Everyday Problems Stress Teachers the Most

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Stress levels of teachers in the Washington region have jumped to new heights since the sniper attacks began nearly three weeks ago. Yet teachers are credited with keeping their classrooms from boiling over. "They are bearing up in an unbelievable fashion under unbelievable conditions," said Prince William County Superintendent Edward L.Kelly.

Even without the pressures of a violent crisis, teachers complain that their jobs, while rewarding, are getting harder because of too few resources, too much paperwork, crowded classrooms, students with emotional problems, low pay and high-stakes standardized tests.

Staff writer Valerie Strauss asked teachers in the region and acrossthe country to discuss the greatest source of their professional stress -- and how they deal with it.

Janise Mead

Reading teacher

Backus Middle School, Washington

My biggest stress has to do with the issues that kids come to school with that are so difficult to identify. I've had these children for two months almost [this school year] and there are still issues that hold up their educational process. I talk to parents but still can't get the children to attend to the task given. It's not an academic problem, it's a social problem.

Yes, we're dealing with the stress of the sniper. That explains away the last week or so, but we’ve been dealing with this issue since September. I don’t know if this is a holdover from September 11, but I find that more than ever, these kids have different things on their minds and are finding it hard to pay attention in school. . . .

I try to handle it to the best of my ability. I don’t let a lot of things bother me. I decided a long time ago not to let financial matters and other things get to me. But the kids have a harder time.

Kent Kariya

Math teacher

Westland Middle School, Bethesda

Right now my biggest issue is behavior management, getting control of the class to get lessons across effectively. When you have a class size that is pretty much capacity, at 32 kids, the room is filled, and you never have everyone on task and focused.

The first thing to do when they are not well-behaved is to look at yourself and say, "Why isn’t my lesson engaging enough?" The second thing to do is make sure that kids who are not friends do not sit next to each other. And you have to consider that if you don’t have their attention, it could be because they are frustrated and don’t understand the material. . . . I tend to look at the veteran teachers to see what they do, and find they do a lot with their tone and delivery.

Janet Myers

English literature and writing teacher

Joplin (Mo.) High School

Differentiating instruction so that the needs and learning styles of all students are met is a constant source of stress. The "No Child Left Behind" motto is one that teachers take very seriously, but constantly struggle with how to accomplish the goal.

Teachers relieve this stress through their participation in continued professional development programs, support from positive fellow teachers and practicing flexibility. Learning the tools of the trade helps arm a teacher with more knowledge and techniques to utilize in the classroom. Keeping a positive outlook with positive peers reduces feelings of anxiety, stress and bitterness. A flexible teacher is a less-stressed human being, because she is ready for anything.

Mary Ellen Dakin

World literature, English composition teacher

Revere (Mass.) High School

This is my 16th year teaching secondary English, and what seems to be wearing me down is the paper load. The multiple-choice and short-answer questions are relatively manageable, but the essays and research projects are a burden. They consume three to four hours of each Saturday morning, and as happy as I am to wake up to a day without bells, the stack of essays [to grade] sits like a weight on my spirits. Occasionally I conduct peer-editing and self-editing lessons, but still have not found a way to significantly reduce the long hours of reading and commenting on students' writing. . . .

Kenneth Haines

French teacher

Northwestern High School, Hyattsville

For the modern educator, there is no greater stress than wanting to succeed admirably at an important task and being systematically denied the resources to do so, but that is precisely the fate awaiting most who undertake the job of teaching. To paraphrase the old real estate adage, the three secrets of effective teaching are: time, time and time. The requirements for presenting excellent instruction are: time to plan effective lessons, time to present those lessons and, finally, time to assess whether learning has taken place. All three are absolutely essential to improving student achievement.

Today, however, good teaching transpires mostly where teachers donate innumerable hours of non-compensated time to the schools for the purposes of planning and assessment. . . . Teachers in your typical school are in front of children for 275 minutes a day, and if they are fortunate, they have a paltry 45 minutes to plan their lessons. The remainder of a teacher's requisite planning must be performed outside the seven-hour school day.

Rachel Levy

English as a Second Language teacher

Walton Middle School, Albemarle County, Va.

The most stressful thing professionally for me is the emphasis on standardized testing, which has been a growing trend in American public education in recent years, and has just gotten much worse with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which I like to call the No Child Left Untested Excessively Act. . . .

Standardized testing does have its place in education, don’t get me wrong; I think it’s a very useful tool. However, the way those tests are currently being used or are being mandated to be used goes against everything I believe is quality education . . .

If this trend continues and becomes more intense than it already is, it may drive me out of teaching. And our nation’s leaders wonder why it is difficult to attract well-educated, creative and smart people to what is and should be an interesting and fulfilling profession.

Some of the goals for passage of the standardized tests are simply unrealistic. Yet, I and my school -- and maybe the students -- are held responsible for not making an unrealistic goal. . . . How can you pass a standardized English test the same way a native speaker would if you’ve only been learning English for one to two years?

Linh Le

Fourth-grade teacher

Thurgood Marshall Elementary School, Seattle

My biggest professional stress is trying to motivate students to learn when they don’t have any motivation coming in. A lot of kids have not hooked into the fact that learning is important . . .

Right now, they are still learning that when I say something once, that’s what I mean. When I say, "Pull out your book and open it to Page 50," I mean it then, and not the third or fourth time. I am now telling them this is the first and only time I will say it. So those students who didn’t hear it the first time now look at their neighbors instead of waiting for me to repeat myself. It takes a few months to make them understand that I really mean what I mean. But I never give up.

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