

Teachers' Mental Health Days: A Research and Policy Proposal

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Yutong (Emily) Wang is a high school senior at the St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Maryland. She plans to major in Political Science and Psychology at the undergraduate level. Since March 2021, Emily has been working with the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA) to incorporate the suggested policy recommendation as part of the MCEA agenda in advancing MCPS teacher's mental wellbeing. Her policy recommendation will also be featured on the Teaching Profession column of Education Week, a national news organization. Emily's research interests include improving mental health conditions for underrepresented groups, educational policy for teachers, and the influence of political partisanship in the American Education system.

ABSTRACT

School mental health research and policies tend to focus on enhancing the wellbeing of students more than that of teachers. Teaching is a stressful profession. Heavy workloads and high stress levels can cause teachers to develop mental health problems. Teachers' mental health has an impact on many aspects of society, ranging from students' academic and psychological outcomes to economic circumstances. This study investigates the development of a "Teachers' Mental Health Days" policy that would allow teachers to take days off from teaching for mental health reasons. A survey was undertaken between December 2020 and January 2021 to obtain feedback on this proposal. A total of 24 respondents at 12 public high schools and one private high school located within the Montgomery County Public Schools system (MCPS) agreed to participate. The findings suggest that some of the most prominent mental health problems that teachers face stem from the lack of mental health support and attention given to these issues by the Board of Education. The responses indicated high levels of interest in, and support for, a "Teachers' Mental Health Days" policy. I propose sanctioned leave or "Mental Health Leave" for teachers, which could potentially be made available for two days in every school year. Such leave would be paid, but without added employment benefits such as pension rights. Such a policy would not only provide teachers with an opportunity to help take care of their mental health, but would potentially benefit other groups, including but not limited to students, parents, and board officials.

Keywords: mental health, high school teachers, teacher welfare, school mental health, teaching load, educational policy

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of mental health at school has attracted attention from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Recent policy efforts related to school mental health have focused on improving the mental wellbeing of the student population. Public health and education policies directed at benefitting school mental health include the House Bill of 2191 (HB 2191, 2019), which allows high school students to take days off from school for mental health reasons as “Excused Absences.” In addition, the Mental Health Service for Students Act (H.R. 1109, 2020) offers funding to provide mental health care services for students in public high schools.

Despite progress made in advancing students’ mental health, a significant population has been excluded from the effort to promote school mental health, namely teachers. Teaching is a stressful profession and yet it comes with an inadequate amount of mental health support. Data from the 2017 Educator Quality of Life survey revealed that 61% of teachers find their work to be “always” or “often” stressful. Moreover, many teachers from that survey reported having poor mental health for 11 or more days per month, and other poor health outcomes, such as a lack of quality sleep (BATs, 2017).

From a humanitarian perspective, mental health could be regarded as a basic human right (Nagaraja and Murthy, 2008). Mental health does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or socio-economic status, and without proper support, mental illness quickly becomes severe. Therefore, it is reasonable for teachers and students to be given the same amount of attention and support in the development of effective strategies to enhance mental health at school. Findings from a national survey on school mental health indicated that 84% of educators reported moderate to significant mental health challenges. This number is similar to the 83% of students who reported mental health challenges (Young, 2020).

Mental health challenges

Teachers’ mental health challenges contribute to both micro-level (at the individual

school and community level) and macro-level issues (at the national level). At a micro scale, poor mental health may lead to low teaching performance and engagement, which has a negative impact on students’ academic and psychological wellbeing. Findings from a 2009 Gallup study showed that teachers’ levels of engagement were directly associated with the engagement levels of their students, which in turn affected student achievement outcomes. For a 1% increase in a school’s average student engagement level, there was a 6% increase in reading and an 8% gain in math achievement (Bidwell, 2014). Additionally, improved psychological wellbeing among teachers was associated with better student wellbeing (standardized effect = 0.07) and lower student psychological distress (standardized effect = -0.10) (Harding et al., 2019).

