

# Teacher Stress

By Ken Mrozek

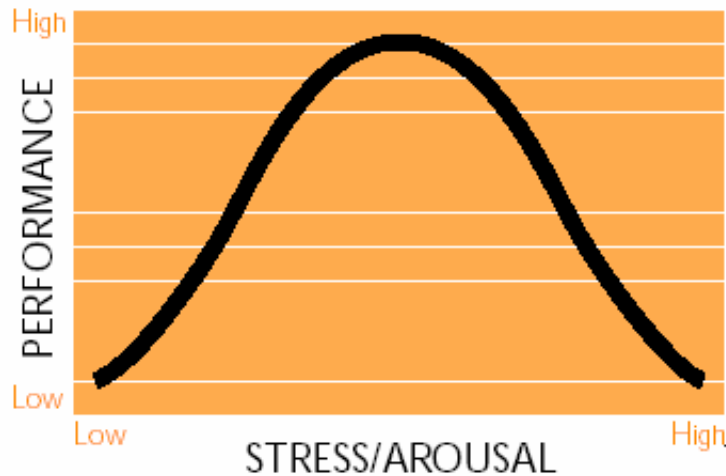


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## What is Stress?

“An excess of demand made upon the adaptive capabilities of the mind and body” and is seen in the form of a physical demand, a mental demand or both.

*Definition 1 – Definition of Stress<sup>1</sup>*



*Figure 1 – Relationship between Stress and Performance<sup>2</sup>*

It is important to understand that while stress (see Definition 1) is necessary and positive and it can also be negative and harmful. Figure 1 shows the general relationship between the level of stress and the level of performance. Whether positive or negative, physical or mental, the body's reaction to stress can be described by three stages:

1. **Alarm Reaction Stage** - the body identifies and first reacts to the stress. In this stage the body first releases hormones that help in the defense against the stressor.
2. **Resistance Stage** - the body continues to resist the stressors as they persist. If the stressors continue and there is a consistent state of resistance, there is potential to move into the third and final stage.
3. **Exhaustion Stage** - the body and mind are no longer able to make the necessary adjustments to resist the stressors and there is physical and/or mental exhaustion.<sup>3</sup>

Focus for the remainder of this report is on negative physical and mental stress and specifically reviewing the persistent stressors that push teachers into the third stage and ultimately to exhaustion.

# Stress in Teaching Profession

- If given the opportunity, ? of all teachers would NOT become teachers again
- 20% to 33% of surveyed teachers report teaching is either very or extremely stressful
- 30% of all novice teachers leave the profession before their 5<sup>th</sup> year

Figure 2 – Teacher Stress Statistics<sup>4</sup>

Research has shown that along with serviceman, social workers and linguists, teachers have surfaced at the start of the new millennium as the most afflicted with rising stress.<sup>5</sup> Most alarming is that 30% of all novice teachers are leaving the profession (Figure 2). Annual teacher turnover is higher when compared with turnover of all other occupations. A report in June 2002 issue of the National Association of

