

Teacher Workbox White Paper

Superintendent Janet's Dilemma

Janet Matthews, the superintendent at Kennesite School District, is stressed. It's not quite the same stress she felt ten years ago when she first took this role and had much to learn. Janet's state has changed the teacher evaluation system again, and her board of education has had to cut a few support positions for the coming school year due to budget constraints. Janet and her team are expected to do more with less every year, and this year is no exception. The current reality is really impacting morale. This past summer, Janet had more educators leave the district than she has seen in her tenure.

The good news is that Janet has a pot of money to spend on improving staff climate and culture. She wants to use this money to lessen teachers' cognitive load and, hopefully, help everyone feel more excited about their jobs with Kennesite School District. Janet is looking for a team-building opportunity that will improve morale and help staff feel less overwhelmed.

Teachers Are Overwhelmed and Leaving - We Need Them to Stay

Unfortunately, teachers are overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs, and this is not specific to Janet's school district. According to a *USA Today* article,¹ Tennessee public schools started the 2023-24 school year with 3,900 teaching positions vacant or with underqualified educators. The state of Virginia reported that approximately 3.9% of its positions were in the same situation.

One study² found that teachers were more likely to identify as emotionally exhausted as the number of tasks they were asked to perform increased. However, when tasks were cognitively demanding, teachers reported less exhaustion. In essence, teachers want to feel they are engaging in meaningful and productive

activities and not spending all of their time on a never-ending list of administrative to-dos.

Due to the high rates of teacher burnout, the mental health struggles among people in the education profession, and the need to retain high-quality teachers, it is no wonder that many school districts are prioritizing teacher mental health. A focus on supporting teachers and helping to ease the mental load of the profession is the right thing to do. But how can districts decide how to address this issue?

Self-Care Professional Development

One suggestion is to use money allocated for teacher well-being on a large-scale professional development day dedicated to learning about stress and self-care. Since the start of the pandemic, school districts across the country have worked to implement self-care professional development for educators to learn stress management strategies. Kennesite School District could hire massage therapists and yoga instructors for this event. They could provide all staff members with fidgets and adult-style coloring books to keep some strategies with them throughout the year.

While many districts have utilized the strategy of self-care professional development, we know that it does not provide a positive impact in the long term. One *EdWeek* study found that “many teachers say sessions on superficial self-care - like breathing exercises, yoga, and reminders to take a bubble bath or go for a walk - are no substitute for the kind of broader, systemic change that would keep them from feeling that their jobs have become untenable.”³

If Money Grew On Trees

A second option that school districts implement to help with teacher overwhelm and burnout is to invest significant money in increasing salaries, awarding bonuses, or creating additional positions that will lighten everyone’s load.

One LinkedIn article that discussed the teacher shortage issue⁴ identified “financial incentives” as one of the top ways to improve teacher retention.

Unfortunately, money does not grow on trees. Most districts are unable to commit large amounts of money to adding staff positions or increasing compensation to current teachers and staff. Sadly, some districts, such as Janet’s, are facing financial issues that cause a reduction in staff—meaning all remaining employees usually have more on their plates.

Helping Educators Manage the Invisible Work

A great solution for improving teacher overwhelm is to train educators on an organizational system that helps them manage the administrative tasks on their plate. Utilizing professional development time to teach an organizational framework and providing the materials needed to institute and maintain this system both acknowledges the mental load required of teachers and has the opportunity to improve their mental health.

Providing opportunities for self-care is nice, but giving someone a tool to reduce the number of hours they work each week gifts them time to spend on their own personal self-care. While every teacher would love to earn more money, receive a bonus, or see their school hire more support staff, this is not feasible in many districts. Offering training and support on an organizational strategy will help educators feel more in control of their time, and as the saying goes, time is money.

One article titled *Prioritizing Teachers’ Mental Health*,⁵ addressed a few options for supporting teachers’ mental health and combating burnout. One thing they suggest is that districts should “ensure teachers have the resources, tools, and support to manage their workload effectively. Setting reasonable expectations and reducing administrative burdens can go a long way in preventing burnout.” In order

to help improve mental health and reduce burnout, teachers should be trained on an effective organizational and task management system.