From a macro-level standpoint, high teacher turnover as a direct result of poor mental health can lead to social inequality and economic damage. Such damage includes but is not limited to the widening of achievement gaps that disproportionately affect underserved student populations, as well as increased state and national attribution costs. The annual U.S. teacher turnover rate is 16% (Grace et al., 2016), with low pay and high levels of stress as the most common reasons cited for leaving the profession. Public schools in areas of high poverty experience 50% higher teacher turnover rates compared to more affluent public schools (Murnane & Steele, 2007). Furthermore, students tend to score lower in English Language Arts (ELA) and math when a higher turnover rate is presented. This trend is particularly reflected in Title I schools and schools with a higher prevalence of low performing and black students (Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2012).

The widening achievement gap and economic damage caused by high teacher turnover are interconnected. It is estimated that, on average, states in the U.S. spend up to 2.2 billion dollars annually on teachers’ attrition turnover (Haynes, 2014), which costs about \$7.3 billion in U.S. schools each year (The National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future). If a large amount of the budget from U.S. schools each year goes to teachers’ attrition, then schools have a reduced budget available for improving

school activities, such as school wellness programs, academic improvement programs, and professional development opportunities.

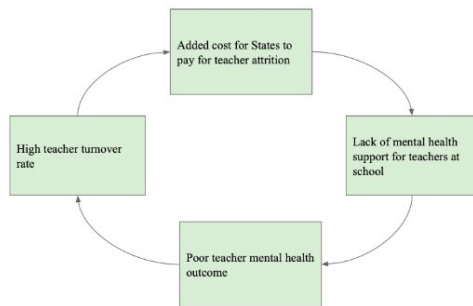


Figure 1. The vicious cycle of poor mental health in teachers (EW, 2021)

Current initiatives taken by the teachers' union to improve teachers' mental health include the development of a "mental health day" for teachers. For instance, the Fairfax Education Association (FEA) and the Washington Teachers Union have been urging members to take a mental health day because of growing mental health risks in the teaching workforce. More recently, the FEA stated that the union has been helping its members obtain counseling and medical attention due to the added stress caused by COVID-19 (Hillerich, 2020).

Common causes of mental health problems among teachers

This section aims to provide a general background on some of the most common causes of mental health problems among teachers, and to discuss potential factors that prevent teachers from seeking help.

Heavy workload and a lack of work/life balance

There has been an increase in expectations from students and the public on the roles and responsibilities of teachers (Berlanda et al., 2019). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that teachers were more likely to work on the weekend than the average American professional (Krantz-Kent, 2008).

Furthermore, teachers work an average of 10 hours and 40 minutes per day, which is more than three hours beyond the average workday required in public schools nationwide (Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). Besides helping students to excel academically, teachers are also responsible for helping students with social and emotional growth. Recent studies have shown that teachers are often the first to report child maltreatment, but the amount of reporting decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the lack of direct contact between teachers and students (Barron, Goldstein, and Wallace, 2020; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019).

It is unarguable that teachers bear many important responsibilities, having a crucial impact on the attainment and outcomes of students. However, more attention needs to be paid to issues relating to the duration of teachers' work, their workloads, and their poor work/life balance.

A lack of autonomy and influence

"Teacher autonomy is defined and measured by one's capacity to take control of one's own teaching" (Sehrawat, 2014). According to a study from the National Foundation for Education Research, teachers are 16% less likely than similar professionals to report having "a lot" of influence over how they do their job, especially with relatively low autonomy over assessment and feedback (Worth & Brande, 2020).

