

Reducing Teacher Burnout: A Multifaceted Issue

Strategies to Retain Quality Educators



As holiday break draws nearer, teachers (and students) may find themselves feeling quite burnt out. Though it is natural to feel ready to ditch everything for family gatherings, warm baked goods, and holiday movies, this feeling often extends past this season for teachers. Experiencing the dreaded feeling of burnout and continuing to push through it has become the norm for many educators, but it doesn't have to be that way! To combat this issue, we interviewed Lloyd Hopkins, Executive Director and Founder at Million Dollar Teacher Project, a nonprofit that aims to elevate the teaching profession in a way that enables every student to be taught by a highly trained, qualified, understanding, and engaged teacher. As we take a deep dive into this issue, we'd like to present you with a few tips to decrease teacher burnout in your school/district and, in turn, decrease attrition rates.

Q: Prior to founding Million Dollar Teacher Project, what did you witness or experience that demonstrated that teacher burnout was a serious problem?

A: Well, I've worked in and around education in different capacities for 18 years prior to launching Million Dollar Teacher Project. The most important time period on this journey was the six years I spent in the classroom. During this time, I worked in elementary and middle schools and showed up every day assisting teachers that were under-resourced and undervalued. Every day I saw them show up despite the stress they were experiencing about bills that are due, a lack of support from their administration, a lack of parent involvement, and the absence of an outlet for them to rely on. I also witnessed that, when these systems aren't functioning, marginalized communities get hit even harder. It is important to me to see equity in access and an empowered community, so I knew we had to start with education. Specifically, I knew after witnessing what I had seen first-hand that the way we could have the most impact to move the needle in education was to support teachers. If we can better support educators, we can grow schools from the inside out.

Q: What efforts have you seen being made to reduce teacher burnout?

A: Some schools handle these issues better than others. I have seen some schools implement teacher recognition or casual Fridays, but we would like to amplify these efforts. From our perspective, it's not about the beacon on the hills school that does it well and is surrounded by 20 other schools that do not. It is about the community as a whole. Though we have seen some efforts being made, they are not widespread.

Q: How has Million Dollar Teacher Project approached the issue of teacher burnout?

A: Before launching Million Dollar Teacher Project, I surveyed teachers across the state of Arizona to understand the issues that were most affecting teacher recruitment and retention. The results showed that many felt the effects of a lack of teacher recognition, low levels of support from the community and leadership, and a lack of compensation that is on par with their role in society. I knew we couldn't just focus on compensation because throwing money at the issue may keep teachers for a bit longer, but you still eventually lose them. So, I knew we needed to focus on changing the environment by impacting how teachers are supported, recognized, and compensated. This formed the three pillars to our approach- recognition, support, and compensation

Q: What are some ways that Million Dollar Teacher Project has combatted some of the contributions to this issue?

A: Out of the three issues mentioned when I surveyed teachers, compensation can admittedly be one of the most difficult issues, but we have implemented a strategy called TAP, which stands for Teacher Appreciation Package. To create this, we work with businesses to offer meaningful discounts to teachers to help their salary stretch a little further. Right now, we ask businesses to participate in November and May for teacher appreciation. In turn, our job is to provide information about usage to create an ROI proposition to encourage them to continue to participate. In addition, we are working on establishing a fund for emergency assistance, scholarships for teachers looking to further education, field trip expense assistance, debt relief for teachers, and basic needs assistance for students identified by teachers. In the long term, we hope to have a fund to increase teacher salaries and implement programs for teacher recognition and support programs.

Q: What are some practices that schools/districts can adopt to remedy teacher burnout or become proactive and prevent it?

A: A teacher wellness program can go a long way. Some key elements for a teacher wellness program are:

- Meditation
- Access to therapy
- Massage
- Allowing a trainer to train teachers at a time that works for their schedules
- Reducing teacher workloads by bringing interns or other teacher support to give teachers more opportunities to take a break and connect with their colleagues
- Reimagining the teacher work day by finding ways to give educators more targeted points for breaks

- Parent involvement

Q: You mentioned parent involvement. What does that look like and how can that help reduce teacher burnout?

A: When I look at a school that doesn't have parent involvement, my first question is "are you really putting in effort to make sure parents feel welcome?" Parents need to feel that this is a partnership, so we need to create ways to partner with and engage parents throughout the year. We have to empower parents to feel like they have ownership of being able to help raise their school up by creating diverse pathways of involvement so parents can get involved in ways that are meaningful to them. Maybe one parent would prefer to maintain a phone bank to help with teacher recognition, whereas another parent may be available to help with morning traffic to reduce the burden on teachers. Parent involvement cannot be a one size fits all experience.

Ultimately, teacher burnout is a community issue. It is a responsibility for all of us to figure out meaningful ways to support our teachers and students.

Q: What caused you to found Million Dollar Teacher Project?

A: I noticed that there are a lot of projects that focus on kids and technology, but there aren't many that focus on the teacher. The teacher is one of the most important parts of the equation. As a society, we have really become neglectful in a sense that we do not truly and fully support teachers' growth. We expect the love of kids to sustain an educator for 20 years, but a lot of them are only able to continue in this field for so long. The support of teachers is a community issue. Teachers experiencing burnout is a community issue. That is the exact reason why I founded Million Dollar Teacher Project.

Whether you are currently experiencing teacher burnout in your school/district or hoping to be proactive for the future, teacher burnout is a preventable issue. As you and your school/district come together to create a solid strategy to reduce stress, workload, and financial worry on teachers, we encourage you to be inspired by the work of Lloyd Hopkins' Million Dollar Teacher project. As you implement practices that address key concerns such as teacher support from both leadership and the community, compensation, and recognition, you will notice that teachers are happier, retention will increase, and so much more! After all, "Happier teachers equals happier students," as Lloyd says.