



INTENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR EDUCATOR WELL-BEING



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**VAN NESS
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**
WASHINGTON, DC

“When you have made connections with other people, when you have time for that relationship building — it all contributes to your feeling of wellness. I want to continue to build out that work because it’s just the most stressful time for teachers. It’s a work in progress . . . we definitely are trying because we recognize teachers can’t be well for the kids if they are not themselves well.”

CYNTHIA ROBINSON-RIVERS
Head of School

Teacher well-being is critical to the well-being of the students they serve,¹ as well as to the stability of their schools.² Our teachers deserve to be well but report the highest levels of extreme daily stress compared with other occupational groups (tied only with nurses), resulting in high levels of teacher turnover and subsequent instability among school communities.³

This trend is especially dire in Washington, DC, which had a teacher turnover rate of 25 percent in 2019, higher than both the national average and the urban average. Teachers cited a lack of administrative support in addressing challenges as well as a lack of support for teacher safety and mental health as key reasons for their departure.⁴

Schools that cultivate positive work environments for teachers are less likely to experience high levels of teacher turnover and more likely to have in place the classroom conditions necessary for students to learn. As the former District of Columbia Public Schools Director of Teacher Retention and Recognition, Van Ness’ founding principal Cynthia Robinson-Rivers had extensive insight on the integral role teachers play in student success, as well as the chronic risk of teacher turnover. She has led the school’s development of a healthy, sustainable work culture for its teachers.

At Van Ness, lead teachers are accompanied by a teaching assistant or partner teacher who shares their responsibility for classroom management and addressing learning gaps. The school also offers personalized professional development opportunities that are aligned to areas for growth and interest.

Intensive mental health supports

For more intensive needs, the school has developed a system for providing mental health care for students and staff through a community partnership



“We were so focused on the children and providing direct care for the children. We realized that, well, actually, it’s the adults around the children, it’s the educators, and it’s the parents. And if we can pour into [the adults, then] outcomes for children — they were more healthy. Their grades were better. They had better ways of being able to cope, manage, navigate. And so, we really made a strong push to pour into the adults.”

DR. KARIMAH WARE

Clinical Psychologist and Director of Clinical Training at MedStar WISE

with the MedStar Center for Wellbeing in School Environments (WISE). During the past school year — a time of increased stress from the COVID-19 pandemic and reckoning with systemic racism — Ms. Robinson-Rivers prioritized offering voluntary, no-cost therapy sessions to interested teachers during the school day through WISE. To ensure all teachers could use this opportunity, the school implemented a 6–8-week cycle of therapy sessions that can be extended indefinitely when teachers express continuing needs. This strategy has been a crucial outlet and resource to mitigate teacher stress.

Many returns on investments in well-being

While it requires funding and time to invest in mental health support at Van Ness, research has also shown that investing in teacher well-being can yield cost savings by avoiding teacher attrition and can improve student outcomes.⁵

Results at Van Ness support this link: the school has consistently scored in the top five schools in DC on the district’s Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which measures instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization. Combined with anecdotal data from teachers on the effectiveness of the school’s mental health supports, the school provides a powerful example of using the whole-person approach in building a community that prioritizes wellness for all.

Van Ness Elementary School BY THE NUMBERS

Number of Students	325
Geographic Setting	Urban
Grades Served	Pre-K–5
School Model	Traditional public school
Conditions for Equitable Learning & Development	Personal, Learning Environment, & System

Student Demographics	5% Latinx*
	58% Black
	27% White
	1% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
	0% Native American*/Alaska Native
	8% Multiracial
	16% Students with disabilities
	2% English language learners
30% Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	

*Student Demographic data sourced from profiles.dcps.dc.gov and nces.ed.gov. NCES lists Latinx as “Hispanic” and Native American as “American Indian.”



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COMMUNITY-LED STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Consider while you listen. . .

COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Through their partnership with WISE, Van Ness Elementary has provided mental health care for students and educators. What community partnerships could your team establish or use to provide greater behavioral health supports for your school community?

TEACHER WELL-BEING

Clinical psychologist Dr. Karimah Ware discussed how important adult well-being is in ensuring students are cared for, and research shows that teachers experienced some of the highest stress levels when surveyed — and that was pre-pandemic. How does your school assess educator well-being? What type of supports does your school have in place for educators during the pandemic — and beyond?

INTENSIVE SUPPORTS

How can the roles and responsibilities of staff — including social workers, school counselors, and others — be organized to strengthen the intensive well-being needs of adults? How might community partnerships lend additional support?

Related Resources



For more teacher well-being strategies during the during the Coronavirus crisis, check out these related resources from WestEd: [Self-Care Strategies for Educators](#) and [Community-Care Strategies for Schools](#).

Conditions for Learning and Development

In their work, school leaders and educators must attend to a range of conditions that can promote — or inhibit — learning and development.⁶ These include Personal Conditions, Learning Environment Conditions, and System Conditions.

PERSONAL CONDITIONS

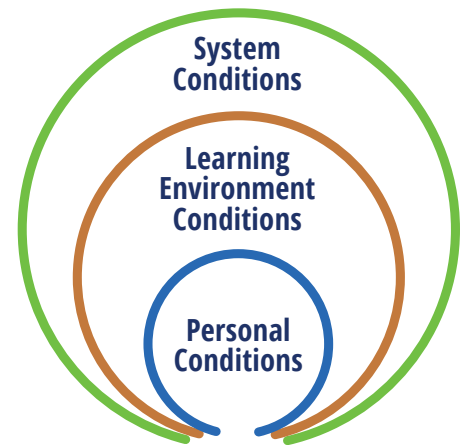
Conditions that bolster and ensure health and well-being within individuals in school communities, including social and emotional health and well-being as well as the physical, mental, and behavioral health of students and the adults who care for them.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT CONDITIONS

Conditions that foster safe, supportive environments and responsive, reliable relationships. These conditions include school climate and trauma-informed and restorative practices, as well as the policies, structures, and systems in place at the district, school, and classroom levels. Together, these can promote resilience, provide protective factors, and ensure that every person — regardless of background, circumstance, or identity — can learn, grow, and thrive.

SYSTEM CONDITIONS

Conditions stemming from the complex community and social factors that can influence health and well-being. Here, cross-sector collaboration between schools and other sectors — such as health, mental health, justice, child welfare, housing, and anti-poverty efforts — can accelerate schools' positive impacts on the development and well-being of students and families.



BEYOND SEL
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The BEYOND SEL Audio Gallery

is a series of stories that capture promising practices shaping the landscape of social and emotional learning and support in schools across the country.

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- ¹ Zhang, Q., & Sapp, D. A. (2008). A burning issue in teaching: The impact of perceived teacher burnout and nonverbal immediacy on student motivation and affective learning. *Journal of Communication Studies*, 1(2). <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/25/>
- ² Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American educational research journal*, 50(1), 4–36.
- ³ Greenberg, M. T., Brown, J. L., & Abenavoli, R. M. (2016). *Teacher stress and health effects on teachers, students, and schools* [Issue Brief]. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University. <https://www.prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf430428.pdf>
- ⁴ Members of the DC State Board of Education. “Results from the 2020 DC Teacher Attrition Survey” (2020). <https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/2020-02-29-FINAL-2020%20Teacher%20Attrition%20Report%20%2B%20Cover%20Memo%20%2B%20Reply%20Letters.pdf>
- ⁵ Lever, N., Mathis, E., & Mayworm, A. (2017). School mental health is not just for students: Why teacher and school staff wellness matters. Report on emotional & behavioral disorders in youth, 17(1), 6. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6350815/>
- ⁶ Garcia Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67(5), 1891–1914. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131600>