Preparing Educators to Address the Rising Problem of Behavior Problems

Christina Whalen, PhD, BCBA
Director of Research
&
Alexus Moore
Research Assistant

RethinkEd
Together We Power Potential

Executive Summary

Classrooms are facing numerous challenges within today's educational landscape, with one of the most pressing issues being the shortage of qualified teachers prepared to handle the growing urgency of managing problem behaviors. This shortage has created a need for ongoing professional development opportunities that can help teachers better support the diverse needs of their students. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on evidence-based practices such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), social skills, and emotional development, which have shown promise in improving outcomes for students. Additionally, the role of mental health in the classroom has become increasingly recognized, with a growing emphasis on creating supportive classroom environments and promoting positive mental health practices. Classroom management and climate are also important factors that can impact student success.

KEYWORDS

Problem Behavior, Challenging Behavior, Disruptive Behavior, Teacher Preparation, Teacher Training, Professional Development, PBIS, Social Skills, Emotional Development, Mental Health, Disproportionality, Student Discipline

Table of Contents

Problem Behaviors Are Becoming a Big Problem:
Student Disruptive Behavior on the Rise

Behavioral challenges in the classroom are on the rise in terms of frequency and severity, and teachers are not equipped to manage it. Problem behaviors include bullying, tantrums, defiant behavior, elopement (running off), self-injury, aggression, unresponsiveness, emotional outbursts, and non-compliance. **More than 70% of teachers report a recent increase in disruptive behavior** in the classroom compared to 66% in 2019 (Prothero, 2023). Tantrums and defiant behavior are frequent and more than half of teachers report that these behaviors happen multiple times weekly and 25% report that they happen multiple times per day (EAB, 2019). One of the results of frequent behavioral issues in the classroom is that students end up losing about 3 weeks of instructional time (EAB, 2019). There are many factors that are contributing to this rise in disruptive behaviors including 68% lower student morale than before the pandemic and about 33% of students not being motivated, according to teacher reports (Prothero, 2023). Another contributing factor is the negative impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on student's socio-emotional development with 87% of schools reporting increased incidents of misconduct, rowdiness, disrespect toward staff and peers, and prohibited use of electronic devices (NCES, 2022). In addition, more than 70% of schools are reporting dramatic increases in absenteeism.

One of the results of frequent behavioral issues in the classroom is that students end up losing about 3 weeks of instructional time (EAB, 2019).

Another important consideration for the increases in disruptive behaviors is the rise in mental health issues for students. Students may exhibit additional issues such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicide ideation, self-harm, and other mental health issues. 1 in 5 children and teens in the United States exhibit symptoms of a mental health disorder (CDC, 2023). The most common mental health diagnoses in children and teens are depression (3.2%), anxiety (7.1%), behavior problems (7.4%), and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (9.4%) (CDC, 2023). Often, mental health disorders overlap or co-occur. For instance, many children and teens with depression also have anxiety (73.8%) and/or behavior problems (47.2%). When not treated or addressed, mental health issues can adversely impact a child's emotional and social well-being and their ability to learn or participate in everyday activities with their peers. Teaching social skills and working on emotional development are effective and pro-active approaches to targeting mental health concerns and teaching these skills has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance use, and impulsive or dangerous behaviors (e.g., Taylor, et al., 2017). Improving student wellness skills can also improve self-care, peer interactions, attendance, behavior, and academic performance (e.g., Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017). **It is essential to target mental health directly by providing students and educators with the knowledge and understanding that is needed to be able to identify issues and provide support.** But how can teachers help their students when they do not have the necessary training?

Running on Empty: Teachers Are Not Prepared

Only about a third of teachers are effectively trained to manage challenging behaviors (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020). More than 40% of teachers think that they are not fully prepared for classroom management and handling student behavior (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). This is partially due to the paucity of coursework and training in college programs for teachers. Only 15% of teacher special education programs provide sufficient coursework on classroom management and only about 33% of programs require teacher candidates to practice these skills (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). While Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are known to help with behavior management, only 63% of teachers reported having any training in it, and only 57% of teachers reported that they use it regularly (EAB, 2019).

