The Storm Was Already Here: Teacher Stress Amid COVID-19

Jonathan M. Coker

University of South Florida

For educators, COVID-19 has been described like a natural disaster bringing an avalanche of stress—but the conditions that made this crisis have been present for decades.

Teachers report some of the highest levels of occupational stress, even in the best of times. This makes the profession unsustainable, leading to demoralization, burnout, and eventual attrition.[1] While the pandemic augmented teacher stress that was already present, it also exposed teachers to new working conditions that lowered their stress. Together, these two strands of thought offer insight into how the status quo of stressful teacher working conditions should be disrupted to make the field more sustainable.

Although interventions abound for reducing teacher stress,[2] they often place the blame on the individual's psychology for failing to adapt to stressful situations, rather than examining the systemic sources of stress like poor working conditions.[3] Individualizing stress perpetuates a problematic narrative wherein teachers are to blame for the harm inflicted upon them. For example, it is well known that teachers are underpaid, work too many hours, and have poor work-life balance due to the demands of the job. Policymakers, researchers, and administrators often respond to this through wellness programs such as mindfulness or self-care models that shift the task of stress reduction back to teachers.[4] Consequently, teachers experience a vicious cycle of doing too much, feeling stressed, and then blaming themselves for feeling stressed. Even though coping is a valuable tool in stress reduction,[5] failing to address longer-term solutions places teachers in a precarious position wherein even minor disruptions can have devastating consequences.

These unaddressed problems in teacher working conditions are analogous to the scenario of a city with poor infrastructure stricken by a natural disaster. Rather than the storm itself,

[1] For an overview of teacher stress, see Cheryl Travers, "Current Knowledge on the Nature, Prevalence, Sources and Potential Impact of Teacher Stress," in *Educator Stress: An Occupational Health Perspective*, ed. Teresa Mendonça McIntyre, Scott E. McIntyre, and David J. Franci (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 23-54.
To understand the impact of stress and attrition, see Meredith L. Wronowski and Angela Urick, "Examining the Relationship of Teacher Perception of Accountability and Assessment Policies on Teacher Turnover during NCLB," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 27, no. 86 (2019): 86, https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3858.
[2] Nathaniel von der Embse, Shannon V. Ryan, Tera Gibbs, and Ariel Mankin, "Teacher Stress Interventions: A Systematic Review," *Psychology in the Schools* 56, no. 8 (2019), 1328-43, https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22279.
[3] Critiquing stress concepts that fail to link systemic and structural forces to stress, see Dana Becker, *One Nation*

Under Stress: The Trouble with Stress as an Idea (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[4] For a critique of self-care models, see Anna-Marie Greaney and Sinead Flaherty, "Self-Care as Care Left Undone? The Ethics of the Self-Care Agenda in Contemporary Healthcare Policy," *Nursing Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2020): e12291, https://doi.org/10.1111/nup.12291.
Also see David Forbes, "Mindfulness and Neoliberal Education," In *Weaving Complementary Knowledge Systems and Mindfulness to Educate a Literate Citizenry for Sustainable and Healthy Lives*, ed. Malgorzata Powietrzyńska and Kenneth Tobin (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2017), 145-158.
[5] Chris Kyriacou, "Teacher Stress: Directions for Future Research," *Educational Review* 53, no. 1 (2001), 27-35, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910120033628.

it is the poor infrastructure that makes the city so vulnerable to devastation. Similarly, the pressures imposed by COVID-19 have highlighted the poor infrastructure present in the landscape of the teaching profession.[6] For example, teachers' low rate of pay can also equate to poor living conditions.[7] This meant that many teachers were working in their homes during school closures, which were smaller, noisier, and more crowded than their classrooms. I have spoken to teachers who reported groggy spouses who could no longer sleep during the day after graveyard shifts, sweating on porches in the high Florida heat as they worked through daily read-alouds, and storing student data under the beds of roommates. Wi-Fi was often poor and teaching materials were scarce, since many had only one hour or less to remove all needed materials from their classroom before their schools were locked for the rest of the year.

