



Creating a Culture of Care

A Guide for Education Leaders to Develop Systems and Structures That Support Educator Well-Being

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OVERVIEW

In order to support students, educators must first support each other and be supported themselves. In fact, across helping professions in general, well-being is an ethical imperative. This guide is for education leaders at all levels—local, regional, and state—in charge of supporting their education staff. It offers practical information and guidance on educator well-being in these ever-challenging times.

The strategies offered are intended to be integrated into the everyday systems and structures of education settings. This list of strategies and processes is not exhaustive or prescriptive. Rather, it is an invitation and a foundation upon which to build and strengthen educator well-being in the context of educational systems. As you adopt and adapt any of these (or other) practices, you are encouraged to model the practices with your colleagues and students to normalize well-being practices and institutionalize a culture of care.

Education leaders are encouraged to read this guide with colleagues and discuss it in collaborative settings. The guide provides an introduction to key concepts followed by suggested activities that can be used by individuals or groups to actively engage with the guide's content.

Enter where you wish. There is no wrong door here. This is an invitation to the work—not a prescription. Read or listen, pause, reflect, and practice. Keep an eye out for pullouts, quotes, and reflective questions along the way. To help you navigate to where you want to be, the following is a quick overview of how the guide is organized.

1. **Key Concepts:** the “what” and “why,” providing background information on the ecological systems framework and the root causes of and conditions for well-being; the relationship between brains, bodies, behaviors, and environments; influences of bias and perception on educator well-being; and shifting systems
2. **Tips for Using the Strategies:** the foundational elements of applying the guide's strategies
3. **Strategies: the “how,”** offering some ways to rethink and redesign education systems as well as some preventative and restorative strategies, with specific examples
4. **References:** works cited throughout the guide; note that many resources (including some not cited in the strategies list) are hyperlinked for your reference throughout



KEY CONCEPTS

There are growing efforts at state and local levels to attend to educator well-being,¹ particularly as a result of the pandemic. Research pre-pandemic—and even more so now—shows that unhealthy education systems have very real consequences. Stress and burnout are substantial concerns and lead to poor educator retention, affect teacher–student relationships, and negatively impact various student and school outcomes (Chang, 2009; Madigan & Kim, 2020; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Mahfouz et al., 2019;

Individual-level concerns (e.g., poor leadership, staff mental health risks) and collective-level concerns (e.g., lack of inclusion or belonging) are primarily the result of systems-level factors embedded in organizational cultures and processes—and yet, individual-level strategies are too often the means for trying to address these concerns.

Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Sorenson, 2007). According to a recent RAND survey, principals and teachers report higher job stress than other workers, and educators of color are even more likely to report poorer well-being (Steiner et al., 2022a). Job-related stress for educators has been linked to poor physical and mental health, absenteeism, and turnover, which in turn have been shown to have negative impacts on students' academic and nonacademic outcomes (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Madigan & Kim, 2021; McLean & Connor, 2015). Moreover, according to Steiner and colleagues, only 44 percent of teachers and 60 percent of principals believe the job stress and challenges are worth it (Steiner et al., 2022b).

So, if stress, burnout, and retention are problems, then how might education leaders invest in effective and sustainable solutions, if investing in any solutions at all? This brief invites the reader to consider three key points:

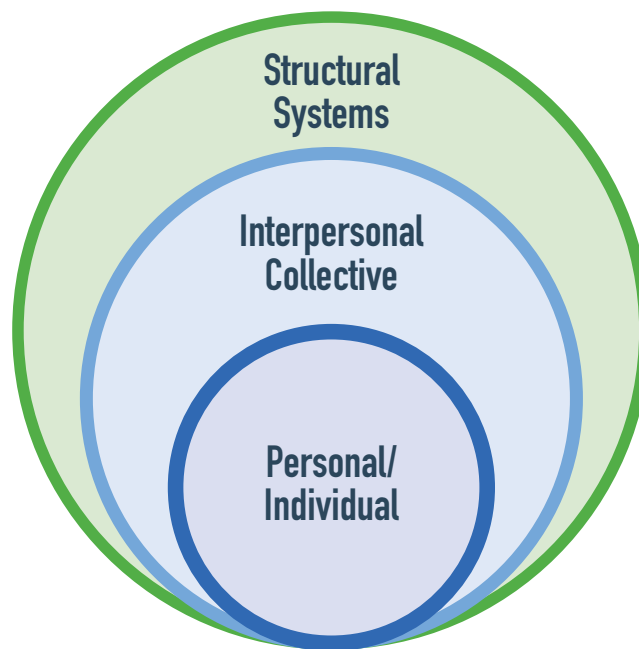
1 According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), "There is no consensus around a single definition of well-being, but there is general agreement that at minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning." Aspects of well-being include physical, social, emotional, psychological, economic, development and activity, life satisfaction, domain-specific satisfaction, and engaging activities and work.

1. How might you focus on a *comprehensive* and *integrated* approach that addresses underlying issues associated with stress, burnout, and retention, as well as health and well-being, rather than trying solutions that often do not work in isolation?
2. How might solutions build from the science about how people's brains and bodies respond to and influence their contexts?
3. How might one's biases and perceptions influence the approach used?

Applying an Ecological Systems Lens

An ecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) supports leaders in understanding how culture and various experiences, relationships, environments, and systems influence an individual, a group, and/or a system. An ecological systems lens is centered on a belief that everything is interconnected within and among individuals, groups, and systems (Gaia et al., 2018; Neal & Neal, 2013). In other words, an individual's personal and interpersonal experiences exist within larger systems (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ecological Systems Lens



Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979

The three levels of this ecological system can be described as follows:

- *Personal/Individual* refers to what is going on within individual people (biologically, psychologically).
- *Interpersonal/Collective* refers to individuals' interactions with each other; it includes relationships, community, and the collective experience.
- *Structural/Systems* refers to infrastructure, processes, organizational aspects, resources, and policies that establish the conditions for the ways people think and act.

While many educator well-being efforts are well-intentioned, they may be overly focused on solutions that often **do not work in isolation** rather than focused on a **comprehensive and integrated approach**. For example, educator well-being is often approached in terms of self-care, with an overreliance on individual strategies and supports for well-being (e.g., yoga, mindfulness, exercise, vacations). Although well-intentioned, this approach can inadvertently put the onus on individuals to heal and care for themselves, ignoring the impacts of systems and structures on individual and collective well-being.

Individual strategies have value, but they can't solve organizational or systems problems alone. For example, mindful breathing or a quick walk will not be an effective strategy for teachers who have back-to-back lessons or classes, or a sustainable strategy for state or district personnel who are understaffed and managing dozens of programs and initiatives. Individual-level concerns (e.g., poor leadership, staff mental health risks) and collective-level concerns (e.g., lack of inclusion or belonging) are primarily the result of systems-level factors embedded in organizational cultures and processes—and yet, individual-level strategies are too often the means for trying to address these concerns. (Jennings et al., 2019; Praslova, 2023).