The inability to make direct impacts in the classroom and the school community, and the lack of attention and value attached to a teacher's feedback creates a strong sense of powerlessness among teachers. Thus, such factors have psychological consequences, including tension, frustration, and anxiety (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Bullying

Workforce bullying is prominent in the teaching industry. Teachers experience bullying by superiors, colleagues, students, or parents at rates far higher than those reported for other professions (BATs, 2017). While many research studies have focused on teachers bullying students, a limited number of studies have investigated the bullying behaviors exhibited by students toward teachers (James et al., 2008). Student bullying behaviors directed at teachers include

abusing, ignoring, swearing, mocking, gossiping about teachers, and damaging teachers' belongings (Pervin & Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998). Previous studies have concluded that student bullying behaviors towards teachers may affect the mood and performance of teachers, in addition to student learning (Pervin and Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998; Benefield, 2004; De Wet and Jacobs, 2006).

Barriers to help-seeking

Stigma on mental health

Negative attitudes and stigma towards mental illness are evident among teachers. Recent evidence suggests that 70% of higher secondary school teachers exhibit an overall agreement with the personal and perceived stigma towards a depressive case vignette (Venkataraman, Patil, and Balasundaram, 2019). It is important to enhance the understanding and awareness of mental illness in the teaching workforce so that teachers become more willing and comfortable to reach out for help when dealing with mental health challenges (Gur et al., 2012).

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) summarizes that teachers and other school staff who experience exhaustion and burnout related to their work are more likely to have negative physical and psychological symptoms and consequences (Lever, Mathis, and Mayworm, 2017), including:

1. Emotional numbing
2. Loss of enjoyment
3. Lack of energy
4. A sense of cynicism or pessimism
5. Increased illness or fatigue
6. Increased absenteeism and "sick days".

The Present Study

A survey was conducted on 522 high school teachers from public and private high schools located in Montgomery County, Maryland between October 2020 and January 2021. Montgomery County is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, with a median household income of \$99,435 (Montgomery County government, 2021). The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) system is the largest school system in Maryland and the 14th largest school system

in the United States. MCPS has 25 public high schools and 47 private high schools. Out of the 13,142 MCPS teachers, 86.4% have a master's degree or equivalent (Department of Public Information and Web Services Montgomery County Public Schools, 2018).

Method

Participants

A sample of twelve MCPS public high schools and one private high school were selected. Six public high schools were randomly selected based on schools that ranked in the top 12 (Group A). The other six public high schools were randomly selected from a ranking of 13th to 24th (Group B). The average graduation rate was approximately 94% for Group A and 84% for Group B. The college readiness index was about 69 out of 100 for Group A and 39 out of 100 for Group B.

Procedure

The online survey was first provided to Group A and a follow up request was sent after 3 days. Afterwards, the survey was sent to Group B, and the follow-up process was repeated. This technique was used to help compare the responses from teachers between the two groups. Lastly, the survey was sent to teachers at the private high school, after which the follow up process was repeated.

Measures

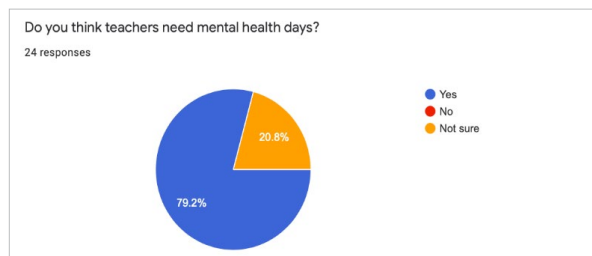
The survey consisted of seven multiple choice questions, three of which could be answered by "yes," "no," or "not sure." The survey included one qualitative open free-text question, asking teachers to provide additional thoughts on the idea of high school teachers taking mental health days off during the school year. Throughout the survey, responses remained confidential and anonymous. The survey was conducted under the supervision of my mentor, Dr. Roger P. Worthington, with additional input from a private school teacher.

Results

Overall, 24 teachers from twelve public high schools in Montgomery County and one private high school participated in the study. The crude response rate of this survey was 4.6%. With respect to the school types, 83.3% [n = 20/24] of respondents were from Group A, 8.33% [n = 2/24] were from Group B and 8.33% [n = 2/24] were from the private school.