In addition to the insufficient training of new teachers, **there is a concerning trend of teacher shortages and lack of on-going professional development** to meet the needs of students. In the 2020-2021 school year, 44 states reported shortages in teachers and that has jumped to 48 states reporting teacher shortages in the 2021-2022 school year (Gaines, 2022). In many cases, unqualified teacher candidates are placed in classrooms with a provisional license. This can be problematic when the candidates have not had sufficient training in classroom management. This can also add to the increasing numbers of teachers leaving the field and ultimately, these issues affect student safety and outcomes.

Is It Getting Too Hard? Teachers Are Overwhelmed

In addition to the lack of appropriate training in behavior management, teachers frequently suffer from extreme stress and burnout. This, of course, adds to teacher shortages and has a negative impact on students. The level of burnout is directly related to

classroom management skills of the teacher burnout can have profound consequences such as emotional exhaustion, difficulties with emotion regulation, depersonalization, negative perceptions of students, and poor job satisfaction (Gilmour, et al., 2022). These symptoms can add to the disproportionalities in student discipline and education placement.

Teacher burnout and stress can affect their well-being and sense of belonging in the workplace. This can lead to poor attendance, attrition, and lower student outcomes. The teaching profession is one of the biggest high-risk careers mostly due to occupational risk hazards such as workload, lack of social support, lack of training and resources, difficulty with classroom management, role ambiguity, etc. (Alarcon, 2011). PreK-12 teachers fill one of the largest occupational groups in the country (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014) but **teacher stress is extremely high compared to their professions with about half of teachers leaving education within the first 5 years of teaching** (Ingersoll, 2001) and about 15% leaving education every year (about 500,000 teachers/year) costing taxpayers about $2.2 billion/year (Haynes, 2014). Hayes' research also reported that teacher burnout rates are about 50% higher for Title I schools and more than 70% higher for teachers serving a majority of students of color. Burnout can also lead to higher absenteeism, low job satisfaction, and can even have serious impacts on mental and physical health (Merida-Lopez & Extremera, 2017).

A great deal of studies report that there is a significant relationship between teacher stress and a student's ability to regulate emotions and manage stress (e.g., Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Our ability to identify, manage, regulate, and evaluate our emotions

and to perceive, understand, and respond to the emotions of others is referred to as emotional intelligence (EI) (Cherry, K., 2020). Lower emotional intelligence is associated with higher burnout and decreased abilities in regulating emotions and managing stress (Merida-Lopez & Extremara, 2017). Lower levels of stress and teacher burnout can result in improved outcomes for students (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018) and when teachers experience difficulties with coping with stress it can lead to behavioral problems with students and lower academic outcomes (Wentzel, 2010). The COVID pandemic led to increased stress and burnout for many educators. In one study, 55% of teachers reported that they were thinking about leaving the field of teaching (Kamentz, 2022). Another study with over 300 educators identified certain factors that contributed to teacher burnout and stress which included anxiety and stress about COVID-19, anxiety about teaching under COVID conditions, parent and student communication, and support from administration (Pressley, 2021).

> 70% of schools reported that there has been an increase in absences with staff since the pandemic, and 99% reported that it is not always possible to find substitute teachers so schools must rely on administrators, non-teaching staff, and others to cover classes on a regular basis (NCES, 2022).

Rising absenteeism is not just happening for students, but for teachers as well and 70% of schools reported that there has been an increase in absences with staff since the pandemic, and 99% reported that it is not always possible to find substitute teachers so schools must rely on administrators, non-teaching staff, and others to cover classes on a regular basis (NCES, 2022). Teacher absenteeism increases behavioral challenges in the classroom, often with less prepared staff who struggle to keep order. Lack of preparation and training, inconsistent adult presence, and issues such as COVID and social-justice issues leave

many schools resorting to traditional discipline practices that are often not only ineffective, but harmful.

