effective in addressing core burnout concerns. Additionally, participants reported that schools that focused on improving communication and offering teachers greater autonomy showed improved staff engagement and satisfaction.

The findings reinforce the importance of holistic wellness strategies in combating teacher burnout. Interventions emphasizing mental health support, relationship-building, and stress reduction strategies were particularly effective. Schools must prioritize practical measures like reducing administrative burdens and enhancing peer support networks rather than relying on superficial morale-boosting tactics. Investing in comprehensive wellness programs that cater to teachers' emotional, psychological, and social well-being is key to sustaining a motivated workforce (Prendergast & French, 2022).

Moreover, building a culture of wellness requires intentional actions that promote self-care, boundary-setting, and work-life balance (Lakshmin, 2023). Programs that integrate wellness strategies into the school environment are more successful in reducing teacher stress and promoting positive outcomes for educators and students.

Recommendations

This study suggests that teacher burnout is a systemic problem, and the system must change to decrease teacher burnout. Research affirms the prevalence of initiative fatigue within schools. Schools may find themselves shuffling through various initiatives with little success and an increased burden on teachers (Greene & Kramer, 2020). As such, schools must

identify areas where burdens can be reduced. Such areas may include:

Establish designated duty-free periods for teachers to recharge:

- Ensure teachers have at least one period per day that is completely free from supervisory duties, meetings, or required tasks.
- Protect this time by clearly communicating expectations to staff and administrators so that it's respected and consistent.

Incorporate accessible mental health resources, including counseling and self-care programs:

- Offer on-site or virtual counseling services through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or school-based partnerships.
- Provide professional development workshops focused on stress management, mindfulness, and work-life balance.
- Create self-care spaces on campus—quiet rooms or lounges equipped with calming resources.

Promote collegial support through mentorship programs and collaborative planning time:

- Pair new teachers with experienced mentors for guidance, support, and emotional encouragement throughout the school year.
- Set aside structured, regular time for grade-level or subject-area teams to plan lessons, share strategies, and solve challenges together.

Provide professional autonomy and involve teachers in decision-making processes:

- Allow teachers to choose instructional strategies and materials that best suit their students' needs, rather than mandating scripted curricula.
- Involve teachers on school leadership teams and committees that decide policies, schedules, or curriculum changes.
- Create surveys and feedback opportunities where teachers can voice concerns and help shape initiatives that affect their daily work.

Provide mental health or wellness days:

- Include designated wellness days in the school calendar that teachers can take without penalty to support their mental health.
- Encourage a culture where using these days is normalized and supported, not stigmatized.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of wellness-focused interventions on teacher retention rates and academic outcomes. Expanding the scope of research to include diverse educational environments can offer broader insights into the success of wellness strategies in reducing burnout.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of wellness programs in retaining educators. Administrators can minimize teacher burnout and improve overall job satisfaction by integrating meaningful wellness initiatives into school cultures. Policymakers should prioritize funding and resources to

implement holistic interventions that address the multifaceted stressors faced by educators. Developing strategies incorporating mental health services,

positive peer networks, and practical stress-reducing initiatives can build a healthier educational workforce.

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