

Too many school teachers are feeling overwhelmed and undervalued

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For a growing number of teachers, the job isn't what it used to be. The 'why' that drew them to the profession in the first place is buried deep under doubt and distraction.

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Teaching, in spite of appearances, can be a lonely profession. I don't mean the solitary work of marking or lesson planning that comes with the job, but rather the sense of powerlessness and isolation that many teachers are experiencing on the precipice of this school year. Plainly put, educators across the country are feeling stuck, their social and professional energy unseasonably low for September. Like cogs in a faltering machine – where the machine is an unwell school, a struggling district, or a collapsing system – they are fragmented and inert.

The blunt causes of these feelings are novel and complex, with some beyond the immediate purview of schools (e.g., increased polarization and declining institutional trust). But the acute causes are familiar enough: too many competing pressures and agendas without enough time and support, from ad hoc plans to new curriculums to parental interference to students' and teachers' own ill-being. While some students regained their instinct for freedom during the pandemic, some teachers became more alienated and extreme in their views. The bottom line is that many teachers feel overwhelmed and undervalued, which is having knock-on effects on job satisfaction and retention.

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And for a growing number of teachers, the bend-not-break defence is toward individualism. Individualist teachers close their classroom door and cover the curriculum, blocking out the greater school ecosystem. It's a coping strategy, or a deal of desperation teachers make with themselves, figuring that if they can't possibly do all the different (and sometimes nonsensical) things they are being asked to do, they will just do this one thing they know they can do pretty well. A closed door, a covered curriculum, a lonely profession.

An individualist teacher is not necessarily a bad teacher. As a parent, you might be gratified to have your child's classroom led by someone singularly focused on delivering content in which they strive to be expert. A principal might be relieved to have a staff member who sticks to themselves and the fundamentals. The image of the competent, individualist teacher who forges ahead while shutting out everything

else also serves as a convenient illustration for the back-to-basics narrative that is pervasive in education right now.

So what's the problem? Is this just about teachers' feelings? No, it's fundamentally about students. Because the best evidence tells us that collaboration between teachers, when supported and resourced, leads to deeper learning and better outcomes for students. Teaching is performed most effectively as a team or small-group sport, with teachers sharing insights and best practices about what works for them and what doesn't, as well as learning from other disciplines within the education ecosystem. Capacity built as a team will always beat individually built capacity.

Importantly, teachers who believe in their collective ability as a school team to positively influence students are shown to have the greatest impact on achievement. In order to really thrive, teachers need a sense of connection with each other and the flexibility to do more than just cover the curriculum. Teachers who are subject matter experts are nice to have, but they simply don't move the needle as much as a collaborative group who believe in and support each other as professionals. Teacher collaboration, not individualism, is what the back-to-basics crowd should actually be calling for.

This September, schools should be putting teacher collaboration at the top of the agenda, then striking many other items from the agenda. They should remember that closed classrooms are found in the rubble of decay, not in thriving systems. They should look for solutions that cohere, not divide. They should tap into the reason why teachers got into the profession in the first place, which is to make a difference in young people's lives through positive relationships and effective team instruction.

Parents, some of whom seem indifferent to the slow ruin of teachers collectively, should remember that to discomfort teachers is the duty of students, but it is not the duty of parents. To break the bond of teachers and students on a large scale is to risk producing a series of ragged edges when a smooth plane is what is needed to work from.

Teachers should open those classroom doors and walk down the hall for a closer look at what's going on next door.

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