

# Insights: How Can We Foster Teacher Wellbeing?

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Throughout the past three years, the world has witnessed the incredible contribution of teachers as they navigated numerous challenges: shifting learning online instantly, supporting students through events such as the pandemic and wars, and navigating many other daily challenges that create stress and anxiety.

This has all placed a heavy burden on teachers, compounding the existing challenges faced around the world in attracting and retaining teachers into the profession. It has also placed a bigger importance on focusing on teachers' wellbeing and mental health, for their own sustainability in this work, and also so that they can be good stewards for supporting the wellbeing and learning of their students.

Over recent years, we have been learning about what it takes to foster teacher wellbeing. We have found that organizations that prioritize teacher wellbeing do the following:

## 1. Prioritize wellbeing as essential not as optional

Wellbeing is a key outcome to prioritize in itself both for students and for the adults who support them. We want students and teachers to achieve results, but we also want them to experience joy, meaning, love, and connection along the way.

For teachers, a focus on wellbeing is also essential to ensure their long-term sustainability in the work. In addition, science shows us that a student may mirror the emotional state of a teacher. This means that a calm teacher can inspire calm in her students, whereas a stressed teacher can pass on stress to students.

For students, wellbeing is critical for learning, since safety and love are preconditions for learning. Brain science shows us that when students are in stressed states, it not only affects their wellbeing, but it also inhibits the executive centers of their brains responsible for higher order cognitive thinking.

We also heard that it is important to be intentional about wellbeing, and that it is an outcome that we can work toward. Many network partners are taking steps to place more of an explicit focus on wellbeing, through efforts such as creating wellbeing teams or designing surveys that assess teacher wellbeing.

## 2. Focus on wellbeing at all levels

If we wish for students to be well and learning, we also need to support teachers to be well. This means that we also need to invest in the wellbeing of the staff who support those teachers.

Juan Manuel Gonzalez, CEO of **Enseña por México**, shared that: *"It is hard to support the wellbeing of teachers and students if you don't do it yourself first."* His organization made it a big priority to invest in the wellbeing of their own staff, especially during the pandemic, when they found that staff were overwhelmed. They started by creating a partnership with the Centre for Emotional intelligence. As staff began to learn how to better identify and regulate their own emotions, they saw the value of these tools, and began sharing them with teachers in their program. In turn, these teachers began using these tools with their students.

This virtuous cycle of wellbeing is also supported by the data. By analyzing teacher attrition data collected from across our global network, we discovered that “engagement” levels of staff members of Teach For All partner organizations (our closest proxy for staff wellbeing) correlate to trends in teacher retention. This means that what these organizations do to take care of their team members—including those who serve as teacher trainers and coaches—translates to how teachers feel.

### 3. Ensure basic needs are met

Teachers are often working in challenging environments. In some cases, taking care of basic needs can make a significant difference. For example, **Teach For Nigeria** provides extra financial security allowances for those in border areas, health care for its teachers, and data allowances to support teachers to connect with one another. Other network partners have provided basic support to meet the unique challenges that teachers face in their contexts, such as providing teachers with access to safe co-working spaces, offering financial wellbeing seminars, and focusing on good nutrition practices.

### 4. Build “inner leadership” capacities

It is important to support teachers to do the “inner work” on themselves to build skills and mindsets that can help them deal with increasingly complex and uncertain environments. This means supporting teachers to be self-aware of their emotions, and develop healthy coping mechanisms, whether it’s mindful breathing or reaching out to a colleague for support. When teachers struggle with wellbeing, often the root cause is an underlying feeling of “*I’m not good enough*”, or “*I can’t do it all*”, or “*I must be 100% in control.*” We need to support teachers to unlearn these limiting beliefs, and grow their capacity to deal with challenges.

Many programs across our network are explicitly building teacher training that focuses on leadership skills such as resilience, mindfulness, managing energy, regulating emotions and perspective-taking. For example:

- **Teach For Slovakia** is using the PR6 Resilience Model, which focuses on six domains that predict resilience (e.g., connecting to purpose, emotional regulation, problem solving, foundational health, tenacity, collaboration). Each teacher comes up with a development plan that is focused on one of these domains and they focus on building habits that support that domain.
- **Enseña por México** has created a holistic wellbeing “curriculum” for its staff and teachers, with sessions every two weeks on topics from self-compassion to building healthy relationships. They also use simple tools like an *emotional thermometer* to support students, teachers and staff to become more aware of their emotions. In addition, the team introduced a mobile app, which contains guided meditations that encourage users to pause throughout the day.
- **Teach For Lebanon** offers practical skill-building sessions with teachers on topics such as managing stress and time management, with a wellbeing program run for teachers *by teachers* so that the strategies are relevant and practical.

### 5. Create space for healing and support teachers to work with trauma

Teachers and students today are facing a great deal of trauma and toxic stress, driven by enormous global challenges such as the pandemic, war, refugee crises, and local challenges. We are seeing examples of intergenerational trauma that persist over decades, because little was done to heal from past effects of colonialism, war, endemic poverty, and other systemic challenges. Not only do we see the impact of trauma show up in students, we also see the effect of vicarious trauma on teachers.

