



Southeast (HHS Region 4)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Staff Wellness

Strategies in the Southeast Region

Georgia: State Leadership for Staff Self-Care

Contributed April 2021 by Rebecca Blanton

Project Coordinator, GA Project AWARE

Wellness Wednesdays

Caitlin Dooley, PhD, Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning for the Georgia Department of Education is very supportive of self-care. Each Wednesday during the months of February and March 2021 was designated as Wellness Wednesday and a 30-yoga session was provided with a yoga instructor who provided yoga stretches virtually for anyone who cared to join the sessions. Once March ended, Dr. Dooley began taking suggestions from the staff on future self-care practices.

Coffee and Conversations

Jason Byars, PBIS Program Manager at GaDOE, instituted monthly Coffee and Conversations sessions for all PBIS District Coordinators and School Climate Specialists last fall. The series began with Dr. David Schonfeld providing information on the importance of self-care. Each month has a different topic and the attendees may ask questions or ask for resources. Dr. Dooley also began a Coffee and Conversations monthly call with anyone who wanted to join in an informal discussion about any topic.

North Carolina: Cleveland County Schools Project AWARE Pilot Site

Contributed April 2021 by Heidi Austin, EdD, MCHES, CFLE

Director, NC project AWARE

Reprint of article by Chris Bennett, EdD, Megan Johnson, and Melissa Lawter

Bennett, C., Johnson, M., and Lawter, M. (2021) Focus on Staff Wellness. *Principal Leadership*. September 2021 forthcoming.

Focus on Staff Wellness

Pre-flight instructions always advise travelers to put their mask on first before assisting those around them. The same holds true for educators surrounding their mental health and wellness.

In order to ensure wellness and learning are maximized for students, it is vital for teachers to be at their best each day. Teachers not only bring personal struggles to school, they also help students manage and cope with their own external experiences that create barriers to their learning. Compassion fatigue is real. Given the combination of stressors on teachers, our school has paralleled efforts to address not only the core and tiered social emotional and mental health

and needs of students, but our staff members as well in order to create an optimal learning climate.

As a school, we have focused on the stem 're-' with students in our work with restorative practices for students making bad decisions, refocus as a place for students to gather themselves before returning to their next class; the refresh room for students to shower and/or laundry to be washed/dried; the Reset Room for students to use strategies to 'reset' themselves before returning to class. We are using the same stems with our staff to help everyone rejuvenate, relax, and revitalize throughout the school year.

Reset Room

Our school has a Resiliency Room for students referred to as our Reset Room. Based on the same premise, we created a Reset Room for staff. The room is equipped with similar items - dim lighting, anti-gravity chairs, bean bag chairs, inspirational and self-care focused reminders, exercise balls, foam rollers and lacrosse balls for stretching, a fountain, and a resource wall - and is a place teachers can go for a few minutes during planning if they need an opportunity to reset or recharge. The room is designed to be a calm setting allowing staff to reset and prepare for their next class, meeting, etc. In order to make a Reset Room concept/atmosphere accessible from on campus and remote locations, we have a Virtual Reset Room for staff and students. The Virtual Reset Room contains links to visual and sound-based relaxation videos, coloring exercises, and mental health resources. Teachers (and students) are invited to access anytime as it is linked through our school website. All staff have been trained on the Community Resiliency Model (CRM) which is designed to provide self-regulation strategies to help widen our 'resilience zone' and regulate our nervous system. Teachers can use these stress-response resources not only when helping students cope with stress and stressful situations, but also themselves when they feel they have been or are about to be 'bumped out of their zone.' Strategies include:

- **Tracking** - reading our body's response to outside stimuli.
- **Grounding** - focusing on the response in this exact moment.
- **Resourcing** - person, place, or thing that brings joy.
- **Gesturing** - calming or self-soothing motions.
- **Help Now strategies** - quick nervous system reset strategies.

Within the Reset Room, we have asked staff members to post pictures of their resources to help them reset in the event they need to visit the Reset Room. Additionally, it is important for teachers to model strategies for students as guides in order to help us embed them within the culture of our school.