How School Discipline Is Being Handled

In recent years, there has been a growing concern over the way school discipline is being handled. Studies have shown that certain groups of students, such as Black, Latinx, and those with disabilities, are disproportionately targeted and disciplined by school officials (Lehmann & Meldrum, 2022; Whitford et al., 2019). Current disciplinary practices often involve a punitive approach, where students who are perceived to be breaking rules are met with harsh consequences, such as suspensions or expulsions. However, this approach has been shown to be ineffective at preventing future misbehavior and may even worsen the

> There has been a growing movement towards preventative practices, which refers to any actions taken by a teacher to avoid unwanted conduct. (Preventative Approaches, n.d.).
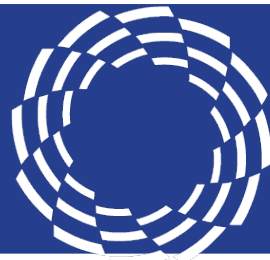
problem by pushing students out of school and into the juvenile justice system. In addition, studies have shown that the use of suspensions and expulsions is often arbitrary, with some students receiving harsher punishments than others for similar offenses (Erickson & Pearson, 2021; Gerlinger, 2021; Yaluma et al., 2021). The issue of disproportionality in student discipline is particularly troubling, as it suggests that certain groups of students are being unfairly targeted by school officials. This can have serious consequences, not only for the students themselves, but also for their families and communities. Students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to drop out of school, which can lead to a range of negative outcomes, including lower earnings and higher rates of incarceration.

To address this issue, there has been a growing movement towards preventative practices, which refers to any actions taken by a teacher to avoid unwanted conduct. (*Preventative Approaches*, n.d.). These practices may include restorative justice programs, which involve bringing together those who have been harmed by a student's behavior and working to repair the harm done, as well as social-emotional learning programs, which teach students skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (Hashim et al., 2018; Hoffman, 2009). Preventative practices may also involve changes to school policies and practices, such as eliminating zero-tolerance policies, which require schools to impose harsh punishments for certain offenses regardless of the circumstances (Berlowitz et al., 2017). Instead, schools may adopt more flexible and individualized approaches to discipline, which consider the unique needs and circumstances of each student.

Overall, the issue of school discipline and disproportionality in student discipline is a complex and multifaceted one. While current practices may be exacerbating the problem, there is growing momentum towards more preventative and restorative approaches that aim to address the underlying causes of misbehavior and promote positive outcomes for all students. **Without proper training and preparation, school staff will not be successful in responding to or preventing disruptive behaviors.**

Rethinking Professional Development and Teacher Preparation

While professional development can have immense benefits for educators, often, it is not targeted toward practical applications, such as classroom management. In many cases, professional development is repetitive, introductory, and does not match with the reality of managing a classroom (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Specialized and specific training is required to fully prepare educators. Professional development that utilizes interactions

with colleagues can improve the effectiveness of teachers (Brock & Carter, 2017). In addition, working collaboratively with peers and getting support from administrators can lead to stronger commitment and improved motivation (Garwood, Werts, Varghese, & Gosay, 2018). **High quality professional development can be the key to keeping educators** and has been shown to affect their decision to stay in education or at their school (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). In addition to building classroom management skills, it is important to help educators learn to handle their own stress and improve their mental well-being. Teaching them skills in emotional wellness and mental health can improve job satisfaction and create safer and more positive classroom environments (Whalen, 2021).

To effectively manage a classroom of students, educators must learn how behavior works and what procedures are best for managing behavior. Competency-based training (CBT) and performance-based teacher education (PBTE) are the most common professional development procedures used to train teac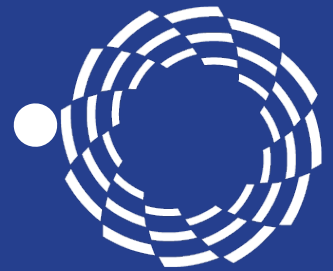hers (Kirkpatrick, Akers, & Rivera, 2019). These protocols require that teachers practice and demonstrate what they learn and that the concepts are broken down into manageable components. BST is similar but consists of more hands-on training and has been shown to be more effective than traditional approaches to professional development (Brock et al, 2017). BST includes instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback (Leaf, et al. 2015). All components can be delivered in person or remotely and several studies support the use of video modeling for the modeling step of the teaching sequence (e.g., Whittenburg, et al., 2022).