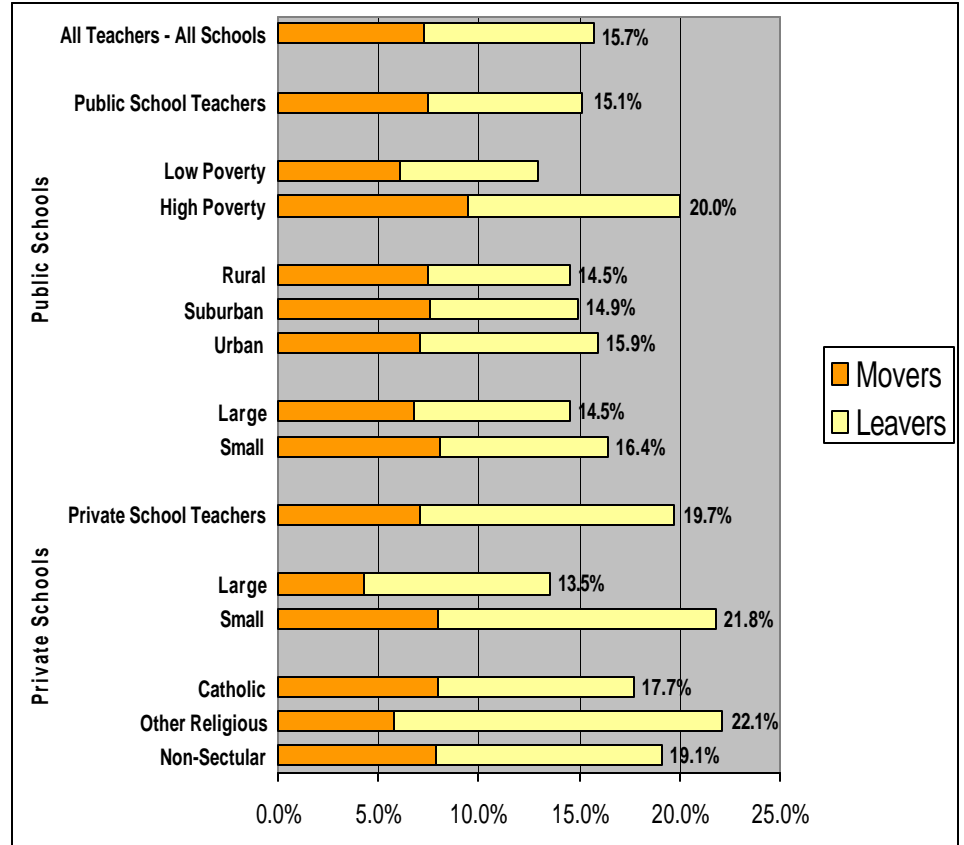


Figure 3 – Annual Teacher Turnover<sup>6</sup>

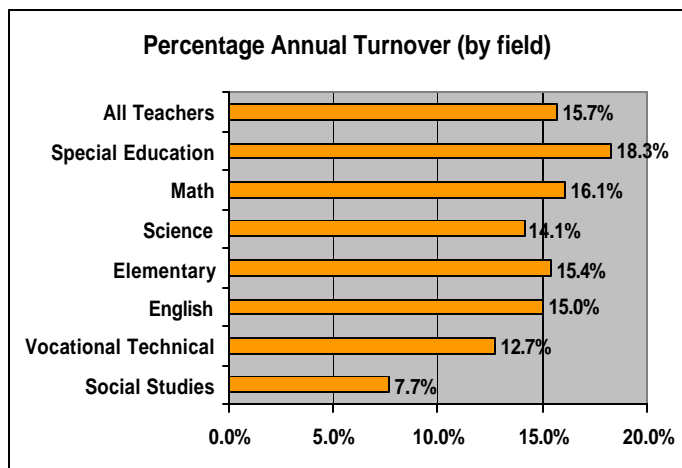


Figure 4 – Teacher Turnover by Field<sup>8</sup>

turnover coupled with the demographic trend of increased secondary school enrollment has caused a severe shortage of secondary school teachers.

Secondary School Principals showed that annual turnover of professions other than teaching averaged 11 percent while annual turnover for the teaching profession was 15.7 percent.<sup>7</sup> Figure 3 shows turnover rates for various school types and characteristics, while Figure 4 shows teacher turnover by field.

The report further stated that high

# Effects of Stress

“Every possible societal malfunction affects the classroom – drugs, alcohol, divorce, gangs and poverty.”

## Common Stressors Teachers Experience

- Poor classroom working conditions (small room, many students)
- Lack of adequate instructional materials and teaching resources
- Lack of proper facilities within a school (heating/cooling, lighting, media facilities, noise, room structure)
- Job security – budget cuts mean teacher cuts
- Decreased job mobility
- Low salaries
- Little opportunity for promotions.
- Annual incremental raises not in pace with cost of living
- Interruptions during teaching time
- Conflict between amount of time to teach and curriculum
- Teachers roles: teacher, mother/father, coach, counselor ...
- Heavy workload gives teachers no time to relax within a day
- Teachers bring work home daily – no time to finish at work
- High-Stakes Assessment Testing
- Responsible to Administration/Board Objectives & Policies
- Responsible to the students, parents, school administration/board
- Physical and Mental abuse by students

A shortage of teachers and increasing student enrollment is enough to create a highly stressful profession, but research shows that there are many other stressors unique to the teaching profession (Figure 5). In fact, Forrest J. Troy wrote, “every possible societal malfunction affects the classroom – drugs, alcohol, divorce, gangs and poverty.”<sup>10</sup> The same stresses

Figure 5 – Common Stressors Teacher Experience<sup>9</sup>

are not prevalent in every classroom. Figure 6 shows a large difference in the types of

dissatisfaction between an urban, high poverty public school and a suburban, low poverty public school. The same stressor may not be experienced by each teacher and stress affects every person differently, but it is easy to see why the teacher turnover rate is above normal when compared to other professions.