Nonetheless, all agents within a system and all elements of a system contribute to well-being. Thus, the onus should not rest on individuals alone, rather the collective should take responsibility for adversity and should contribute to the solutions (Barton et al., 2022).

Additionally, short-term and individual actions cannot replace longer-term and collective endeavors to make well-being efforts sustainable. The way systems and structures are designed impacts any well-being efforts. Often, it is important to rethink, reimagine, and rebuild systems to enable individual and collective well-being. For well-being to take root and grow, people must challenge the status quo because “systems are perfectly designed to get the results they get” (W. Edwards Deming Institute, n.d.). Thus, in order to change outcomes, people—individually and collectively—must change the systems.

As evident in the research cited above, educator well-being is a prerequisite for everything that education systems are striving to achieve—from growing and retaining the workforce to improving student outcomes. Educator well-being is not a standalone or add-on focus, rather it is the foundation. And education leaders are uniquely positioned to facilitate meaningful and sustainable change at each of these levels (individual, collective, systems); thus, they are critical players in shifting education systems to support educator well-being (and subsequently student and school success) as a whole.

Root Causes of and Conditions for Well-Being

Again, while many well-intended efforts to support educator well-being have been implemented, these efforts have tended not to address the underlying issues associated with stress, burnout, and retention or with health and well-being. Clearly, the immediate, short-term needs of individuals should be addressed, but as short-term solutions are implemented, leaders also must take the **long view** and work to **change the culture** of many schools and communities to address the **complex, adaptive nature of well-being**.

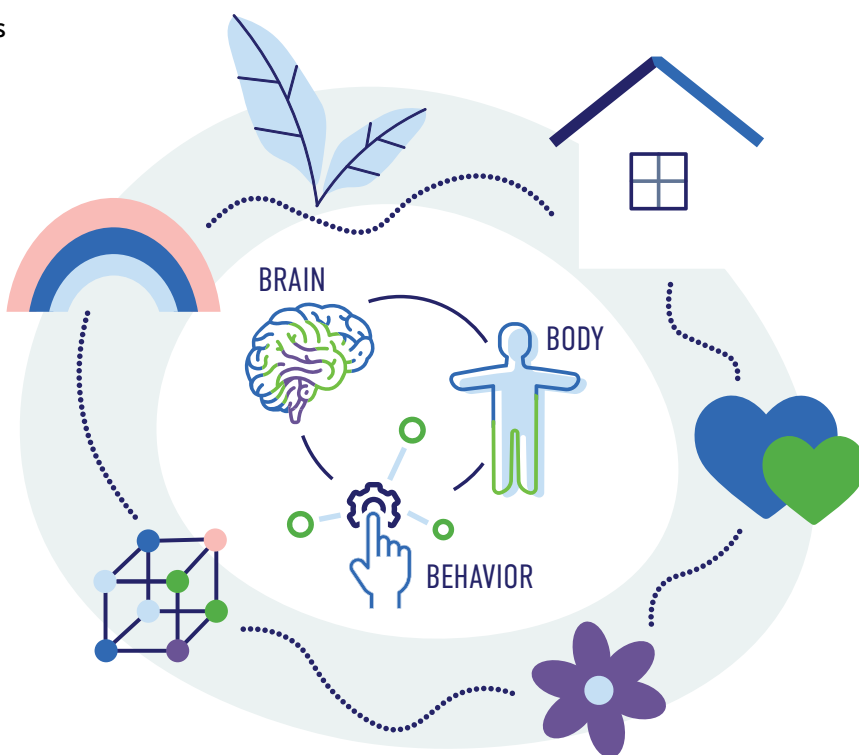
In shifting how health and well-being are defined, the focus should not simply be on the absence of illness or disease and instead should include physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being, as well as the balance and integration of those elements—the things that make people whole. The existence of systems and structures that support mutual care, belonging, and interconnection is important (Trout et al., 2022). Such systems and structures affect how people think and feel and act, and they determine how people handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. With this perspective on health and well-being, education's policies, practices, and values can shift toward creating strong communities and places of collaborative care and learning.

Brains, Bodies, and Behaviors Within Relationships and Environments

Understanding how brains and bodies influence behavior and how brains, bodies, and behaviors are influenced by people's relationships and environments (systems, structures) is essential in the workplace (see Pate et al., 2022). In fact, the science of learning and development can help with examining the way systems and structures can transform workplaces to promote well-being.

The neuroscience research related to well-being (Perry, n.d.; 2006; Siegel, 1999, 2010; The SoLD Alliance, 2020) indicates that people need three things to effectively educate and lead: (1) people need to get regulated—that is, physically and emotionally calm and settled, feeling safe and secure; (2) once regulated in this way, people need to feel socially and emotionally connected through safe and supportive relationships that are attuned to people's needs; and (3) once calm and settled and connected in healthy and supportive ways with others, then people are finally ready and able to engage with learning, teaching, and leading.

If educators try to jump straight into teaching, working, decision-making, or leading, they completely bypass what their brains need to get there. If staff and students are showing up dysregulated because they are stressed out and unsettled—which many are these days—or if they are feeling disconnected from safe and supportive relationships and environments, schools may not effectively or sustainably reach the part of the brain (“thinking brain”²) needed for effective educating and leading.



2 The “thinking brain” refers to the top and front parts of the brain responsible for executive functioning including attention, concentration, impulse-control, and decision-making (Perry, n.d.; Siegel, 1999, 2010)

Humans have a fundamental need for physical and psychological safety and security (Clark, 2020; Maslow, 1943; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Tay & Diener, 2011), and education systems can influence a person's ability to feel physically and psychologically [un]safe and/or [in]secure. Over time, people become conditioned to their environments to respond and react in ways to keep themselves feeling safe and secure. Thus, if a system is chronically dysregulated, the individuals and the community within that system will follow suit and the cycle becomes reciprocal. Along with having needs for safety and security, humans have a fundamental need for connection and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tay & Diener, 2011; Tomova et al., 2020). Benefits of belonging in the workplace include increased engagement, better job performance, lower turnover risk, and fewer sick days, especially for staff from marginalized backgrounds (BetterUp, 2021; Culture Amp, 2018).

Being dysregulated impairs a person's capacity for physical and emotional regulation; reduces their ability to attend, focus, and engage; and lowers their tolerance for interpersonal connection and collaboration (Levine, 2010; Levine & Crane-Godreau, 2015; Hammond, 2015; Van der Kolk, 2015). Conversely, when people are regulated, they are better able to focus, engage, keep commitments, and build trust as well as have the ability to access key thinking, learning, and leading strategies.

Another major aspect of well-being is a sense of meaning and purpose (Czekierda et al., 2017; Disabato et al., 2017; Steger & Frazier, 2005). Education staff and leaders want to know that they matter to others and that the work they do matters and is meaningful. In fact, feeling like one matters is associated with fewer depressive symptoms, less burnout, and better physical health (Haizlip et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019; Taylor & Turner, 2001). As a part of having fundamental human needs, education staff and leaders also want to have a broader sense of purpose and significance to their work and want to be respected and valued not just for their work but for who they are—especially as their true, authentic selves. Relatedly, a sense of autonomy is associated with a broad range of positive outcomes, including greater intrinsic motivation and better psychological and physical health (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

... the current education system is designed for struggling and surviving rather than thriving.

