

Missouri teachers have felt stressed, 'attacked' during pandemic, statewide survey shows

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Eighty percent of Missouri educators reported feeling more stressed this year than in any other year in their careers, according to a statewide survey by a team of Missouri State University researchers.

Their chief stressor was trying to connect with students to impart academic instruction. Ongoing technology and staffing issues weighed them down, along

with the worry about keeping themselves and students safe during a pandemic.

Supporting students with special needs and dealing with community pushback were other issues that plagued teachers this year, according to survey results.

"It was immediately apparent that we have a lot of teachers under a whole lot of stress and my hunch is this is going to have a long-term impact, not only on retaining who we have, but potentially on recruiting more people into the profession," said Jon Turner, an associate professor of educational leadership at MSU.

Turner said a portion of teachers reported feeling "personally attacked" due to decisions made — at the district, state and national level — regarding schooling during the height of the pandemic.

"The people being caught in the middle are often the teachers," Turner said.



More than 8,000 educators, mostly classroom teachers, responded to the survey in mid-February — a year after COVID-19 case was reported in

Missouri — and they provide a critical snapshot of the impact of the pandemic on the teaching profession.

Researchers Turner, Ximena Uribe-Zarain, Kennedy Ongaga, and Kelly Wynne are still digging into the results.

They agreed to share the major findings with the News-Leader — and, by extension, the public — to shed light on teachers' experiences during the past year.

"These are our educators on the front lines," said Wynne, the MSU school counseling program coordinator. "They are the ones dealing with the students, who are also tired and worn out, and (they) are having to deal with the social-emotional aspects, as well, of the pandemic."



The original impetus for the survey was to see if teachers were looking at leaving earlier than planned, potentially exacerbating the national teacher shortage.

Ten percent of the educators surveyed said they planned to resign or retire this year — and 62% of those cited the pandemic as a reason.

"They acknowledged they were not in a good place and they need support," said Uribe-Zarain, assistant professor of counseling leadership and special education. "They are not feeling OK."

She added: "It's already a hard job to recruit teachers and now with this I think it's going to be harder."

Will pandemic make teacher shortage worse?

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recently launched a campaign to inspire high school and college students to consider a teaching career. The slogan is "The future depends on teachers."

"This year provided many a unique look at the crucial role that educators play in our society. When our schools closed their doors and students stayed home, parents gained a better understanding of and appreciation for teachers," said Mallory McGowin, chief communications officer for DESE.

"Yet, the pandemic has caused concern that larger numbers of teachers may retire early or leave the profession, exacerbating the existing teacher shortage."



Paul Katnik, assistant commissioner for education in Missouri, said today's teachers are the best way to recruit future teachers. He said districts with "grow your own" programs, to encourage students to pursue public education, are promising.

"We really believe that the future teachers are sitting in our high schools right now. And we believe the biggest cheerleaders, the recruiters that need to be involved, are the teachers in those high schools," he said. "They know these students. They are the ones who need to tap them on the shoulder and say 'You know what, you would make a great teacher.'"

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This year, in an attempt to alleviate part of teachers' stress, top education officials from across Missouri advocated for more flexibility in testing, in-person and virtual learning, and filling classrooms with substitutes.

Nearly all districts now offer in-person instruction. At the time of the survey, 41% were in-person with a virtual option, 29% offered a blended approach, 18% were fully in-person, and 12% were virtual.



Ongaga, an assistant professor focused on educational administration, said the survey showed there were teachers who love their jobs but felt caught between the need to earn a living and concerns for their safety.

"Most of the comments were 'If it were not for the paycheck, I am not sure I'd go back and do this' and 'I have to do this because I don't have a choice,'" he recalled.

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Asked about safety measures implemented by schools, 62% of teachers called it "about the right amount," while 31% said it was "not enough." The remainder said there were "too many."

Nearly 60% of teachers described putting the safety measures into place as either difficult or extremely difficult.

Pressure, criticism from parents and community

The survey was multiple choice or short answer but that did not stop respondents from adding comments. The researchers said they were overwhelmed by how many lengthy messages they received.

"They were eager to talk," said Uribe-Zarain. "They needed an outlet for their frustration to let the public ... know how they are feeling and how they are doing."



The surveys were anonymous, although educators were asked how long they'd been in public education, what they taught, what part of the state they lived in, and if their district was suburban, urban or rural.

One commented: "I have felt the lack of empathy from parents and the community. Never in all of my years as an educator have I thought about leaving the profession. COVID-19 and the constant complaints from parents on Social Media have deeply affected me."

They said "added stress" was the top factor affecting their fulfillment as educators this year and noted they were "drained of physical and emotional energy."

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Negative thoughts about their job, inability to catch up on their workload and increased pressure from parents and the community were also factors.

According to the survey, 83% of Missouri educators felt factors related to COVID-19 negatively impacted the ability to perform their job.

One commented: "I feel less supported by the community at large than ever before. A year ago, we were 'heroes,' now I feel educators are mistreated more than ever before."

Teachers are dealing with "higher and new expectations with less grace," one wrote on the survey. Another described teachers as "political footballs to be kicked around."

Pandemic caused "paradigm shift"

The researchers, who are all involved with preparing educators who work in schools, said the pandemic will reshape K-12 education.

"I'm not sure schools are going to go back to the way they used to be," said Ongaga. "Every school district is going to include the online learning, in one way or another."

They also agreed the lessons learned from the pandemic will likely inform policy and budget decisions for the 2021-22 year and beyond.

Ongaga said technology purchases, teacher training, learning models, and curriculum will all be altered by the lessons of the past year.

"It's a paradigm shift," he said. "If Missouri was looking for a reason to go big, then the pandemic is a good thing."

He said education leaders, at the state and district levels, can seize upon the flexibility discovered in the past year to make changes in teaching and learning. He said they can also look at ways to "incentivize" teachers to enter and stay in the field.

"I hope they will be bold enough to make those choices, those decisions that are going to move the K-12 education industry forward," he said.

"The point is basically putting resources where they are needed most."



Ongaga said during the pandemic, vulnerable groups of students — refugees, migrants, students with special needs and those lagging behind their peers — struggled more than others.

"The pandemic has revealed who we truly are ... it was revealed the inequities between the urban, suburban and rural; between different subgroups of students; what teachers have and what they need to have and what they ought to have," he said.

Turner said the huge changes experienced in the past year may "drive some out of the profession" and attract others.

He said veteran teachers may reconsider plans to teach a few more years if too many of the temporary changes from this year remain in place.

"You're going to have one cohort of people say 'If we're not going back to the way things were then I'm out.' That is not being mean, it's just being practical," Turner said. "They are saying 'If I have to Zoom with kids for the rest of my career, I'd just as soon take my retirement and leave.'"

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Wynne said the pandemic highlighted the need for mental health resources in schools, for students and for employees. She said a smattering of districts have started adding "mindfulness" exercises and stress relief options for employees.

"They're seeing that our faculty and our staff are struggling a well as our students," she said. "It's time to consider what do we need to implement next year for our staff and our faculty to be able to perform at their best for our students."

Wynne said the pandemic will have an impact on student learning for years. "The skill gaps are going to exist not only in the academic realm but in the social skills for some of our younger kids because they have been out of school and at home."

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