

Is teacher burnout contagious?

July 10 2017, by Kenneth Frank



A study by Michigan State University's Kenneth Frank and colleagues suggests burnout can be contagious among teachers in the same school. Credit: Michigan State University

Burnout among young teachers appears to be contagious, indicates a new

study led by Michigan State University education scholars.

The study found a significant link between [burnout](#) among early-career teachers and exposure to both a [school](#)-wide culture of burnout and burnout among the young teachers' closest circle of colleagues.

Surprisingly, the link was stronger to the school-wide culture of burnout than it was to burnout among close colleagues.

"If you are surrounded by people who are downcast or walking around under a pall of burnout, then it has a high chance of spilling over, even if you don't have direct contact with these folks," said Kenneth Frank, professor of measurement and quantitative methods in MSU's College of Education.

"This study," Frank added, "is one of the first to provide evidence that the organizational culture in schools can make a notable difference for early-career teachers' burnout levels."

Frank co-authored the study with Jihyun Kim, an MSU doctoral student, and Peter Youngs, a former MSU scholar who's now an associate professor at the University of Virginia. Their findings appear in the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education*.

The researchers analyzed the survey data on burnout of 171 teachers who were in their first four years in the profession and 289 experienced teachers who served as the young teachers' mentors or close colleagues.

Kim, lead author on the paper, said she was interested in investigating [teacher](#) burnout based on her experiences as an early-career teacher in her native Korea, where she worked long days and weekends.

Early-career teachers are particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout as

they adjust to working full-time and respond to school and district expectations, she said. Further, schools often fail to provide teachers with enough resources, including the appropriate teaching materials, assistant teachers, professional development and preparation time.

"These resources are critical not only for reducing teacher burnout, but also for closing gaps in students' learning," said Kim, who will begin work in the fall as an assistant professor of education at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

Frank said teacher burnout is also tied to the current education policy environment. Controversial policies such as evaluating teachers based primarily on student test scores, merit pay for teachers and lack of voice in assignment of students to teachers can bring added pressure.

"We know that early career teachers are susceptible to burnout because of the significant demands placed on them. It is also clear that the introduction of new reforms in K-12 [education](#) on a frequent basis adds to the pressures they experience," Frank said.

"If school administrators and policymakers are serious about promoting retention and reducing burnout among novice teachers, they should be aware not just of the curriculum they are advocating, or their rules and policies for teachers. They should also attend to how the [organizational culture](#) in their schools can have direct effects on burnout levels of their faculty."

Provided by Michigan State University

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