Overall, when people account for the complex ways both historical and current systemic factors like race, socio-economic status (SES), language, gender, sexual orientation, and ability status impact the kind of workplace that staff experience and how they are involved in decision-making; when education leaders teach about and allow staff to name and challenge biased

and oppressive systems; and when people begin to shift the power dynamic from power *over* to power *with*, more caring, supportive, ethical, equitable, and just systems begin to be created. When staff's experiences, cultures, hopes, and aspirations are valued and supported, they develop empathy, are more confident and persistent, and subsequently thrive (Brady et al., 2020; Hausmann et al., 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

However, many current education settings and systems are not set up to help reach the “thinking brain” of adults or students or to support their actualization. In fact, back-to-back instructional periods 5 days per week and working nights and weekends do not allow people to get even their basic biological needs met (e.g., using the restroom when needed, time to eat, time to rest) much less the physiological, psychological, and social needs that are required to use the parts of the brain responsible for effective communication, collaboration, teaching, learning, and leading. Thus, the current education system is designed for struggling and surviving rather than thriving.

Perception and Bias

Another major reason education organizations are struggling to support staff well-being is a matter of perception and of attribution bias,³ including racial bias. According to Praslova (2023), attribution errors may be partially responsible for the human tendency to focus attention on individual rather than systemic factors. Praslova discusses how a fundamental attribution error (or dispositional bias)⁴ influences one’s brain to explain others’ behavior according to their disposition (e.g., character, personality, or ability) while ignoring contextual factors. For example, one may believe a person lacks time management skills rather than having too many responsibilities for their time.

Another bias, group attribution error,⁵ may skew a person’s perception of groups that are outside of one’s own. Thus, a person attributes a particular group or group member’s behavior to their characteristics rather than to the context or circumstances under which they are operating. Aware of this bias, for example, Black women leaders may hold back because they are worried about social penalties for violating gendered norms of “niceness” and racial stereotypes about “aggressiveness” (Bowles et al., 2007; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2021).

... any shorter-term actions recommended in this guide cannot replace longer-term efforts to make well-being efforts sustainable. ... Overall, these strategies are not meant as yet another thing to do; rather, they are options for integrating mindsets and practices that can become embedded in longer systems change efforts as a way of being, rather than a way of doing.

Overall, bypassing contextual and systemic influences on individual and collective functioning and organizational effectiveness comes at a cost—whether in terms of wasting resources (time, money, energy, morale) or committing harm (intentionally or unintentionally) to individuals and groups.

Shifting Systems

This guide, grounded in the science of learning and development and in systems thinking, is about the everyday systems and structures that can support or hinder individual and collective well-being.

³ Attribution bias is the tendency to explain a person’s behavior based on character rather than situational or environmental factors (see, for example, Kelley, 1967).

⁴ Fundamental attribution error (FAE) refers to “an individual’s tendency to attribute another’s actions to their character or personality, while attributing their behavior to external situational factors outside of their control” (Healy, 2017).

⁵ Group attribution error (GAE) is defined as attributing group members’ behaviors to internal character rather than situational factors or circumstances (Allison & Messick, 1985). This bias is seen most often across groups.

Nonetheless, any shorter-term actions recommended in this guide cannot replace longer-term efforts to make well-being efforts sustainable.

If you are an education leader, you are likely engaged in multiyear improvement or long-term systems change efforts. Longer-term, sustainable efforts typically involve leadership, teaming, resources and resource allocation (funding, training, time, staffing, ongoing supports), data, and participatory design approaches.

Although a brief overview of longer-term strategies and processes is provided in the “Tips for Using the Strategies” section, this guide offers a menu of systemwide practices that you can implement now while you simultaneously invest in the longer journey of creating a culture of care.

Overall, these strategies are not meant as yet another thing to do; rather, they are options for integrating mindsets and practices that can become embedded in longer systems change efforts as a way of being, rather than a way of doing.

The remainder of this document organizes the strategies by three tiers based on the science of learning and development: *safety and security*; *connectedness and belonging*; and *meaning, agency, and growth*. These tiers not only correspond with what decades of organizational, developmental, cognitive, and social psychology research say about human needs, but also provide a pathway for thinking about ways to promote the flourishing of all people on your teams and the health and well-being of the entire organization.





TIPS FOR USING THE STRATEGIES

Take a team approach. Systemwide well-being is best guided by a team. A leadership team can co-facilitate your well-being codesign process, testing and implementation, and iteration and improvement. It also can provide continuity as people enter and leave the system at the school, district, regional/county, and state levels. Although assembling a new leadership team to focus just on well-being is an option, it is often better to build off an existing team with overlapping priorities, processes, and activities, such as your school climate team, multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) team, or school improvement team. At a minimum, a well-being leadership team should include a school administrator, teacher, other school or district staff, and health or mental health professional such as a school social worker, counselor, psychologist, social and emotional learning (SEL) coach, or nurse. Of particular importance is to include someone who has authority to make policy and other changes and who is positioned to lead, message about, and prioritize your efforts. At regional/county and state levels, teams should be comprised of leaders from across departments within agencies and across agencies with diverse backgrounds and varied priorities. When possible, include someone who

Individual, collective, and systems well-being are interconnected. Everyone and everything contribute to well-being; thus, the responsibility should not rest on individuals or leaders alone, rather the collective must take responsibility for adversity and contribute to the solutions.

coordinates programs and has decision-making authority or influence such as a professional learning coordinator, curriculum and instruction lead, or SEL coordinator. Furthermore, ensuring there is representation from diverse backgrounds and identities will be essential for ensuring equity of voice and leadership.

Use a data-driven, participatory design approach.

Community-centered, participatory strategies help leaders and teams understand the history of the people and of the education community. Thus, collect data that vividly reflects the experiences of the people in your system. Consider, for example, ways to gather personal and collective stories of the members of your learning community. Such stories

paired with quantitative data such as school climate data can give you a fuller, more nuanced understanding of well-being in your system. Also, be sure to codesign well-being efforts with staff and leaders who are historically and/or currently marginalized. Additional information and resources on these topics are found throughout the remainder of the document.

Ensure alignment and coherence. Individual, collective, and systems well-being are more likely to result when initiatives are implemented within an aligned and coherent system. If educators at every level of the system—from the state level to the classroom—work in aligned and coherent ways to sustain the conditions that support well-being, every staff, student, and leader will have experiences that support personal purpose, healthy relationships, a sense of place in community, success in school and the workplace, and engaged citizenship. There are many things to consider for alignment, including but not limited to policies, programs, resources, practices, and so on, and for ensuring that these elements cohere around vision, commitments, and values. See WestEd’s alignment and coherence guides which aim to help state education agency (SEA) leaders (Walrond & Romer, 2021) and local education agency (LEA) leaders (Walrond, 2021) implement conditions for learning and development for students, families, and educators, through their work to improve the alignment and coherence of their whole-person initiatives.

