

Creating an environment that promotes the wellbeing of educators.

1) Talk openly about mental health issues, including your own

“Making mental health visible is key,” said Darcy Gruttadaro. District and school leaders should look for every opportunity to talk about how difficult the pandemic, and discussions on injustices, have been, and how “we all have mental health struggles,” and need support, she said.

Administrators should take care not to overuse email in conveying their support for psychological wellness; there is no substitute for eye contact on such a sensitive, important topic, Gruttadaro said. District officials and principals should set up face-to-face meetings schoolwide, or in smaller groups or one-on-one to express concern, support, and commitment to providing care.

It is also important for leaders to show their own vulnerability. Sharing their own struggles and self-care practices sends a powerful message that mental health struggles are normal and accepted, experts say. As a leader, you can include your therapy appointments in your public Outlook calendar, or mention that you see a therapist. Create a storytelling event where colleagues share their experiences with mental illness. Take a few days off and set your out-of-office message to say you won't be answering email so you can fully recharge.

All these things embedded in a culture of support for a “mentally healthy workplace” can encourage people to share their difficulties and seek help, said experts, head of client services and a principal at MindShare Partners, a nonprofit that advises organizations on workplace mental health.

Avoid burying colleagues' emotional difficulties under a blanket of cheerful pep talk. What doesn't work is toxic positivity. You have to respond to the temperature in the room. When you try to push past the energy in the room and just stick with the agenda, that's a problem for people.

2) Train your team to spot early signs of mental health struggles

Experts increasingly suggest mental health training for leadership teams. Engage a consultant to train district leaders, principals, and counselors in seeing that a work performance issue might be a mental health struggle in disguise. It's about recognizing when you, or someone else, needs help.

District and school leaders might also consider training a group of willing employees to serve as mental health ambassadors who build awareness and connect colleagues to resources. Conducting regular surveys or using pulse checks can help leaders track their teachers' wellness.

3) Ask whether you fully recognize your teachers' needs

Research shows that only about 29 percent of district leaders and 16 percent of teachers say that their school or district provides adequate mental health benefits. In a survey conducted, seven in ten district leaders said teachers' emotional and physical well-being rank high on their priority list, but fewer than one and a quarter of teachers stated that those things were a high priority in their districts.

Mental health issues often hide in plain sight. Studies show employees are reluctant to share their struggles or ask for help. Researchers found that even before the pandemic, 6 in 10 employees had experienced symptoms of mental illness in the past year, but most never told anyone at work about it.

4) Create ongoing systems of support, like virtual groups and call lines

Like most of the district leaders, work to support their staff is part of a larger, ongoing program to build strong social-emotional support for students. As a part of that work, creating virtual support groups for teachers, principals, and assistant principals, facilitated by staff is important.

Only a few teachers sign up for support groups early in the year but as the year progresses and as teachers request for guiding sessions for their own schools, rather than connecting with their colleagues districtwide. It is evident that educators need some sort of support coming from the district.

Create an opportunity to exhale for educators, to meet with people who get it, understand, and not to worry about something they share in confidence. Think about creating teacher and principal call lines. If you can provide free weekly sessions to help teachers process their feelings. Having district social workers and counselors, and staff from the office of student and family support services, help callers connect with support resources, or pay a visit to help. Have structures in place that will help all if not most people that turn to these for help.

5) Build a culture of check-ins

Many employees dread the time-suck of meetings. But they can be a key lever in building a mentally healthy workplace. For district and school leaders, those gatherings can be an opportunity to engender a culture in which genuine inquiries about colleagues' well-being and supportive responses are woven into daily practice. Help district and school leaders build emotional check-ins into nearly every meeting and professional learning day during the pandemic.

6) Recognize that some employee groups may need more support than others

Don't assume all employees need the same support or services. Understand that some people need more support than others and understanding this will help guide you in maximising the amount of support that you will be able to provide. This can be achieved through conversations, surveys, and other methods. It is about exploring different methods or techniques to achieve the goals that you set for.

7) Reduce barriers to getting services within your employee assistance and health insurance programs

Leaders should find out how widely these services are used, and investigate what might be standing in the way. Teachers might have a tough time getting counseling through their medical plans, for instance, because in-network counselors are often booked months in advance or not taking new clients.