Recharging Activities for Staff

To help teachers focus on their own mental wellness/health and work to build community, we offer recharging activities for staff members. Activities are designed to allow staff to unwind and focus on themselves after pouring time, effort, and energy into students' wellness and learning. We record participation in recharging activities and prizes are raffled. Recharging activities we have introduced to staff include:

- **Wellness Bingo** - staff members were given a bingo-type card with 30 activities involving physical, intellectual, emotional, whole body, and general wellness activities. Staff members complete monthly and those completing the most activities win prizes.

- **Be a coffee bean** - based on Damon West's [story](#), this activity included watching his video, visiting the Reset Room with colleagues for coffee, and taking a small jar of coffee beans as a constant reminder to be a coffee bean - when faced with adversity, change the situation for the better.
- **Massages** - a local chiropractor provided staff members with free 15-minute massages during planning periods.
- **Build your own Zen Garden & stress ball** - staff fellowshiped and built Zen gardens and stress balls to keep in their classrooms.
- **Tea & chocolate** - these are 'fan favorites' of our staff - faculty visited the Reset Room during planning to enjoy tea and chocolate.
- **Paint party** - staff stayed after school for fellowship and a paint party as our art teacher led them through painting a snowman on a provided canvas.
- **Yoga & meditation** - a local yoga instructor provided a yoga session after school for interested staff.
- **Weight room & exercising** - our weight room was opened for staff for before and/or after school use.

Additional activities have been completed and planned for the future, but these are the highlights.

Weekly Highlight Moment

Each Friday, weekly notes are sent to staff outlining important dates and other notes. Oftentimes, there is a link to a Google document embedded in the weekly notes asking teachers to share a highlight from their week or work with kids, a new relationship built with a student, a fun fact they learned about a student, etc. Allowing teachers to reflect on their week and review the reflections and positivity of others works to build a more positive school climate.

Activities to Boost Morale, Confidence, and Collective Self-Esteem

To boost morale, confidence, and collective self-esteem, we recognize staff and students as often as possible. We have quarterly awards recognizing teachers for their efforts in curriculum and instruction, child advocacy, leadership, and innovation. The winners are determined by peers and passed to the next peer. Students nominate a staff member of the month; within their nomination they are asked for a reason. While we award one staff member with the actual award, all teachers receive the 'why' for each nomination they received. This provides a confidence booster to staff members monthly and allows them to see their students' admiration and appreciation.

Printed information via Employee Assistance Program

For staff wellness and mental health well-being beyond activities we can offer at school, we frequently send information to staff members of the Employee Assistance Program.

Collegiality and Community-Building Activities

In addition to providing staff an opportunity to engage in a wellness-type activity, an equally important component is providing staff with a sense of collegiality and community-building as we are all in this together. One way we focus on wellness and 'the work of learning' is to have robust professional learning opportunities. This provides a chance for teachers to collaborate and do the work together instead of working in silos. Teachers discuss and share strategies, successes, failures, and laughs. They distribute the workload to ease burdens in order to make themselves and ultimately the students successful.

North Carolina: Tar Heel Teachers at Home

Contributed April 2021 Heidi Austin, EdD, MCHES, CFLE
Director, NC Project AWARE

Tar Heel Teachers at Home: Elevating Teacher Voice in North Carolina is a weekly online series produced by Marlow Edutainment that offers online interviews to promote viable plans to meet the emotional and social needs of educators and students.

Episode Spotlight: Addressing the Social & Emotional Learning Needs of Students & Educators
On April 27, 2021 Tar Heel Teachers interviewed SEL experts and educators about wellness needs. Guests included Tonya Smith (Director of Choral Music at Elkin Middle/Elkin High in Elkin City Schools), Adrian Parry (Principal of Hickory Ridge Elementary in Cabarrus County Schools), Ryan Etheridge (Project ACTIVATE Evaluator & Coaching Coordinator with Cleveland County Schools), Dr. Christopher Soto (Social-Emotional & Mental Health Coordinator with Durham Public Schools), and Beth Rice (NCDPI Student Supports Consultant). View the 50-minute episode **here**.