Another approach to classroom management is to proactively teach social skills, wellness, and emotion management, which has been shown to improve student behavior, relationships, academic performance, emotion regulation, responsible decision making, and resilience (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Researchers have identified the core components of an effective wellness program to include social skills, identifying feelings in self and others, and behavioral coping skills/relaxation (e.g. Lawson, McKenzie, Becker, Selby, and Hoover, 2019). Other important components for an effective wellness program include providing opportunities for students to practice, having multi-year programming, providing training and implementation support for staff, and having at least one evaluation study with a comparison group and pre-post measures that shows a positive outcome on

> Professional development in wellnes and social development has been shown in multiple research studies to improve teacher's well-being and to reduce burnout and stress and improve student outcomes (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Whalen, 2021).

academics, conduct, emotional distress, or positive social behaviors (CASEL,2013). In special education, teaching these skills can help to decrease challenging behaviors such as bullying, aggression, and harassment (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015).

Professional development in wellness and social development has been shown in multiple research studies to improve teacher's well-being and to reduce burnout and stress and improve student outcomes (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Whalen, 2021). Teachers' comfort in implementation and their perceptions of student motivation and behavior had the most significant effect of their stress, perceived teaching efficacy, and job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). The most important skills for educators to learn in order to have positive relationships with their students, create and maintain a healthy learning

environment, and manage student emotional and behavioral challenges are self-awareness, social awareness, cultural awareness, prosocial values, and self-management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

To build the proficiencies and confidence of educators to more effectively manage their classroom and teach their students, the RethinkEd multi-tiered Behavior Series can help educators and administrators to learn the basic skills of behavior management including prevention, responding, setting up the classroom environment, relationship-building, data collection, enhancing student motivation, reporting, personal bias, compassion fatigue, and creating positive learning environments. This flexible, on-demand series is appropriate for all levels of educators and staff. Behavior intervention tools such a point system and incident reporting can also help teachers to keep behavior on track, and more intensive behaviors can be addressed using behavior contracts, self-monitoring, and targeted behavior tracking. Preventative tools for teaching important skills such as awareness of self and others, social skills, stress management, and self-management are also available in the Wellness and Mental Health series for professional development and student instruction.
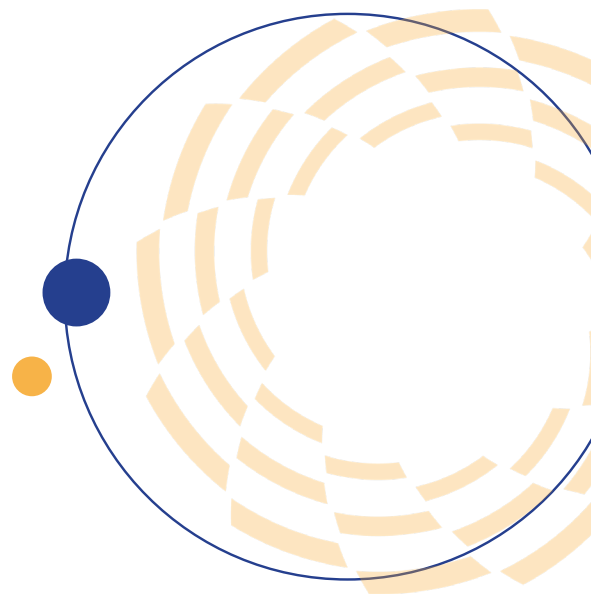
References

Ashdown, D. M., & Bernard, M. E. (2012). Can explicit instruction in social and emotional learning skills benefit the social-emotional development, well-being, and academic achievement of young children? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *39*(6), 397–405. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-011-0481-x

Brock, M. E., Cannella-Malone, H. I., Seaman, R. L., Andzik, N. R., Schaefer, J. M., Page, E. J., Barczak, M. A., & Dueker, S. A. (2017). Findings across practitioner training studies in special education: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis. *Exceptional Children*, *84*(1), 7–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402917698008

Brock, M. E., & Carter, E. W. (2016). A meta-analysis of educator training to improve implementation of interventions for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, *38*(3), 131–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932516653477

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2023). *Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html

Cherry, K. (2020). What is emotional intelligence? Emotional Intelligence (verywellmind.com)

Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., & Perry, N. E. (2012). School climate and social–emotional learning: Predicting teacher stress, job satisfaction, and teaching efficacy. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *104*(4), 1189–1204. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029356