Thoughtfully frame well-being efforts. When preparing to engage staff and leaders to cultivate well-being, it is essential to carefully consider how you will frame the initiative (see Heifitz et al., 2009). Thoughtful framing means communicating about your well-being efforts in a way that enables your school and district community members to understand the goals, why the effort is important, and how *they* can help carry it out. One possible way to frame well-being efforts is: *Individual, collective, and systems well-being are interconnected*. Everyone and everything contribute to well-being; thus, the responsibility should not rest on individuals or leaders alone, rather the collective must take responsibility for adversity and contribute to the solutions.

A well-framed message can resonate with people and speak to their individual and collective hopes and fears. In framing your message, pay attention to where your collective is starting from, not where you (the leader or colleague) are in terms of understanding and motivation. Try to use your messaging to inspire the group to move forward. WestEd’s [“Aligned and Coherent Communications to Serve the Whole Person: A Workbook for State Education Agencies”](#) (Canavero & Buckner, 2021) might be helpful in these endeavors for school/district leaders as well as regional/county and state education leaders.

Expect resistance. Historically, adult well-being has not been prioritized and is often invalidated in place of overworking and rewarding busyness and perceived productivity. Expect interested parties, particularly those working at the systems levels (school, district, and state agency leadership, school boards, etc.) to resist your efforts. Resistance may have less to do with the merits of your ideas and mostly to do with the fears of loss your ideas generate (Heifitz et al., 2009), and may be because systems change takes time. Some may worry that your efforts will lead to the loss of an existing program or initiative, to a reduction in funding tied to their job, or perhaps to a loss of personal or organizational identity connected with an old way of doing or being (see the description of

attribution errors or biases in the “Perception and Bias” section above). Others may worry that the efforts will take too much time or that long-term endeavors often feel impossible. Additionally, “resisters” are often people who need a different or more personalized way to be brought in, so consider your approach. Furthermore, often what you perceive as resistance is someone trying to take in and process new concepts; thus, time and revisiting conversations may be necessary. Overall, identify any fears in terms of threat or loss or time, acknowledge those with respect, and identify any needs for more personalized or intensive approaches. Most importantly, get allies who can help share your load and take small, incremental steps.

Stay the course and celebrate process over outcomes. Change takes time and is a complex and nonlinear process. You may sometimes feel like you will never succeed or that the effort is not worth your time. These feelings are common when engaging in systems change. Take note of the small successes you have had along the way and, when possible, enjoy the *process* not just the *outcomes* of the work. Remember, small choices matter. Decisions made at the micro level can influence the macro level. Again, gather your allies, share the work, and keep the work at the center.

Identify and allocate resources. Find your partners and secure resources. Supports are everywhere.

- Identify and allocate funding and time: When building your budget for the upcoming year, allocate resources to support the work and strategically align them with local, state, and federal efforts and funding.⁶ If your budget cannot support the work, many local agencies or businesses as well as regional or state agencies may be interested in supporting you. Build your network and ask for help. The answer is always no if you never ask.
- Engage boards and unions: Boards (school and state) and unions make and negotiate important decisions about the systems, structures, and processes of education. Engage in conversations to build awareness, share the data (local and research literature), and make a case to prioritize educator well-being via systems.

Get support for capacity building. Leadership and systems coaches can help you build organizational support for well-being through policies, systems of support, and financial resources.

- Professional learning and training for staff: Building systems-level well-being is a process of skill development. As with other professional learning efforts, you can invest in professional learning for staff to build the competencies and stamina required for engaging in more relational and strategic work.
- Coaching for staff: Regardless of the coaching type (individual, group, systems), it is important that coaches have a working knowledge of organizations, systems, and how systems change occurs and is sustained over time. Some foundational aspects include relationship building and trust building, communication and collaboration, understanding organizational climate and culture, nonlinear design and improvement processes, and data-driven decision-making.

⁶ For more on funding considerations at the time of this publication, see: <https://ccsso.org/resource-library/federal-funding-streams-and-strategies-improve-conditions-learning-resource-guide>

- Leadership supports: Leaders play a critical role in well-being efforts as they are uniquely situated between the systems and the collective or individuals within a system. Training and coaching in adaptive and transformative leadership and personal and organizational diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) work can be valuable. If you have a mentor, the mentor may be able to help you identify funding streams for this work. Many of the ideas in this brief are “free” ways of being and interacting with personnel. However, some of the ideas will take staff time.

The next section describes simple strategies and practices that are intended to be integrated into the everyday systems and structures of education settings. This list of strategies and processes is not exhaustive or prescriptive. Rather, it is an invitation and a foundation upon which to build and strengthen educator well-being in the context of educational systems. As you adopt and adapt any of these (or other) practices, you are encouraged to model them with your colleagues and students to normalize well-being practices and institutionalize a culture of care. Additionally, while these are organized by the science of well-being, they build off each other and often overlap.



STRATEGIES

Safety and Security



Many employers agree that protecting workers from physical and psychological harm, including injury, illness, discrimination, and harassment, is critical to employee well-being. And yet, safety and security are complicated concepts and include more than just the absence of harm. Gabor Maté (as cited in Gillen, 2021) says, “Safety is not the absence of threat; it is the presence of connection.” For example, tolerating diversity may keep an individual physically safe, but celebrating diversity as a source of strength will further contribute to individual and collective well-being. Relatedly, ensuring workers earn enough to meet their basic needs is an aspect of security, but helping staff save for retirement and grow in their careers may further contribute to their well-being. The following are some systemwide strategies that may cultivate or sustain various aspects of safety and security.

Adjust schedules and modify spaces to help staff meet their physical and psychological regulation needs.

According to research from Microsoft Human Factors Lab, work that does not allow for regular short breaks is contributing to fatigue, reduced focus and engagement, and stress (2021). Studies have found that even short breaks are good for focus and productivity (Ariga & Lleras, 2011), and short bursts of physical activity like walks have been shown to improve mood and energy levels (Bergouignan et al., 2016). Unfortunately, educators are often unable to access the breaks they need. According to a national survey, one in two teachers reported having inadequate bathroom breaks (Wong, 2015). Adjusting schedules and modifying spaces may help staff meet their physical and psychological regulation needs. You might do the following, for example:

- Modify instructional periods to build in 5 minutes at the beginning of every period for staff and students to get regulated and connected. You can find example exercises to promote regulation in [Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders](#) (Pate et

al., 2022) and in [Strategies for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning](#) (which also apply to in-person settings) (Pate, 2020). Institute the same 5-minute practice at the beginning of meetings or events that require the top and front parts of participants' "thinking brains." Leave another 5 to 10 minutes at the end of these periods for processing, rest, and reflection. Staff who need it can also use the time you set aside to meet their biological needs (e.g., take a restroom break).