Unfortunately, low rates of pay are not the only working condition leading to precarity. Teachers also typically work too many hours in a regular school week, often blurring the boundaries between work and home.8 During the pandemic, this too was amplified. I spoke to teachers telling me they were texting and emailing parents until midnight, only to a sleep a few hours before logging in online by 7:00 am to start it all over again. Many of the teachers reported feeling they were on-call like a doctor.

Yet as much as working from home intensified teacher stress, many teachers also experienced improvements to their working conditions while working from home during pandemic-related closures. When working in a school building, lunchtime usually requires teachers to be on-duty monitoring students, the lunch period can be as brief as 15 minutes, and healthy food options are often unavailable. While working from home, teachers reported healthier eating habits such as greater frequency of and more access to nutritious snacks, as well as not having to rush their mealtimes in short lunch blocks at school. Bathroom habits also improved due to the flexibility of teaching virtually. One teacher told me, "I haven't been able to pee on my own for the past three years. [During COVID-19] it was just a normal thing, not a 6-year-old outside the door guarding it for me." With no building to commute to, some saved money on gas, and many enjoyed a break from the daily grind of classroom management, particularly if they taught students who were physically violent.

Calls of "getting back to normal" view this pandemic as an anomaly, something to survive, until we can immediately return to the status quo. However, doing so ignores how the status quo has failed us as well as the inevitability of problems to come—whether they be new issues caused by COVID-19, hurricanes, wildfires, blizzards, or even future pandemics. Instead, we can

[6] I draw upon the concept that psychological recovery can be compared to natural disaster recovery, from Devin G. Atallah, Gonzalo Bacigalupe, and Paula Repetto, "Centering at the Margins: Critical Community Resilience Praxis," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167818825305.

[7] Elise Dizon-Ross, Susanna Loeb, Emily Penner, and Jane Rochmes, "Stress in Boom Times: Understanding Teachers' Economic Anxiety in a High-Cost Urban District," *AERA Open* 5, no. 4 (2019), 1-20, https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858419879439.

[8] Jaime L. Beck, "The Weight of a Heavy Hour: Understanding Teacher Experiences of Work Intensification,"

McGill Journal of Education 52, no. 3 (2018), 617-36, https://doi.org/10.7202/1050906ar.

Julian Howe, "Nine 'til Three? Not Likely! A Study of Teachers' Workload," *QTU Professional Magazine* 20, no. 1 (2004), 18-21, https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/aeipt.140812.

Yasemin Z. Türktorun, Gerald M. Weiher, and Holger Horz, "Psychological Detachment and Work-Related Rumination in Teachers: A Systematic Review," *Educational Research Review* 31 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100354.

use this crisis to shed light on the vulnerabilities that were always lurking in our educational system, as well as to reimagine schools that function differently.

These insights provide a pathway to change both brick-and-mortar and virtual school settings. In terms of brick-and-mortar settings, teachers need restroom relief,[9] as well as longer lunches and lunch monitoring relief.[10] Teachers also need the option of professional development via videoconferencing to save time and transportation costs otherwise spent traveling to various locations. Furthermore, teachers need new classroom management choices, such as temporary virtual school options for students exhibiting violent behaviors, which could provide the needed schedule flexibility for these students to receive more mental health support and ensure greater physical safety.[11]

In terms of virtual school settings, teachers need email cut-off times to help with boundary

blurring and to reduce excessive work hours.[12] Districts must also expand digital infrastructure and software resources, since virtual teachers do not have access to physical resources like manipulatives, classroom libraries, science kits, etc. It will also be necessary for schools to provide virtual teachers with a physical space within the school building for the storage of materials and the use of a quiet, uncrowded space to broadcast lessons.

To truly make teaching a more sustainable field, even bolder solutions might be required. Wage increases and affordable housing solutions would be essential,[13] given the poor living conditions of many teachers. Schools could adopt permanent hybrid options, mixing digital and in-person schooling,[14] four-day instructional weeks that provide teachers a fifth day for planning,[15] or even recurring virtual teaching positions to accommodate students and teachers who work

[9] Ingrid Nygaard and Marc Linder, "Thirst at Work—An Occupational Hazard?", *International Urogynecology Journal and Pelvic Floor Dysfunction* 8, no. 6 (1997), 340-43. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02765593.