DePaoli, J.L., Atwell, M.N., and Bridgeland, J. (2017). Ready to lead: A national principal survey on how social and emotional learning can prepare children and transform schools. A Report for CASEL (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning). https://casel.org/ready-to-lead/

Educators Report Growing Behavioral Issues Among Young Students | EAB. (2019, February 14). Eab.com. https://eab.com/insights/press-release/district-leadership/press-release-growing-behaviorial-disruptions/#:~:text=More%20than%20half%20of%20teachers%20said%20they%20see

Espelage, D. L., Rose, C. A., & Polanin, J. R. (2015). Social-emotional learning program to reduce bullying, fighting, and victimization among middle school students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, *36*(5), 299–311. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932514564564

Gaines, L. V. (2022, April 20). Students with disabilities have a right to qualified teachers — but there's a shortage. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2022/04/20/1092337446/special-education-teacher-shortage

Garwood, J. D., Werts, M. G., Varghese, C., & Gosey, L. (2017). Mixed-methods analysis of rural special educators' role stressors, behavior management, and burnout. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *37*(1), 30–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870517745270

Gilmour, A. F., Sandilos, L. E., Pilny, W. V., Schwartz, S., & Wehby, J. H. (2021). Teaching students with emotional/behavioral disorders: Teachers' burnout profiles and classroom management. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, *30*(1), 106342662110202. https://doi.org/10.1177/10634266211020258

Hagaman, J. L., & Casey, K. J. (2017). Teacher attrition in special education: Perspectives from the field. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, *41*(4), 277–291. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417725797

Herman, K.C., Hickmon-Rosa, J., & Reinke, W.M. (2018). Empirically derived profiles of teacher stress, burnout, self-efficacy, and coping and associated student outcomes. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 20(2),* 90–100.

Helping special education teachers under stress | Center for Educational Disparities Research. (2021, August 19). Cedr.ssri.psu.edu. https://cedr.ssri.psu.edu/news/helping-special-education-teachers-under-stress

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, *79*(1), 491–525. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

Jones, S., Bailey, R., Brush, K., & Kahn, J. (2018). Preparing for effective SEL implementation, Harvard Graduate School of Education. https://www.selconnection.com/images/Preparing-for-Effective-SEL-Implementation.pdf

Kamentz, A. (2022). More than half of teachers are looking for the exit, a poll says. NPRT, KBPS. Over half of teachers want to leave the profession early, NEA poll finds : NPR

Kim, S., Crooks, C. V., Bax, K., & Shokoohi, M. (2021). Impact of trauma-informed training and mindfulness-based social–emotional learning program on teacher attitudes and burnout: A mixed-methods study. *School Mental Health*, *13*, 55–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-020-09406-6

Kirkpatrick, M., Akers, J., & Rivera, G. (2019). Use of behavioral skills training with teachers: A systematic review. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 28*, 344-261.

Lawson, G. M., McKenzie, M. E., Becker, K. D., Selby, L., & Hoover, S. A. (2018). The core components of evidence-based social emotional learning programs. *Prevention Science*, *20*(4), 457–467. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-018-0953-y

Leaf, J. B., Townley-Cochran, D., Taubman, M., Cihon, J. H., Oppenheim-Leaf, M. L., Kassardjian, A., Leaf, R., McEachin, J., & Pentz, T. G. (2015). The teaching interaction procedure and behavioral skills training for individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder: A review and commentary. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *2*(4), 402–413. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-015-0060-y

Mérida-López, S., & Extremera, N. (2017). Emotional intelligence and teacher burnout: A systematic review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *85*, 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.07.006

Mindful Staff. (2020). What is mindfulness? Are you supposed to clear your mind, or focus on one thing? Here's the mindful definition of mindfulness. https://www.mindful.org/what-ismindfulness/

National Center for Education Statistics. (2021, May). *COE - Students with Disabilities*. Nces.ed.gov. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022). More than 80 percent of U.S. public schools report pandemic has negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development. Institute for Educational Sciences (IES). Press Release

National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2020). *Significant Disproportionality in Special Education: Current Trends and Actions for Impact*. https://www.ncld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-NCLD-Disproportionality_Trends-and-Actions-for-Impact_FINAL-1.pdf