Reduce Time Spent on Administrative Tasks

Teachers spend a great deal of time on administrative tasks outside the purview of lesson planning and teaching. Often, these tasks take more time than necessary because educators constantly switch tasks quickly, so their brains never have enough time to focus on the task for the amount of time it requires.

A physical organizational system that provides a space to easily find and manage administrative tasks allows teachers to allocate specific time for these tasks and to dedicate their brain power during that time without task-switching. According to *The New York Times*, "at work, the way to get more tasks done is to learn to let most of them wait while you focus on one."⁶

Provide a Framework for Organization

Educators often teach their students to practice color coding as an organizational strategy to easily find the supplies they need. For example, if math class is coded as blue, then students in that class know that they need to get out their blue folder and notebook when starting math class. Why aren't all teachers taught a similar strategy for their own organization?

According to a workplace productivity consultant⁷, "adding color will help you to save time in both retrieving and filing information...The whole reason color-coding works is that it allows you to visually and quickly identify items by category." Providing teachers with a framework to help organize and manage administrative tasks should include a color-coded visual component so they can easily identify the materials they need for a specific task, meeting, or activity.

Strengthening Teacher Executive Function

Executive function is taxed when too much is required of our working memory. A person's working memory is burdened each time they try to remember information and tasks. *ADDitude Magazine*⁸ suggests reducing the cognitive load on working memory by writing down all tasks and ideas. This practice can be taught to teachers to help them feel less overwhelmed and to improve executive function.

Organize 365 Teacher Workbox

If you are like Janet and are looking for a professional development opportunity that will support your staff members and help reduce burnout, a self-care day is not going to provide teachers the framework they need to ease their mental fatigue and offer ongoing support. However, the Organize 365 Teacher Workbox can provide the structure, system, and support that will help to reduce the cognitive load and streamline administrative tasks, leaving educators more time to focus on students while at work and self-care outside of contractual hours.

The Teacher Workbox is an organizational tool that helps teachers manage their papers and administrative tasks. The system comes with a physical box and 40 slash pockets, or binder pockets, that help to color code and organize different categories of work. The system encourages teachers to get ideas out of their working memory by writing down ideas, tasks, and reminders on notecards that are then placed into the box and processed on a weekly basis.

The Organize 365 Teacher Workbox helps educators manage the invisible work, reduces time spent on administrative tasks and task-switching, and provides a framework for organization. It also provides the physical space to collect ideas and important information so they can be retrieved later. Finally, this program offers the education and support needed to develop healthy organizational habits and maintain the system.

Added Layers of Support

A district only needs to purchase one box for each employee, and then that educator will have their Workbox system for the rest of their career. The one-time cost provides the physical product and structure to implement the Workbox framework for many years.

During the school year, there is a weekly coworking time that allows educators to spend time processing their Workboxes together and provides an opportunity to share ideas and ask questions. The videos are then posted as replays in the community forum for future access by all educators enrolled in the program.

Finally, teachers who utilize the Teacher Workbox receive lifetime access to support on the community app and website. This includes videos and support materials for implementing the system, printables, and a forum where they can talk with other educators who utilize the Teacher Workbox. One proven way to provide support to overwhelmed teachers is to “encourage peer support and collaboration...[through] opportunities to connect with peers and build professional support networks.”⁵ This is exactly what users of the Teacher Workbox get when they participate in the online community.

Overcome Teacher Stress Through Structured Support

Many studies show that teachers are overwhelmed in their profession, and, unfortunately, many are choosing to leave the classroom. School districts want to support the amazing educators in their community and provide opportunities to lighten the administrative mental load taxing their energy and instead give them more time to focus on students.

Districts should offer professional development that helps educators organize their work and build systems that will help alleviate their mental load, allowing more time to be spent on student-facing aspects of the job. A significant

way to prioritize educators' mental health is to give them the tools they need to reduce overwhelm. Providing an organizational system and framework can help to do just that - and the Organize 365 Teacher Workbox is the best product available to support educators and districts in this endeavor.

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This white paper was written by Anna Hall and commissioned by [Organize 365](#).

The [teacher workbook](#) pilot for Lawrenceburg Middle School was funded by Organize 365, taught by [Lisa Woodruff](#), and supported by principal Jayme Herbert.

Listen to Lisa, Jayme, and Anna discuss the impact this organizational system is having on teachers in the classroom on the [Organize 365 podcast](#).

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