- Assemble a peace corner or calm space for adults, like the spaces for personal regulation sometimes made available to students. The space might include soft seating; posters or other prompts to pause, notice, and name body and mind sensations and feelings; soft lighting; timers to keep track of time; fidgets; coloring sheets or books; headphones; and so on (see [Buckner, 2022](#)). If space on campus or in the building is limited, consider options for staff to receive sensory input during their breaks or in meetings using items such as fidgets, ball chairs, other moveable seating, or weighted blankets.
- Adopt a peer support strategy such as ["Tap in/Tap out"](#) (Berger, 2018), which allows staff to call on a peer when they need to take a break for a minute or two, whether for a bio break or to step away from a tense situation.

Improve pay, benefits, and access to services.

The importance of paying educators has once again come to the forefront of national discourse with the introduction of the American Teacher Act, a bill that would establish a federal minimum salary of \$60,000 for all public school teachers. Increasing educator pay has important benefits, including strengthening the career pipeline, reducing turnover, and improving student outcomes (Lynch, 2022; Sullivan, 2022). Although school leaders may feel constrained in their ability to increase teacher pay, access to benefits that are preventative, protective, and supportive—including physical and mental healthcare, retirement, and financial and legal services—is an important aspect of an employee's overall compensation package. The following are some ways you might improve staff benefits:

- Build partnerships to get leaders and staff access to mental health services and supports. These may include partnerships with regional education agencies, such as county mental health departments, or partnerships with private therapists. Listen to the [Beyond SEL Audio Gallery](#) to learn how [Van Ness Elementary School](#) ensures every educator at school has confidential, free access to a therapist available to them during school hours.
- Increase access to paid sick leave when possible. According to the Washington Center for Equitable Growth (2022), paid sick leave not only improves public health outcomes but comes at a relatively low cost to employers.
- Fund rotating substitute teachers who can help relieve staff when they are overburdened, such as for special education teachers who are preparing for an individual education program (IEP) meeting. Having trouble finding or funding substitute teachers? Partner with local higher education institutions. Many preservice educators and care providers need field experiences or practicum hours, and substitute teaching is a great way for them to apply their learning and meet their requirements at low or no cost to the district.

- Offer other benefits such as retirement counseling and financial and legal services.
- For staff compensation and promotion, practice transparency by making practices visible and engaging in active listening (Hutto, 2022).

Model and promote work–life balance or harmony.

All humans need some autonomy and flexibility to work when, where, and how it is best for them. However, integrating work and nonwork demands can be challenging for educators who are often required to stay after school for meetings and to grade student work at home, prepare at home for lessons, and work on various school-related teams and activities outside of school hours. Furthermore, “busyness,” urgency culture, and crisis-oriented ways of doing and being are the norm in education contexts. Schools often place unnecessary demands on staff and leader time, particularly as it pertains to data collection, homework, and meetings. These demands are often compounded by staff shortages and burned-out staff who are less productive because of the conditions in which they work.

Putting in place some of the systems and structures mentioned throughout this piece may take some time upfront but can free up staff and leader time and energy over the long term (see the alignment and coherence guides noted above: Walrond & Romer, 2021; Walrond, 2021). Consider these options to improve work–life balance:

- Adjust your schedules. Many schools in the United States have begun experimenting with their schedules to build in more regular working time for professional development, team meetings, and preparation and planning (e.g., half-day Fridays, once-per-month professional learning days, and so on; e.g., Benner & Partelow, 2017).⁷ Building in ample time for staff to do work-related tasks and for activities to support connection, belonging, and celebration is essential. Once schedules are re-established, some of this time should be flex time—that is, staff and leaders should have autonomy and flexibility to choose what they work on during that time and from where they work during that time. The flex time can boost productivity, creativity, morale, teamwork, community, and physical and mental well-being (Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021; Schor et al., 2022) and is crucial to school transformation efforts (Merritt, 2016).
- Establish policies (or norms) informed by staff to limit digital communication outside of work hours.
- Set caseloads for special education staff and other professionals such as school counselors, social workers, and psychologists that allow for effective work *and* work–life balance. Unfortunately, caseloads for school counselors, for example, are 78 percent higher than recommended by experts (Whitaker et al., 2019). Acknowledging the critical shortage of mental health professionals, efforts are underway to fund and train people for such positions. Nonetheless, the most effective strategies for reducing more intensive supports required by these types of staff are through investments in prevention (Tier 1/universal) activities and in building staff capacity. Thus, by reducing the need for Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, staff shortages are less of a concern.

⁷ Such schedules may disrupt schedules for working parents. Thus, as you are designing a new schedule, consider community partners who may be able to offer programs for students of families who do not have child care on these days.

Design for staff diversity and individuality

When people experience work as a place that acknowledges, affirms, and celebrates their cultures, identities, and agency, they have the investment necessary to be engaged and involved in their work, are better able to manage stress, and are physically and mentally healthier and happier (Huffman et al., 2020; Webster et al., 2018).

- Preemptively address needs of staff, including providing all-gender bathrooms, nursing rooms, and accessibility support (Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Dinour & Szaro, 2017; Padkapayeva et al., 2017; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016).
- Make inclusive language the norm, such as by inviting staff to share personal pronouns in email signatures and meetings (NIH, 2022).
- Develop a strengths-based community culture through learning about, highlighting, and rewarding varying strengths among staff (Maese & Asplund, 2022).
- Actively promote an inclusive environment with these suggestions from BetterUp (2021):
 - » Verbally affirm fair and inclusive behavior to demonstrate that this is valued behavior.
 - » Encourage time for thoughtful team building which can help foster supportive relationships.
 - » Openly discuss the importance of allies and the positive impact of being an ally who treats others fairly.



Pause, Reflect, Apply

- Try some of the “regulate” strategies when beginning meetings or classes or when you need to regulate. In-person and hybrid options are found in the following resources:
 - » [Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders](#)
 - » [Strategies for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning](#)
- Co-develop a plan for a peaceful space for staff. Consider what resources you need to secure, what permissions are necessary, and what staff would like to have in the space.
- Review and discuss [Unlocking Time’s](#) strategies for innovative use of school time, including the following:
 - » Involve teachers in the scheduling process.
 - » Free up teachers for collaborative professional development.
 - » Schedule for equity.
 - » Use an alternate enrichment schedule.

- » Give teams professional time through “PLUS” days (in-school professional development time for teacher teams).
- Listen to [Intensive Supports for Educator Well-Being: Van Ness Elementary School](#), a 17-minute audiocast featuring a partnership between a Washington, D.C., elementary school and a clinical psychologist to offer confidential, free therapy to current teachers and staff members. As you listen, reflect on how this story is a good example of systems that support well-being. Consider how the head of school made the decision to prioritize staff’s mental health as part of their focus on well-being. What data did they collect first? What were their beliefs and values about wellness and safety? What structures and partnerships did they need to create and/or develop to make this initiative happen?
- Listen to [Post-Disaster Mobilization Toward Healing & Recovery](#), a 19-minute audiocast about how Paradise School District (in California) responded to the collective trauma of the 2018 Camp Fire by offering a multitiered systems of support approach for ensuring that all school community members had access to counseling and other essential recovery services.
- Review your staff caseloads and compare them to the recommendations from professional associations such as those for school [nurses](#), school [counselors](#), school [psychologists](#), and special education [teachers](#). How many of these professionals do you need? What would the cost be? What existing funds can be leveraged or allocated for these? Identify external local, regional/county, state, and federal funds (including Medicaid reimbursement) for personnel (many exist but may not be explicit or apparent). For sustainability, be sure to prioritize the needs for these staff in future plans and budgets.

