

OPINION EXCHANGE

New Voices: Teacher burnout isn't new, only worse

Let's do something about it.

By Sarah Haugen and Tracy Lysne | JANUARY 22, 2022 — 6:00PM

Opinion editor's note: This article, part of our New Voices collection, was written by first-time contributors to Star Tribune Opinion. For more information about our efforts to continually expand the range of views we publish, see startribune.com/newvoices.

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Those in the profession of teaching are in the business of human development. Educators enter the classroom every day because they feel called to teach future generations.

And while it's a calling, while those who teach care deeply about what they do, educators are becoming disillusioned with the profession.

As former K-12 educators and current program directors of the Saint Mary's University master's of education in teaching and learning program, we witness the stress educators feel, the potential for burnout, and we see an increasing number of teachers leaving the profession.

A contributing factor is that many educators feel there is a direct conflict between what they are being expected to do in their classrooms and what they know is best for learning. Teachers go into the profession primed to ignite the love of learning in kids. Barriers such as standardized testing, social and racial inequities, policies and decisions solely guided by state standards rather than the needs of the students in the room, and lack of trust in teachers as trained professionals, just to name a few factors, swiftly snuff out the flame.

Recently, the situation has become dire. A recent [survey from the RAND Corporation](#) found nearly 1 in 4 teachers said they would likely leave their jobs by the end of the 2020-21 school year. These growing numbers are difficult to hear. Even though it's heartbreaking, it's not surprising.

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Most students spent a portion of the last school year schooling at home virtually, and we are recognizing each student had a very different learning experience. Now that students have returned to the classroom, teachers are feeling the pressure of "learning loss" and feeling judged for not getting students up to speed. The reality raises the question — how could learning have been lost if students weren't able to learn it in the first place?

Educators are charged with teaching their students the assigned grade level curriculum and ensuring they are meeting current grade level standards, and now many are finding a need to help students learn how to learn in a school setting again. Think about it: A current seventh-grade middle-schooler's last school experience may have been in an elementary fifth-grade classroom.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we heard, "Teachers, we know you're doing great things, we believe in you, and we know how hard you work!" Suddenly, that changed and teachers were perceived as rivals. Ethical teaching is about challenging ideals, critical thinking and ensuring equity for *all* children, yet today's message is to put our heads down and not cause any conflict or controversy. The strife of a country divided has sadly spilled over into the classroom.

As professors who educate teachers daily, we know burnout is a serious issue, and we're doing what we can to assist teachers.

We are reinforcing the idea of paying attention to what is most important vs. what is most urgent. We facilitate teachers' abilities to identify their innate gifts and strengths in order to maneuver the unique life lessons they encounter with an attitude of gratitude. We encourage an openness and love to all they encounter. Teachers learn what it means to trust their students, community members, and more importantly themselves so that they might develop young human beings. We remind them that instead of being master teachers, they need to be master learners, always studying our craft to navigate the pressures of a pandemic or whatever the world throws our way.

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The public can also play a role to help ease stress placed on teachers and administrators. Recognize that this school year is not business-as-usual and educators are being stretched to capacity with additional expectations put on them daily as a result of COVID-19 protocols, substitute shortages and busing issues. Trust is necessary as educators are faced with trying new ways of teaching students. The pandemic has provided the unique opportunity to critically look at education and how we approach teaching and learning.

Let's do something about this challenge by extending compassion and empathy by validating and affirming one another for doing our best in a hard situation. Let's not turn on each other. Let's acknowledge the pandemic is something none of us signed up for. Let's move forward together to make positive changes.

Tracy Lysne and Sarah Haugen are program directors for the master's of education in teaching and learning program at Saint Mary's University of

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