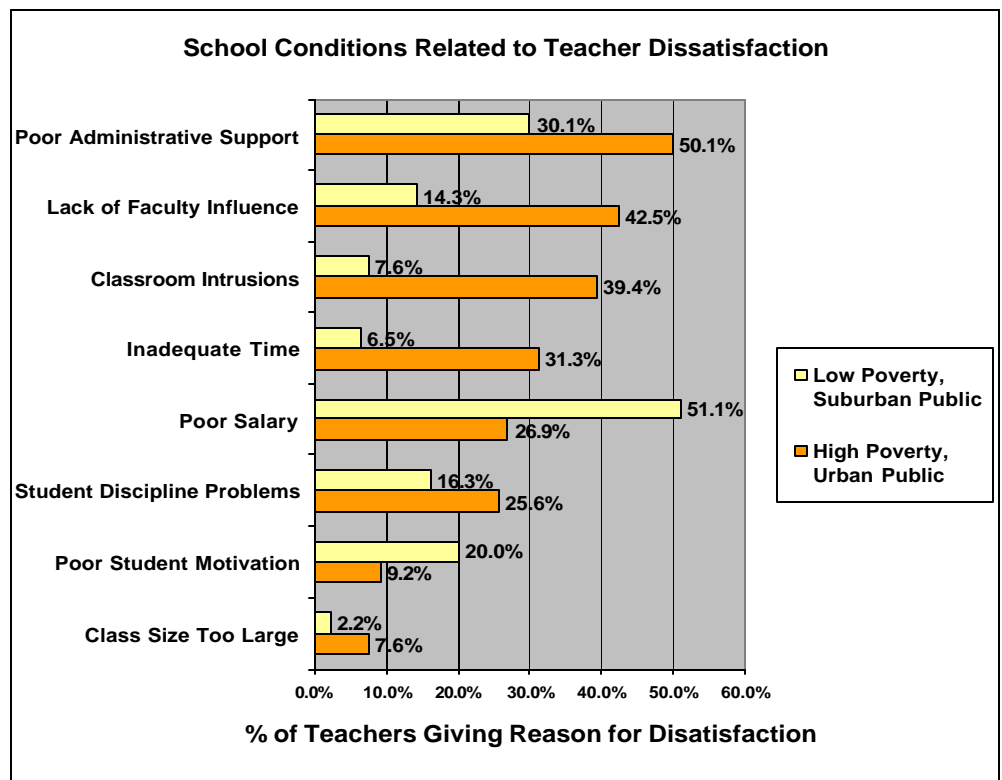


Figure 6 – School Conditions Relating to Teacher Dissatisfaction<sup>11</sup>

Although the turnover rate seems to be one of the most easily measurable indicators of stress, there are many other affects that should also be examined. Some of the physiological changes occurring when stress becomes too much and a teacher remains in the Exhaustion Stage are seen in Figure 7. Some more difficult effects to measure (Figure 8) are more alarming when put into the context of a teacher developing young children and adolescents.

**Prolonged Unhealthy Stress - Effects**

- Hair loss
- Eating disorders
- Tense, muscle ache and pain
- Palpitations and chest discomfort
- Fainting
- Choking
- Indigestion and nausea
- Diarrhea and frequent urination
- Tremors and twitching
- Breathlessness and hyperventilating
- Tension headaches

*Figure 7 – Physiological Effects of Stress<sup>12</sup>*

**Prolonged Unhealthy Stress - `Effects**

- Lack of concentration/ability to think rationally
- Easily distracted
- Reduced memory
- Increased errors
- Organization & planning deteriorate
- Tension increases
- Change in personality
- Irritable/Aggressive
- Depression/Isolation
- Reduced self-esteem
- Speech problems
- Less enthusiasm
- Lower energy levels/Sleeplessness
- Absenteeism
- Burnout

*Figure 8 – Cognitive, Emotional & Behavioral Effects of Stress<sup>13</sup>*

## Stress Self-Assessment

**NEAHIN - Stress Self-Assessment**  
[CLICK]

**Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale**  
[CLICK]

The National Education Association Health Information Network has a Stress Self-Assessment available online. The assessment is to help identify if an individual may be more or less prone to stress in four top stress factors:

- Feelings of connection/isolation and influence/powerlessness
- Adequacy of training/skills
- Campus administration/management issues
- Safety concerns<sup>14</sup>

Another common method used to quantify stress is the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale. Identifying potential areas of concern can help some make the necessary environment or personal changes to improve stressful situations. However, for many situations changes are not possible and individuals need to adopt stress management techniques to reduce or eliminate the adverse effects of prolonged exposure to unhealthy stress.

