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How Teachers' Stress Affects Students: A Research Roundup

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New research is helping to clarify how teachers become chronically stressed, and how it can affect their students' well-being and achievement. [Back to Story](#)

"Relationships really matter for learning; there's a lot of evidence around that," said Robert Whitaker, a professor of public health and pediatrics at Temple University.

In one 2016 study, University of British Columbia researchers tracked the levels of stress hormones of more than 400 elementary students in different classes. They found teachers who reported higher levels of burnout had students with higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol each morning, suggesting classroom tensions could be "contagious."

For example, in one forthcoming study previewed at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) meeting in San Antonio in April, researchers from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands interviewed a small pool of 143 beginning teachers over the course of a year. Those who showed higher levels of stress at the beginning of the year displayed fewer effective teaching strategies over the rest of the school year, including clear instruction, effective classroom management, and creation of a safe and stimulating classroom climate for their students, than did the teachers with lower initial stress levels.

Meanwhile, the University of Virginia is conducting one of the first long-term experimental studies of how classroom-management techniques affect teachers' stress and effectiveness in instruction. Researchers from the university's YouthNex research center and the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning randomly assigned nearly 200 early-career teachers in 100 schools in three districts to normal district training or training in the Good Behavior Game, a research-backed social-emotional-learning program in which teachers reward students' positive group behaviors. Teachers who used the game also had one-on-one video coaching every two to three weeks for a year, to help them identify their own stress levels and ways they can improve their interactions with students.

In the first study from the project, which is forthcoming, Jason Downer, the director of the Center for Advanced Study, found that nonparticipating teachers who started the school year feeling very stressed and "emotionally drained" had significantly worse classroom management and a spike in student disruptions by the spring. Stressed teachers who participated in the Good Behavior Game stayed stressed during the year, but it didn't affect their classes as much, Downer found. "With the intervention, you weren't seeing dramatic improvements over the year, but you had the status quo. With stressed teachers [who did not

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participate], you see a dive" in classroom behavior. There was no effect for teachers who didn't start the year stressed.

"We need to consider the context for interventions, when teachers are stressed coming in and are teaching a chaotic classroom," Downer said in a discussion at another research conference earlier this year.

How Teachers See Stress

So what makes a classroom normal for one teacher and stressful to another? University of Texas at Austin researchers, led by psychology professor Chris McCarthy, found that the answer depends on whether teachers feel they have the cognitive and other resources to meet their students' needs.

The researchers used federal Schools and Staffing Survey data to create profiles of the "demands" on teachers, based on: their and their students' background characteristics; whether their classes had high proportions of English-learners, students with disabilities, or students in poverty; and whether their racial group made up a minority of those in the school. They then compared those demands to teachers' reported resources and whether the teachers felt they had autonomy in their classrooms. Teachers whose demands were greater than their perceived resources were only half as likely to say they would choose to become teachers again as were teachers who saw their demands and resources as balanced. Teachers who reported more resources than demands (a smaller group), were more than twice as likely as teachers with "balanced demands and resources" to say they would become teachers again and would return to their district next year.

"This is purely about perceived demand and resources; two teachers in the same school and teaching the same kids could feel they have more or less resources," said Richard Lambert, who co-wrote the study. But, he added, individual schools often had very different concentrations of the most high-need students in different classrooms. "That's something that administrators absolutely have control over. If I'm a 4th grade teacher, and there are three others down the hall, we all know five minutes [into the school year] that Ms. Jones got dealt a much harder hand this year. The perception of whether you feel treated fairly by your principal is enormous" in its relation to teacher stress, he said in a discussion of the study at AERA.

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