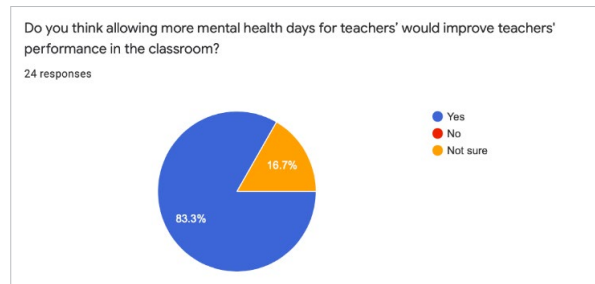
1. Do teachers think they need mental health days?

The participants were asked to select an option from the choice, ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘not sure’ that best reflected their belief on the need for mental health days for teachers. About 79.2% of the participants reported “Yes” and 20.8% of the participants were not sure. No one reported “No”. In short, over half of the participants confirmed that mental health days are considered important for teachers.



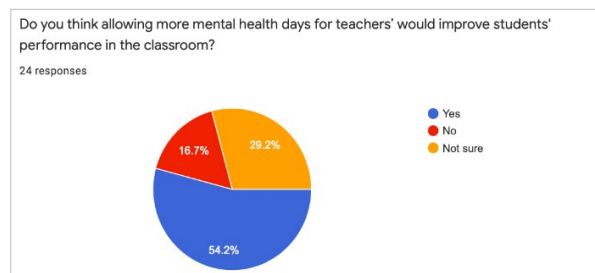
2. ‘Do teachers think allowing more mental health days for teachers would improve teachers’ performance in the classroom?’

The participants were asked to select an option from the choice, ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘not sure’ that best reflected their belief on whether or not allowing more mental health days for teachers would improve teachers’ performance in the classroom. About 83.3% of the participants reported “yes” and 16.7% reported “not sure”. No one reported “No” to this question. Thus more than half of the teachers think mental health days for teachers would improve teachers’ performance in the classroom.



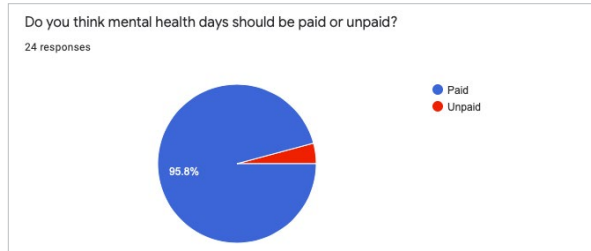
3. ‘Do you think allowing more mental health days for teachers would improve students’ performance in the classroom?’

Participants were asked to select an option from the choice, ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘not sure’ that best reflected their belief on whether or not allowing more mental health days for teachers would improve student performance in the classroom. About 54.2 % of the participants answered “yes”, 16.7% answered “no” and 29.2% were “not sure”. Of note, 16.7% disagreed with the assumption and it is important to understand why they felt that allowing more mental health days for teachers would not improve students’ performance in the classroom.



4. ‘Do you think mental health days should be paid or unpaid?’

Participants were asked to select an option from the choice, ‘paid’ or ‘unpaid’ that best reflected their view on whether mental health days should be paid or unpaid. While 95.8 % (23 out of 24) selected ‘paid’, 4.2% selected ‘unpaid’. Almost all participants think that mental health days should be paid. This provides strong evidence to support the principle of paid benefits for Mental Health Leave.



Qualitative Results

One optional open-ended question asked teachers for additional thoughts on the idea of high school teachers taking mental health days off during the school year. Among the 24 participants, 15 provided qualitative responses. Based on the common responding patterns, those responses fell into one of the four categories: Teacher burnout, Lack of autonomy, Workload, and More “Sick Days.” One response per category was selected to illustrate aspects of teachers’ mental health struggles.

Teacher burnout

Most teachers’ responses in this category highlight the prevalence of exhaustion due to stress, negative feelings, and pressure from work.