Tennessee: Student & Family Supports, TN Dept of Education

Contributed April 2021 by Elizabeth Davis
Program Manager, TN Project AWARE

Online Training in the Science of Self-Care

The Student & Family Supports Team created a four-part training series *Everyone Plays a Role*. Part 1, *Connecting to Systems of Support*, was dedicated entirely to the science behind stress and why self-care is so important for staff working in the education and youth development fields.

Part One: *Connecting to Systems of Support* can be viewed **here**.

The Four-Part Series can be viewed **here**.

Tennessee: Report from Cocke County School District

Contributed April 2021 by Kim Guinn, RN, MS, BSN
Director, TN Project AWARE

Moving Beyond Physical Wellness: Surveying Needs Via Principals

Prior to COVID, our district was already engaged with some staff well-being practices through our Coordinated School Health (CSH) Staff Wellness program component. CSH was partnering with folks in the community to get more staff thinking about nutrition and fitness for their self-care - things like drinking more water or moving along to work-out videos. But no one wanted to hear that drinking more water or running a mile every day would help them "feel" better alongside COVID-19, magnified racial tensions, and a contentious political climate. As 2020 rolled on, staff were living in absolute fear. It became obvious that we needed to do more than just promote *physical* self-care. So, we conducted a principal survey and received some eye-opening feedback from principals and staff around mental health concerns.

Following, is excerpts of feedback we obtained:

- *As far as the teacher well-being... I do see that teachers are tired, stressed, and anxious from making their best attempt to provide high quality education in a very different and difficult school year.*
- *Mental health needs are on the rise as well.*
- *The fear of getting sick, disabled, or dying is heavy on the minds of many teachers and employees.*
- *Our team has been head-down and one foot in front of the other for a long time now. We serve. We do not seek help. We need to address this concern.*
- *Model self-awareness and self-reflection in district communications and encourage staff to practice self-care and connect them to resources when able to do so.*

We understood the cries for help in a poverty-stricken school district that had very limited outside resources, other than a free coffee at a convenience store. Self-care became more than just a physical need. After attending a virtual Coordinated School Health Institute presentation from Kristi Steel, Director of Mental Health at the TN Dept of Education, it became apparent that we needed to look beyond the physical needs of self-care. Kristi said we should not forget the importance of *Psychological, Spiritual, Emotional, and Relational Self-Care* practices


Sharing Resources: *Promoting Educator Well-Being: What is a District to Do?*

Online resources for creating wellness rooms offer concrete tips for creating spaces for staff. For instance, the ASCD Express website lists the article *Promoting Educator Well-Being: What is a District to Do?* Originally published in *Our Mental Health Matters*, the article offers information on creating a weekly wellness space, *Mindful Minute*, *Teacher Feature*, well teacher workshops, and community partnerships to support wellness. It also highlights a Tennessee school district that helps to foster staff self-regulation and resilience. A link to this article can be found **here**

Creating Wellness Rooms

Kaiser Permanente.org offers *Thriving Schools: Staff Breakroom Makeovers* as a resource. The Kaiser article gives ideas for making the most of breakroom space to create a staff and teacher lounge that can contribute to lower stress levels and provide an on-campus retreat where they can relax and support each other. Here are some ideas that Kaiser suggests for teacher breakrooms:

- couch, armchairs
- table, lamps
- paint
- bookshelf
- bulletin boards
- posters
- instructions on how to use exercise equipment
- water dispenser
- yoga ball and mat
- dining chairs
- sound machine, stereo
- switch from overhead fluorescent lighting to softer lighting
- room divider
- art therapy
- positive messaging art
- plants.