[10] For a connection between length of school lunch breaks and health, see Nicholas Townsend, "Shorter Lunch Breaks Lead Secondary-School Students to Make Less Healthy Dietary Choices: Multilevel Analysis of Cross-Sectional National Survey Data," *Public Health Nutrition* 18, no. 9 (2015), 1626-34. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980014001803. For social benefits from duty-free lunches, see Lucy M. Jarzabkowski, "The Social Dimensions of Teacher Collegiality," *The Journal of Educational Enquiry* 3, no. 2 (2002). https://ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/EDEQ/article/view/538.

[11] Maeng, Malone, and Cornell, "Student Threats of Violence against Teachers," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 87, no. 102934 (2020), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102934

[12] Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth W. Dunn, "Checking Email Less Frequently Reduces Stress," *Computers in Human Behavior* 43 (2015), 220-228. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.005.

[13] Paula Davis, "Affordable Housing Solutions for Educators," The Donnell-Kay Foundation (2017), 1-40.

http://dkfoundation.org/assets/img/DK-021-Affordable-Housing-Solutions-for-Educators_FA.pdf

[14] Ute Kaden, "COVID-19 School Closure-Related Changes to the Professional Life of a K–12 Teacher," *Education Sciences* 10, no. 6 (2020), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10060165. Rabiya Saboowala and Pooja Manghirmalani Mishra, "Readiness of In-Service Teachers Toward a Blended Learning Approach as a Learning Pedagogy in the Post-COVID-19 Era," *Journal of Educational Technology Systems* 50, no. 1 (2021), 9-23.

https://doi.org/10.1177/00472395211015232.

[15] For discussion on how a four-day work week would provide more work-life balance, see Kate Power, "The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Increased the Care Burden of Women and Families," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 16, no. 1 (2020), 67-73. https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1776561. See the following for how four-day work weeks may improve teacher retention: Paul N. Thompson, Katherine Gunter, John M. Schuna, Jr., and Emily J. Tomayko, "Are All Four-Day School Weeks Created Equal? A National Assessment of Four-Day School Week Policy Adoption and Implementation," *Education Finance and Policy* (2021), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00316.

best virtually.[16] However, changing the school day is in direct conflict with larger systemic issues such as capitalistic uses of schools as child-storage facilities. After all, school schedules are dictated not by the needs of parents or children, but instead by the needs of employers who demand that schools unburden their employees from childcare to provide more labor to their businesses.[17] Questions of feasibility will likely follow anyone who tries to tackle these ambitious solutions, even though these questions often ignore the cost of maintaining the status quo.

Yet if we do not decide to work towards fixing these vulnerabilities, the next crisis looming in the distance may prove to be an even more painful reminder of what has been left undone.

Jonathan M. Coker is a Ph.D. candidate specializing in Educational Psychology and Research Methodologies at the University of South Florida. He researches teacher working conditions and LGBTQ+ statuses in relation to stress and resilience. Jonathan served as a K-12 classroom teacher for over ten years, and he is committed to helping make the profession more sustainable and diverse.

---

[16] Yong Zhao and Jim Watterston, "The Changes We Need: Education Post COVID-19," *Journal of Educational Change* 22, no. 1 (2021), 3-12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09417-3.

[17] The term "child storage" has been used colloquially to describe the reason schools are being pushed into reopening; see Mitchell D. Lingo, "Teachers Are Done Being Guilt-Tripped," GEN (blog), July 8, 2020, https://gen.medium.com/covid-19-guilt-and-the-breaking-point-of-teachers-8de42f70decd. This term can also be seen in an academic context in Liana B. Winett, Jeff Niederdeppe, Yiwei Xu, Sarah E. Gollust, and Erika Franklin Fowler, "When 'Tried and True' Advocacy Strategies Backfire: Narrative Messages Can Undermine State Legislator Support for Early Childcare Policies," *The Journal of Public Interest Communications* 5, no. 1 (2021), 45-77, https://doi.org/10.32473/jpic.v5.i1.p45.