If we are going to be placing teachers in challenging environments, we need to be able to support them. By building our teachers' capacity to address trauma in themselves, they can also better support their students through challenging times. The core of this work is around creating environments—organizations and classrooms—where every person feels safe, loved, and connected.

The global *Trauma & Wellbeing Practitioner Fellowship* hosted by Teach For All alongside trauma experts from Georgetown University brought together teacher developers from 22 countries with the focus on first developing their own capacity in working with trauma, and then supporting teachers in their contexts to build this capacity as well—grounded in the latest neuroscience and trauma-informed teaching practices. Those who participated then implemented trauma-informed initiatives tailored to their own local contexts.

As one example, **Teach For Nigeria** trained all their teacher coaches and teachers on trauma-informed practices, with a focus on putting safety and love at the center. As part of these sessions, teachers and coaches each built their own systems maps to explore factors from their own lives that may be contributing to stress or trauma. This self-work to understand and heal one's own trauma is important, especially for teachers, so that they don't unintentionally replicate their own trauma cycles with their students.

## 6. Connect to purpose

As we interviewed teachers from around our global network, many shared that when they were able to connect with a deeper sense of purpose, they felt better able to navigate challenges. Sussan Benjamin, a teacher at **Teach For Nigeria** who also mentors teenage girls shared that: *"If you're doing what you love, you don't feel stressed. Instead of feeling stressed, you feel motivated because you want to learn more and do more."*

Nara Magtaghyan, Managing Director of Program at **Teach For Armenia**, shared that when teachers first start, they often complain about workload. However, over two years, as they become more connected with a larger purpose, that of putting "students at the center," everything changes. When they also realize that they're not doing this work *for* their students, but rather *with* their students, their complaints lessen. Their conversations then shift to what more they can do to enable their students' leadership.

Nara also shared that regular habits and practices can help teachers connect with this bigger purpose on an ongoing basis. For example, Teach For Armenia encourages daily journaling practices where teachers can reframe daily challenges by reconnecting with their bigger "why".

## 7. Build support networks and ensure that teachers feel seen & heard

The [research](#) shows us that if teachers have strong support systems (even one or two key relationships within the school), that can make a huge difference in preventing burnout. This can look like peer-to-peer support, support from coaches or other staff, or professional psychological support. These networks help teachers realize that they are not alone, and feel supported in working through challenges. For example:

- **Ako Mātātupu (Teach First New Zealand)** builds a community of care around teachers to support their wellbeing, grounded in indigenous models of wellbeing that prioritize relationships and holistic care. This includes kaihāpai (teacher coaches) who provide academic support and pastoral care, as well as access to a professional therapist who is deeply grounded in the organization's values. The focus is on the wellbeing of the whole person and ensuring that all aspects of a teacher's human experience, such as their culture, family life, and identity, are fully valued.
- **Teach For Nigeria** has created *Fellows Connect*, a cell group of 25-30 teachers in each province, where teachers support one another on common challenges in a self-led peer-to-peer way. These

groups also support peers to strengthen their connections with one another, as they work together on shared projects in their local communities.

- Many partners offer professional psychological support to their coaches or teachers. For example, **Teach for the Philippines** has an in-house well-being officer; **Teach For India** offers support through partnering with a mental health company; **Enseña por México** partners with a school of emotional intelligence that supports staff and teachers; **Teach For Nigeria** hosts a quarterly gratitude and wellbeing circle for teachers, where a therapist joins for support.

Many shared that it's not just what we're *doing* that matters, but also who we're *being*. When a teacher voices a challenge they're facing, the most important thing is that they feel seen and heard. It is important to listen without judgment, and offer a safe space where the teacher's concerns can first be validated. Joyce Saadeh, a teacher from Teach For Lebanon shared her biggest piece of advice for new teachers: *"Remember you're not alone. You have support networks around you. Reach out and get support."*

## Learn More

- See this piece from Wendy Kopp and Radha Ruparell on the [Virtuous Cycle of Fostering Wellbeing in Our Schools](#)
- Check out the summary insights and videos from our first [Wellbeing Summit](#) in September 2022 to learn more about teacher wellbeing, trauma-informed teaching, and organizational wellbeing.
- The [Mental Health & Wellbeing Community](#) is a monthly virtual peer-to-peer learning space for participants, alumni, and staff from Teach For All's network to learn together on topics of mental health and wellbeing. To join this space or learn more about future opportunities, sign up [here](#).
- To learn more about our work in supporting trauma-informed practice across the global Teach For All network, reach out to [Stephanie.Wong@teachforall.org](mailto:Stephanie.Wong@teachforall.org).
- The [Global Leadership Accelerator](#) supports leaders across the network to do the "inner self-work" to transform the systems around them. To learn more, reach out to [Radha.Ruparell@teachforall.org](mailto:Radha.Ruparell@teachforall.org)