Connectedness and Belonging



Once staff feel physically and emotionally safe, calm, and settled, then you can implement systems and structures to support them in getting socially and emotionally connected through safe and supportive relationships that are attuned to each other’s needs.

Create systems for responsiveness and attunement

Systemwide, staff and leaders can develop consistent habits of being responsive and attuned to each other’s experiences, needs, hopes, concerns, and aspirations through authentic interactions and inclusive rituals. There are ample opportunities to develop consistent habits through informal means (hallway or lounge interactions) and through more formal systems (during meetings, check-ins, PLCs, etc.). The following are some examples:

- Offer opportunities for people to develop [rituals](#) that enable emotions to be named rather than dismissed (e.g., loss, change, etc.). On a small scale, doing so might include providing opportunities for people to discuss the “pits and peaks” of their day/week. This can be done synchronously (e.g., in a community circle or staff meeting) or asynchronously (on a web-based

platform such as a [Padlet](#) that is anonymous, or with sticky notes on a board in the staff lounge, and so on).

- Block some time on your calendar every morning just to interact with staff. When greeting a person, take time to inquire how they are doing or feeling. When asked how they are, people often say “I’m fine, and you?” and then move on. Practice modeling and affirming authentic responses such as, “Not that great, actually. Here’s what’s going on.” Or “I’m feeling a little stressed today. Maybe I can share with you at lunch what’s going on.” Or, I’m having a wonderful day! My daughter is having a baby!” When inquiring about what is happening, pause and wait for the response and acknowledge and affirm the response. The following are some example acknowledgements and affirmations that you might use to support your colleagues (from Pate et al., 2022):
 - » This must be hard for you, feeling [xyz].
 - » Thank you for sharing this with me.
 - » I understand you feel that way.
 - » That sounds like a [adjective] experience.
 - » I hear you.
 - » I’m not sure what to say right now, but I’m here to listen.

Foster collaboration and teamwork

As with many collaborative efforts, time is needed on the front end to set up the systems and structures for effective collaboration—but committing this time pays dividends in the end. Not only is the responsibility shared across teams or groups of staff and leaders, but diverse perspectives are represented and evident in the design and solutions that come from such collaboration. A culture of mutual trust, respect, and open communication among staff and leaders allows them to work together to improve systems and practices and to solve problems.

- Be intentional in assembling teams to ensure representation of multiple identities and diverse voices, particularly those marginalized.
- Ensure team members have clarity in their roles and responsibilities.
- Incentivize or compensate team members for work outside of school hours or for responsibilities that require additional work beyond their regular duties.

Cultivate “brave” spaces

Founded in higher education spaces as a way to foster inclusive dialogue, brave spaces offer an alternative to safe spaces because for many people of marginalized identities, there can never be a guarantee of safety (Ali, 2017). According to Arao and Clemens (2013), brave spaces have five features:

- Controversy with civility, whereby varying opinions are acknowledged
- Owning intentions and impacts, whereby participants engage in discussions of effects of dialogue
- Challenge by choice, whereby individuals are free to step in and out

- Respect of others' personhood
- No attacks or intentionally harming another

If schools cultivate brave spaces and are open and nonjudgmental to others' perspectives and experiences, even when people disagree (avoiding judgment, blame, and shame), then brave spaces can help staff and leaders recognize and reflect on their own and others' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. As people listen to understand and learn (not to respond or react), they can help affirm each other's experiences and identities and help members of the group feel valued and represented, all while engaging in important learning. Brave spaces also provide benefits to students. According to a study by Holley and Steiner (2005), students who attended brave classroom spaces were able to excel academically and in terms of personal growth and self-awareness. Cultivating brave spaces is a skill that leaders can learn and practice. Here are some ways you can begin to cultivate brave spaces:

- Create intentional spaces for brave conversations where it is OK to talk about and show emotions at work; be your true, authentic self (inclusive and supportive of all identities); and, when needed, speak up, disagree, and challenge the status quo (including challenging problematic policies, practices, or other leadership decisions). Offer a neutral party who can join staff for challenging conversations and can help staff work through conflict. A skilled facilitator and/or discussion guides or other resources can provide support if you and your staff are new at these practices (see [Aiko Bethea](#), [Ruchika Tulshyan](#), [Dare to Lead Hub](#), and [Brené Brown Discussion Guides](#)).
- Adopt what is often called a "grapple together" mindset and approach. Grappling provides staff and leaders opportunities to get comfortable with discomfort; take healthy and intelligent risks; normalize making mistakes; fail forward/learn forward; build critical thinking skills; build stamina; and appreciate the rewards of working through challenges to reach new learning, growth, and improvement.
- Try to avoid quick or one-sided problem-solving and jumping to solutions when problems arise. Instead, practice listening to and processing with others to allow the group to reveal potential solutions and next steps.

Create Structures for Co-Regulation

People may isolate themselves or be isolated by their communities during difficult times. However, co-regulation can help people feel calm and settled, feel included and connected, and get recentered and focused. Thus, create intentional spaces for co-regulating, supporting one another, and for positive relationship-building.

You can be a co-regulator for another person and help to calm their survival responses through your connection. Brains contain mirror neurons which support co-regulation (Cook et al., 2014). Mirror neurons allow for emulation and imitation of others' feelings and actions. These interactions between people can support empathy and compassion as well as facilitate co-regulation (e.g., Lamm & Majdandžić, 2015). Nonetheless, mirror neurons can also cause co-dysregulation. It can be easy to get caught up in commiserating with others, which is an example of co-dysregulation. Thus, be

mindful of your state and ensure you are regulated before engaging with and attempting to help regulate someone who is dysregulated.

Here are some options for co-regulation structures:

- One-on-one connection to mentor or buddy
- Affinity groups for various identities (e.g., Black staff affinity group for healing and well-being; Leaders of Color affinity group; BIPOC Allies affinity group; White affinity group for understanding race, power, and positionality; LGBTQ affinity group; staff with disabilities affinity group, and so on)
- Intentional time to check in as human beings; for example, focusing the collective toward how they are interrelating, or what Barton and Kahn (2019) call a “relational pause”; while always important, relational pauses are particularly helpful when dealing with adversity; norming regular well-being checks is an important use of time and can be done one-on-one and in small groups
- Being sure to notice the physical environment where people gather to relate and make adjustments that improve the space for physical regulation and interpersonal engagement

Create and reinforce shared commitment and purpose.