# Methods of Stress Management

A – Acknowledge

B – Behavior Modification

C - Communication

*Figure 9 – The ABC's of Managing Teacher Stress<sup>15</sup>*

Stressors are always present in the profession of teaching, which suggests teachers should learn techniques to manage stress to remain an effective teacher. One such method suggests a simple ABC stress

management model which recommends first acknowledgement of the stress, second modification of behavior and finally communication with students and

other staff (see Figure 9). Just as is with many challenges in life, it is better for teachers to be proactive, rather than reactive, with management of stress. A widely recognized

## Healthy Physical State

- Regular Exercise
- Nutritional Diet
- Good Sleep

## Strong Mental State

- Stay intellectually stimulated (mental exercise)
- Be current with subject and teaching methods
- Put things into perspective
- Know yourself (strengths & weaknesses)
- Use other teachers as a resource
- Gain stability from relationships (family/friends)
- Practice relaxation/meditation
- Escape through hobbies, interests and passions
- Provide for self-renewal
- Participate in religion

proactive stress management method is to maintain a healthy physical state through regular exercise, a nutritional diet and good sleep. Another well recognized proactive method of combating stress is to maintain a strong mental state: intellectually, emotionally and spiritually (see Figure 10).

*Figure 10 – Building a Strong Mental State*

Establishing clear classroom

expectations can alleviate many of the stressors existing in a classroom between the teacher and students (see Figure 11). A good practice is for teachers to set up these expectations from

## Establish Clear Classroom Expectations

- Methods of Instruction
- Methods of Assessment/Grading
- Code of Conduct
- Parental Involvement
- Social Support
- Policies & Procedures

the formation of the class to prevent any escalation of anxiety in the classroom. A final proactive stress management technique is control of the work environment. An efficient and effective teacher will be proficient in time management, prioritization and organization. The Ten Commandments for Reducing Stress is a set of guidelines for

teachers to ensure they control their work environment. If teachers continue to see unhealthy stress, even after following the proactive methods and the ABC's method, then

### Control the Work Environment

1. Thou shalt not be perfect or even try to be.
2. Thou shalt not try to be ALL things to All people.
3. Thou shalt leave things undone that ought to be undone.
4. Thou shalt not spread thyself too thinly.
5. Thou shalt learn to say 'No.'
6. Thou shalt schedule time for thyself and support network.
7. Thou shalt switch off and do nothing – regularly.
8. Thou shalt be boring, inelegant, untidy and unattractive at times.
9. Thou shalt not feel guilty.
10. Thou shalt not be thine own worst enemy but be thine own best friend.

they should seek outside assistance. Outside assistance is typically sought after prolonged exposure to unhealthy stress, but outside assistance can be a good source for proactive

### *Figure 11 – The 10 Commandments for Reducing Stress<sup>16</sup>*

stress management. The sources cited below in the Recommended Resources Section provide a good starting point for additional outside assistance.

### Seek Outside Assistance

- Workshops/Seminars/Conferences
- Support Groups/Networks
- Additional Resources (reading/online)
- Professional Counseling



# Recommended Resources

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- **Violence in Communities & Schools:** A Stress Reduction Guide for Teachers and Other Staff – <http://www.neahin.org/programs/mentalhealth/Stress-Guide.pdf>

- Teacher Support Network - <http://www.teacherline.org.uk/>

Teacher Support Network is the United Kingdom national charity that provides practical and emotional support to teachers and lecturers (both serving and retired) and their families, regardless of age, length of service or union affiliations.

- **Center for Mental Health Services** - <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/>

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center provides information about mental health via a toll-free telephone number (800-789-2647), this web site, and more than 600 publications.

The National Mental Health Information Center was developed for users of mental health services and their families, the general public, policy makers, providers, and the media.

Information Center staff members are skilled at listening and responding to questions from the public and professionals. The staff quickly directs callers to federal, state, and local organizations dedicated to treating and preventing mental illness. The Information Center also has information on federal grants, conferences, and other events.

- **National Education Association: Health Information Network** – <http://www.neahin.org/programs/mentalhealth/index.htm>

The NEA HIN Mental Wellness program collaborates with national mental health organizations and programs to provide NEA members with information, education, and training about timely mental health topics.

- **The Center for Teacher Formation** - <http://www.teacherformation.org/>

The Center for Teacher Formation, an educational nonprofit organization, was established to develop, deepen, and expand the work of teacher formation and Courage to Teach nationally. Courage to Teach (CTT) is a program for the personal and professional renewal of teachers, administrators, and counselors in the public schools. The primary mission of the center is to prepare facilitators to lead CTT programs.

- **Education Week (on the web)** - <http://www.edweek.org/>

Editorial Projects in Education Inc. publishes Education Week, the monthly Teacher Magazine, and Education Week on the Web. They are a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Washington, D.C. Their primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. They cover local, state, and national news and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. They also provide periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

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