National Council on Teacher Quality (2014). Training our future teachers: Classroom management. Future_Teachers_Classroom_Management_NCTQ_Report

National Council on Teacher Quality (2020). Clinical practice and classroom management. NCTQ Teacher Prep Review: Clinical Practice and Classroom Management

Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2016). Stress contagion in the classroom? The link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students. *Social Science & Medicine*, *159*(159), 30–37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.031
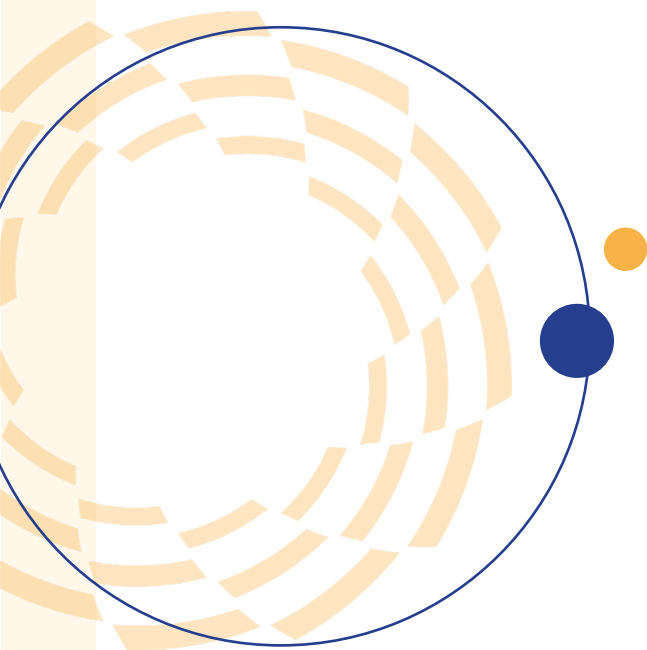
Pressley, T. (2021). Factors Contributing to Teacher Burnout During COVID-19. *Educational Researcher*, *50*(5), 325–327. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x211004138

Program Guide - CASEL Program Guide. (n.d.). Pg.casel.org. https://pg.casel.org/

Prothero, A. (2023). Student behavior isn't getting any better, survey shows. EdWeek. Student Behavior Isn't Getting Any Better, Survey Shows (edweek.org)

Renshaw, T. L., Long, A. C., &; Cook, C. R. (2015). Assessing teachers' positive psychological functioning at work: Development and validation of the Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire. School Psychology Quarterly, 30(2), 289-306. doi:10.1037/ spq0000112

Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning and Teachers. *The Future of Children*, *27*(1), 137–155. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0007

Seidman, S. A., & Zager, J. (1992). Teacher stress workshops. *Work & Stress*, *6*(1), 85–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/02678379208257042

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting Positive Youth Development through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: a Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects. *Child Development*, *88*(4), 1156–1171.

Wentzel, K. R. (2010). Students' relationships with teachers. In J. L. Meece & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), Handbook of Research on Schools, Schooling, and Human Development (pp. 75–91). New York, NY: Routledge.

Whalen, C. (2021). Professional development in Rethink Ed's social emotional learning relates to less educator stress and burnout and better perceptions of well-being and school connectedness. White paper: https://cdn.brandfolder.io/O2DHL91/at/p4v89vnpqkfvrjv4gzmv2c6w/RethinkEd_ProfessionalDevelopment_WhitePaper_1_.pdf

Whittenburg, H. N., Xu, Y., Thoma, C. A., Schall, C., & Ham, W. (2022). Effects of behavioral skills training with video modeling and in situ training on workplace conversational skills of students with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/10883576221127971

White Paper

About Us

RethinkEd combines the power of technology and research to deliver innovative, scalable, and evidence-based instructional materials and supports for all learners and educators, including those with disabilities. The comprehensive suite of tools ensures that every student develops the academic, behavioral, and social/emotional skills they need to succeed in school, at work, and in life. RethinkEd positions educators, students, and families for success.

Get in Touch

info@rethinked.com
(877)988-8871
49 W. 27th Street, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10001

RethinkEd
Together We Power Potential

www.rethinked.com