“Teacher burnout is very real, especially in an online teaching environment. Many teachers do not take off when they need a break because it is often more challenging and stressful to write sub plans than to just come in. Teachers also get very little leave, so do not want to ‘waste’ a day in this fashion.”

Lack of autonomy

Many responses from teachers reported a low level of control over their teaching and school policies. Many felt that their voices and feedback were not valued by the school administration or the Board of Education.

“I have been a public servant since 1987, and I promise you that no one cares what I think.”

Workload

Heavy workload and the work/life imbalance was a common theme in many of the responses.

“I know many teachers already take mental health days, but we use them to do college recommendations and catch up on grading. In reality they are days we need to do the work we cannot fit in during and after school hours. We will likely have the same number of sick days, just able to call them mental health. Most of us already do this. I have been under a doctor’s care for mental health for over a decade, so I do see it as a ‘sick day’ – again the difference is I work the whole time because the backlog of work is causing me anxiety. The best way to improve teachers’ mental health is to reduce class sizes and give teachers more planning time during the day so we don’t spend all of our nights and weekends grading and planning.”

More “sick days”

Additional sick days were mentioned by several responders, and many believe that allowing teachers more paid sick days could help improve a teacher’s general wellbeing.

“My honest reaction is that the solution to this is to provide teachers with one or two extra sick days a year and allow them to use a single sick day without requiring an explanation. I worry about this showing up on employment records.”

Policy Recommendations

Based on findings from the survey and further analysis of the problems, I would recommend the following:

a. Two teachers’ mental health days for one school year

The number of absences recorded as “absent without available leave” (AWAL) has been increasing among MCPS teachers. In the 2016-2017 school year, there were over 22,000 days of unpaid leave used after employees exhausted their available paid leave (Zuckerman, 2018). Approximately 23,000 educators were working in MCPS schools during the 2016-2017 school year (MCPS Annual Report for School Year 2016-2017). On average, educators exceed the 12 paid sick leave days per year limit by taking an average of two (23,000/22,000) additional unpaid sick leaves

per year. Because educators, including teachers, are already taking two AWAL days, classifying these additional sick leave days as “teachers’ mental health days” might make good sense.

b. One teachers’ mental health day per semester

The limitation of teachers using one teachers’ mental health day per semester serves as a check on this policy to prevent situations in which teachers take multiple teachers’ mental health days in one semester. Teachers could use one teachers’ mental health day at any time during a semester and should not exceed that number. However, teachers could still take paid sick leave days if available. The paid leave benefits of teachers’ mental health days would not apply to officially authorized paid leave.

c. Teachers’ mental health days should be paid

Teachers usually work more than three hours beyond the required work hours per day (Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012); qualitative responses from the survey demonstrate the heavy workload that many MCPS teachers are facing, and 95.8% of respondents think that mental health days should be paid. In Article 16, Section B of the Montgomery County Education Association and Board of Education of Montgomery County Contract Agreement for the School years 2018-2020, it states that, “While professional personnel will often work more than eight hours per day, the professional salary schedule is based on an eight-hour workday.” If both the Montgomery County Education Association and the Montgomery County Board of Education acknowledge the unbalanced rate between salary and teachers’ work hours, it is reasonable to compensate teachers through paid leave benefits.

d. Similar procedure to paid sick leave

Teachers should follow similar guidelines to paid sick leave days when requesting mental health days. For instance, they should complete the MCPS Form 430-1A (September 2020 version), “notifying the appropriate official as early as possible if he/she is unable to report for duty” (Article 30, section C of the Montgomery County Education Association and Board of Education of Montgomery County Contract Agreement for the School Years 2018-2020). Amending teaching contracts before implementing

the “Teachers’ Mental Health Days” policy may be necessary. For example, I recommend that teachers should not have to state specific reasons to the appropriate officials when requesting mental health days. Teachers’ mental health days should also be recognized as an official type of leave in the teachers’ contract and the leave request form with proper descriptions that explain the purpose and limitations (please see Formal documentation for more details).