Shared commitment to and purpose for your well-being efforts should be consistently noticed, named, and reinforced in order to help staff see and remember their “why.” By acknowledging every person’s role and contribution to the collective well-being, you reinforce the well-being of the collective. Here are some ways to reinforce a shared commitment and purpose:

- Plan activities that allow for interaction, when possible. In a virtual setting, use tools such as online community platforms or videoconferencing so that staff can see and hear you and one another. In a nonvirtual setting, plan activities that allow for interaction in other ways, such as through group texts or phone conferences so that staff can interact with you and with one another.
- Consistently begin meetings with a relational warm-up activity. For example, ask staff about something fun they did the previous day or over the weekend.



Pause, Reflect, Apply

- Try some of the strategies in the “Relate” sections of the following resources (which offer in-person and hybrid options):
 - » [Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders](#)
 - » [Strategies for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning](#)
- Use the [Center for Creative Leadership’s guidance](#) on creating team norms, following the 10 steps that include reflecting on what contributed to bad team experiences and great team experiences, and on what the whole team can commit to in order to support each other’s success. Great examples of norms (or [ground rules](#)) from Dr. Brené Brown include:
 - » Speak your truth

- » Seek to understand
 - » Respect others' experience
 - » Disagree without discord
 - » Share the air
 - » Maintain confidentiality
- Use Dr. Brené Brown's [Discussion Guides](#), including Building Community, Belonging, Roots of Polarization, Humanity in Disagreement, and Connection Across Divides.
 - Practice using [The Accountability and Success Checklist](#) from Dr. Brené Brown:
 - » T: Who owns the task?
 - » A: Do they have the authority to be held accountable?
 - » S: Do we agree that they are set up for success (time, resources, clarity)?
 - » C: Do we have a checklist of what needs to happen to accomplish the task?
 - Listen to [Integrating Identity Affirmation With Teaching and Learning at Native American Community Academy](#). This 20-minute audiocast describes how a school in Albuquerque, NM, infuses racial, ethnic, and cultural identity affirmation into its programs and curriculum. As you listen, pay attention to which adaptive elements (mindsets, values, beliefs) guide the Native American Community Academy and how the staff foregrounds relationships and a spirit of collectivism. Then, note the technical elements (strategies, practices, processes, and so on) that come out of these adaptive and relational elements.
 - » What questions does this resource spark in your team? What are you now wondering about? How might this resource connect to what is possible in your own context? What specific actions might you take next?
 - Adjust the physical space where people gather. Avoid overhead fluorescent lighting and use natural light from windows or soft bulb lamps to reduce eye strain, headaches, and blurred vision (Hedge, 2010). For discussions, head outside when possible so you can move and communicate (as long as there are appropriate facilitates for varying mobility abilities). For more on adjusting your physical environment, see the [Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work toolkit](#) (Pate et al., 2022), and for more movement-related ideas, see the [Physical Activity Breaks for the Workplace](#) guide from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021).
 - Reflect on the way you, your team, or your organization processes conflict and harm. Read this [short article](#) about restorative conversations and reflect on the extent to which you apply these approaches. Think about ways you might incorporate these approaches into your conversations. You may also want to use this [guide](#) to engage in restorative practices with staff.

Meaning, Agency, and Growth



Once staff feel physically and emotionally safe, calm, and settled and feel socially and emotionally connected through safe and supportive relationships that are attuned to their needs, then staff are ready and able to engage with learning, working, and leading. To support individual and collective well-being (e.g., meaning, agency, and growth) at this stage, there are some systems and structures that can be implemented.

Establish systemwide commitments and policies centering equity, well-being, and care

- Establish a district and schoolwide commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) and to well-being and care. The commitment should be operationalized and evident in mission statements, norms, policies, programs, hiring, and strategic plans.
- Establish a systemwide commitment to regular human-centered data collection, meaning-making, power *with* (rather than power *over*), and aligned action about education staff and leader well-being and care.

Apply an asset frame

- Rather than focus on needs, deficits, and problem-solving, focus on strengths, assets, aspirations, and solution-finding.
- Avoid pathologizing people (students and adults) and their behaviors. Rather, focus on shifting and improving adult behaviors, staff relationships, student-adult relationships, and educational environments.
- Focus on what is working and/or what you would like to see happen. Shift from problem analysis to solution-finding.

Create opportunities for bidirectional feedback and personal and professional growth

- Provide timely, specific, and relevant reciprocal feedback. Leaders and colleagues can provide feedback through formal and informal means. Focus feedback on affirming and reinforcing strengths and identifying and leveraging assets while offering observations and support for growth opportunities.
- Create a culture of giving and receiving appreciation more frequently. Gagné and Deci (2005) found that recognition was a greater motivator than even financial incentives, and a recent study found that high-performing teams were more likely to report a cultural norm of giving and receiving appreciation than low-performing teams (Friedman, 2021). One way to support such a culture is to celebrate incremental accomplishments (“small wins”) of staff and leaders. This celebration can be formal (e.g., ceremonies) and informal (verbal praise, affirmation in email, and so on).
- Just as restorative practices are critical for building a strong and healthy community for students, these same practices can be utilized to support a strong and healthy community among staff. Build a culture of accountability through identifying and repairing harm through facilitation and protected feedback loops (Anderson, 2021).

- Invest in capacity building—including through quality training, professional learning, coaching, mentoring, internal mobility programs, and funding an employee resource group (Elliott, 2021). Investing in staff development helps attract great staff, keeps them engaged, and increases employee performance and retention (Misra, 2018; Singson, 2021).
- Provide clear, equitable pathways for career advancement. According to the Office of the Surgeon General (2022), doing so helps foster inclusion and diversity in the workplace. Provide resources and tools (e.g., accessible professional training programs, career navigation support, tuition reimbursement for continuing education, etc.) that can better support staff over time and address systematic barriers in education workplaces.
- Co-determine high, yet realistic and consistent expectations for work (task completion, performance) *and* for relationships. Build a “fail forward” team mindset and environment (e.g., counteracting the blame game and encouraging experimentation) (Childs, 2019). Reward and acknowledge process, effort, character, and relationships as much as typical performance outcomes.

Collect human-centered data and engage in meaning-making with staff and leaders

- Collect human-centered data using sources/tools such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, discussions, and conversations. Also, use participatory engagement strategies to understand how staff and leaders conceptualize their well-being at individual, collective, and systems levels because their ideas might not even be what others think is relevant or a priority to them. Co-develop data collection tools and action-planning strategies. [The Participatory Systems Change for Equity Guide](#) as well as the resources for design approaches and improvement science—as listed under the next strategy in this section—can support your efforts in this regard.
- As data are collected, engage in meaning-making with interest holders (in this case education staff and leaders). The resources for design approaches and improvement science—as listed under the next strategy in this section—can support your efforts in this regard.
 - » Take inventory of existing programs, practices, or other efforts. Identify overlapping and/or competing efforts as well as those that are unused, ineffective, or harmful.
 - » Review existing policies, conditions, and practices to determine alignment with current staff and leader values, needs, and aspirations (see, for example, [An Alignment and Coherence Guide for Local Education Agencies](#)).
 - » Co-examine and eliminate any systems or structures that are misaligned or cause harm and redesign, implement, and consistently evaluate programs of well-being, paying close attention and responding to the needs of staff and leaders with marginalized identities.