 Currently, Cocke County has added two staff wellness rooms where a lone copy machine once stood. Research supports that mental health self-care for educators can build a positive school culture that improves both student and staff wellbeing and raises academic scores! One of my principals calls their new staff room the Tranquility Room. I have utilized the Kaiser's list above to create our wellness rooms and even asked staff their self-care strategy so that it wasn't me telling them what their self-care should look like. We have placed Keurig Coffee stations and even a retro Ms. Pac Man arcade game system within one staff lounge. Essential oil diffusers were also added. Each staff room is unique and really focuses on the school's staff self-care needs. This room has a very different look now compared to a few self-help books in a bathroom bookshelf in the past. At this point the principals have not rolled out any self-care policy with their staff, but they are fully aware of the trauma that their staff has gone through last year. What we are witnessing is that staff are taking advantage of these rooms regularly and even stopping in them prior to ending their school day to decompress before heading home. Staff are now invested in themselves and each other.

Southeast MHTTC: Mental Health Promotion for All

From Southeast MHTTC

Online Training

Southeast MHTTC and the National Center for School Mental Health created an eight-part series titled *National School Mental Health Best Practices: Implementation Guidance Modules for States, Districts, and Schools*.

In April 2021 *Module 5: Mental Health Promotion for All* was launched. This module first reviews specific types of universal mental health promotion services and supports, including school climate, school staff well-being, positive behaviors and relationships, positive discipline practices, mental health literacy and social emotional learning. Then, quality indicators and best practices are reviewed to ensure these services and supports are of high quality, adequate implementation, and fit local considerations. The online training can be accessed **here**. The full set of implementation guidance and related tools are available **here**.

Southeast MHTTC: Creating Cultures of Staff Wellness and Care for Our School and Community Partners (3 parts, with 7 videos)

From Southeast MHTTC

This three-part series shares information about conditions that support health, regulation, and healing when stress levels are high and enduring. It provides tools and strategies that can be used to prevent stress from becoming harmful, or to ensure you and your workplace bounce back from it when it gets you down. Part I begins with a focus on what you are experiencing right now and connect you to concrete ways to understand and change how you experience of stress. Part II builds capacity to act individually and collectively to support the emotional health of self and colleagues during times of stress. Finally, Part III focuses on how leadership establishes or strengthens cultures of care in order for all staff to thrive.

Part One: In this Moment: Nudging Ourselves Towards Inner Calm and Connection is grounded in supporting healthy stress management for feeling safe and connected, rather than feeling like we need an escape hatch. Link to recorded presentation can be found **here**.

Part Two: Listening to Scientists and our Grandmothers: Taking Care of a Human Being reviews research and best practices on things that keep prolonged stress from impacting our short and long-term health - so we can experience the health and vitality we deserve in our work with students and colleagues. The recorded presentation is forthcoming, but a seven-module video series that links to presentation is available online. Please see information below:

7-Module Video Series: Listening to Scientists and Our Grandmothers: Taking Care of Human Beings

These seven videos may be used selectively as independent learning modules in any sequence or as a cohesive set.

Summary of content:

There are seven evidence-based self-care strategies currently most recommended to mitigate the impacts of stress. Each of these reduces stress hormones, enhances neuroplasticity, and reduces inflammation....which all play important roles in counteracting the body's stress response, and improving health and well-being.

These are the fundamentals to taking care of a human being - to taking care of ourselves and each other. We'll review the science behind why we can justify taking a few minutes out of the day to care for our basic human needs and think of the grandmothers whose wise practical advice has been the source of good care for generations. Overall, the learning objectives are for participants to:

- Understand science behind practices that support human health and wellbeing.
- Learn strategies to support the health and wellbeing of yourself and your colleagues.
- Understand the value of caring for basic human needs, individually and collectively.

A link to the landing page for this series is **here**. Links for individual video modules follow:

- Quality Sleep: **link** to video
- Supportive Relationships: **link** to video
- Mindfulness: **link** to video
- Mental Health: **link** to video
- Access to Nature: **link** to video
- Physical Movement: **link** to video
- Nutrition: **link** to video

Part Three: Creating Intentional Cultures of Wellness and Care Where Staff Can Thrive outlines an imperative for leadership to create workplaces where employees have a chance at being healthy, and where they are safe from the physical and emotional damage associated with chronic stress and lack of social support. We share research on best practices and real world examples of systems and policies that promote staff wellness so that the campus environment is supportive for all. A link to the recorded version of this presentation is To Be Announced. Please check the Southeast MHTTC website in the coming weeks to review.