e. No accumulation

Teachers’ mental health days would expire before the start of the next school year. Unused mental health days would not be available for use in the next school year. The reason for this is to provide teachers with as much mental health care as possible while keeping a balance between teachers and other populations at MCPS. If this “Teachers’ Mental Health Day” policy becomes sanctioned, follow-up, larger scale surveys and pilot studies would be needed to assess the effectiveness of this policy, with opportunities for revision and readjustment based on feedback from teachers, students, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

f. No added benefits

Teachers’ mental health days would not have any added benefits as included in the “Paid Sick Leave Days” policy. For instance, teachers could not cash-out unused mental health days, and unused mental health days would not be added to retirement benefits, partly to encourage teachers to take better care of their mental health. Some teachers are unwilling to use paid sick leave days to take care of their mental health due to the benefits that the “Paid Sick Leave Days” policy includes. Teachers need an opportunity to take care of their mental health without worrying about loss of benefits.

g. Formal documentation

Teachers’ mental health days could be categorized as an official type of leave (mental health leave) to differentiate between paid sick leave and mental health leave. Mental health leave should not be included under paid sick leave because:

- The name “sick leave” is not a suitable representation of mental health leave. Mental

health should be regarded as a human right, and teachers should be provided with equitable care and opportunities to help them secure this right. Anyone could have mental health problems, and if not addressed in time, it can lead to more serious problems that could then require the use of sick leave.

- There are different procedures and benefits between paid sick leave and mental health leave; mental health leave should be given its own description that explains the purpose, qualifications, and limitations.

Due to the differences between mental health leave and paid sick leave, it is important to organize mental health leave in a separate column with proper descriptions that explain the type of leave. This could also serve an educational purpose to help inform teachers about the importance of taking care of their mental health and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health in the teaching workforce.

h. Anticipated benefits

Benefits for teachers

- Provide teachers with an opportunity to take better care of their mental health
- Salary benefit protection for taking mental health days
- Fewer AWAL days
- Spread awareness and reduce the stigma associated with mental health
- Help prevent more serious mental health and psychological problems from developing
- Encourage teachers to voice their concerns

Benefits for students

- Potentially improved academic outcomes
- Potentially improved psychological outcomes
- Learn about the importance of mental health
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Benefits for the County

- Reduce teacher turnover rate
- Reduce added costs due to high teacher turnover rate
- Reduce unpaid sick leave or AWAL

According to NIMH, increased absenteeism and sick days among teachers are a direct consequence of teachers who experience exhaustion and burnout related to work (Lever, Mathis, & Mayworm, 2017). If MCPS wishes to reduce absenteeism or excessive use of unpaid sick leave among teachers, then introduction of the “Teachers’ Mental Health Days” policy is a good first step strategy to help reflect on the county’s academic and social reputation and show teachers that their voices are being heard and valued.

Limitations

There are clear limitations to this preliminary investigation. This pilot survey aimed at providing a basic foundation for later research and replications. Given the relatively small sample size, a larger survey pool and more respondents would be needed for generalizability. Sick leave banks and teacher insurance were not included within the scope of this research, but they could be investigated to help inform any new policy. While the current data showed that more teachers in Group A responded to the survey than those in Group B, no demographic and socio-economic data were collected, including information about racial profiles or the mental health of teachers. However, future studies may need to take account of such socio-demographic variables.

Conclusions

Research on teachers’ mental health is limited, and further comprehensive surveys may need to be carried out. The quantitative data in our research indicated a need for more mental health support for teachers that could be achieved through introducing a Mental Health Leave policy. The qualitative findings indicated the struggle that some teachers are currently facing due to low levels of mental health, mainly caused by workloads. Thus, introduction of a policy such as the one described could ultimately help to improve teachers’ mental health.

Acknowledgments

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