View staff as experts and engage in organizational practices and processes prioritizing their choice and expertise

View education staff as the experts of their own well-being and engage in practices and processes that prioritize them as experts. For example:

- Engage in consistent practices of offering choices and allowing people the agency to make decisions that work best for them, providing flexibility and autonomy in the everyday practices of classrooms, schools, districts, and other educational agencies—allowing people to be their authentic selves and celebrating their identities. For additional strategies, see the “Safety and Security” section above.
- When engaging staff in more formal ways of being and doing, engage them in learning about the level of motivation and commitment the staff members have in their work, in their school or district or agency, and regarding their own well-being.
- Avoid micromanaging; instead, trust staff to make decisions for themselves. While trusting them as the experts on their own lives, also recognize that they need support, so keep the dialogue open and offer support when needed or requested.

Develop organizational systems to promote voice, choice, codesign, and sustainability. It is important for the leadership team to understand the core components of codesigning as well as the systems, elements, and infrastructure required for successful and sustained well-being efforts, especially considering the school’s or district’s or agency’s context and culture. The following may support you in these efforts:

- A codesign process, participatory design, and collectivism are more ethical and equitable approaches than traditional top-down, White-, and/or leader-centric approaches to design and systems change. Use community-centered, participatory strategies to understand the history of the people and of the community and codesign with staff and leaders who are historically and/or currently marginalized. The following resources can support this type of design and development:
 - » [Participatory Systems Change for Equity: An Inquiry Guide](#) (WestEd, 2023)
 - » [Liberatory Design](#) (Anaissie et al., 2021)
 - » [Co-Designing Schools Toolkit](#) (n.d.)
 - » [Design Thinking for Educators](#) (IDEO, 2012)
 - » [Design for Belonging](#) (Wise, 2021)
- Design from the margins. [Lost by Design: Designing From the Margins Toolkit](#) uses three core design principles to structure human-centered, inclusive processes: (1) Emphasize and include the perspectives of people with the greatest needs; (2) build understanding by bringing interest holders together to foster partnership, empathy, and strong relationships; and (3) shift mindsets by developing new ways of thinking to transform practice and sustain solutions.

- Tools from [implementation science](#) and [improvement science](#) can be helpful in supporting teams through implementation and improvement processes.
 - » Designing well-being or other DEIA efforts requires considerable changes at personal, collective, and systems levels by all agents in the system; creating readiness for such change is a crucial element and is often overlooked or underemphasized. Assessing readiness for well-being (or any related efforts) will help create the right foundations for implementation success. For guidance, see the [District Capacity Assessment](#) tool from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) (SISEP, 2019) as well as [examples from NIRN's District Readiness](#) (SISEP Active States, 2020).
 - » Also important to consider are [implementation drivers](#)—key components of capacity that facilitate implementation and assure development of relevant competencies; necessary organization supports; and engaged, adaptive leadership (see NIRN, 2015).
 - » Also helpful is to understand how education systems improve. The six principles of [improvement science](#) can be particularly useful in codesigning your well-being efforts: (1) Make the work problem-specific and user-centered; (2) Variation in performance is the core problem to address; (3) See the system that produces the current outcomes; (4) We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure, so embed measures of key outcomes and processes to track if change is an improvement; (5) Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry; and (6) Accelerate improvements through networked communities.
- Codesign systems where staff can self-assess and self-identify a need for additional supports and provide referrals to supports and services that are more targeted (for small groups) or intensive (one-on-one) (see [Beyond SEL Audio Gallery](#) to learn how [Van Ness Elementary School](#) put such systems in place).



Pause, Reflect, Apply

- Provide your team a list of values (here is a [sample list](#)). Take some time individually to identify your top three to five values and then discuss collectively as a group. Then, identify the group's top five values and use them to guide your well-being efforts. You might want to listen to this podcast episode on [Living into Our Values](#) from Dr. Brené Brown and then complete this [Living Into Our Values](#) activity.
- Consider implementing some of the suggestions from [Strategies for Districts to Support Self-Care for Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). In this recorded webinar, presenters discuss the importance of a district approach to supporting healthy mindsets, connectedness, and belonging, and to cultivating healthy, realistic boundaries and interactions.
- Take some time to write or talk to someone on your team about the following questions (adapted from Trout et al., 2022):



- » Who are the key decision-makers at your site?
 - » Who has the power to make decisions and effect change? How do you know?
 - » Who has the least power? How do you know?
 - » How might individual, interpersonal, and structural elements affect the extent to which individuals and groups hold power at your organization?
 - » If you were to codesign a process with a wide range of individuals with varying degrees of social and positional power, whom would you want to invite? Why? What would you hope to learn from and alongside them? Consider what observations, patterns, and questions might arise after completing this exercise.
- For a deeper dive into the principles of equity-centered codesign, check out "[Street Data: Choosing the Margins](#)," a blog post by Dr. Jamila Dugan (2021), and watch restorative justice circles in action at a school board meeting in Oakland, CA, in the video "[Students Transform Tense Oakland School Board Meeting Over Budget Cuts Into a Circle](#)" (Friedman, 2019).
 - Look at your evaluation process, including its protocol. Notice whether it includes explicit opportunities for bidirectional feedback, strengths, and opportunities and supports for growth. Does it include opportunities to co-determine what "success" looks like? You might want to use Dr. Brené Brown's [Engaged Feedback Checklist](#) to prepare for productive, empowering, and positive feedback meetings. You might also review WestEd's [Anti-Racist Evaluation Strategies: A Guide for Evaluation Teams](#) for ideas about how to more authentically collaborate with Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) (2021).
 - Read the [Out-of-School Time Leader's Guide to Equitable Hiring and Staff Development Practices](#). (Although this resource is geared toward out-of-school leaders it applies to all educational organizations and leaders.) Reflect with your team about your hiring and staff development practices and make adjustments to your practices and policies as needed.
 - Once you have reviewed your policies and practices and engaged in human-centered data collection, begin the process of codesigning a well-being plan or strategy which can be integrated into larger strategic plans or can serve as a standalone plan that is consistently revisited and iterated as individual, collective, and systems needs and aspirations evolve. See the design thinking resources provided above.

CONCLUSION

You can co-create educational environments that are systems of well-being, demonstrating to staff and leaders that they matter, that their work matters, and that they have the resources and support necessary to thrive, not just survive. Although this guide does not provide a comprehensive or exhaustive list of systems, structures, or strategies, it describes research-backed themes of well-being and offers some examples, tools, and strategies from the field, providing opportunities for individuals and teams to reflect on the current state of their systems and to begin redesigning systems of well-being.

Nonetheless, the shorter-term actions described in this guide cannot replace longer-term efforts to make systemwide well-being sustainable. In addition to providing a brief overview of such longer-term strategies and processes, this guide offers a menu of systemwide practices you can implement now while you simultaneously invest in the longer journey of creating a culture of care. Overall, these strategies are less about another thing to do and instead are offered as options for integrating mindsets and practices that can become embedded in longer systems change efforts as a way of being rather than a way of doing.

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