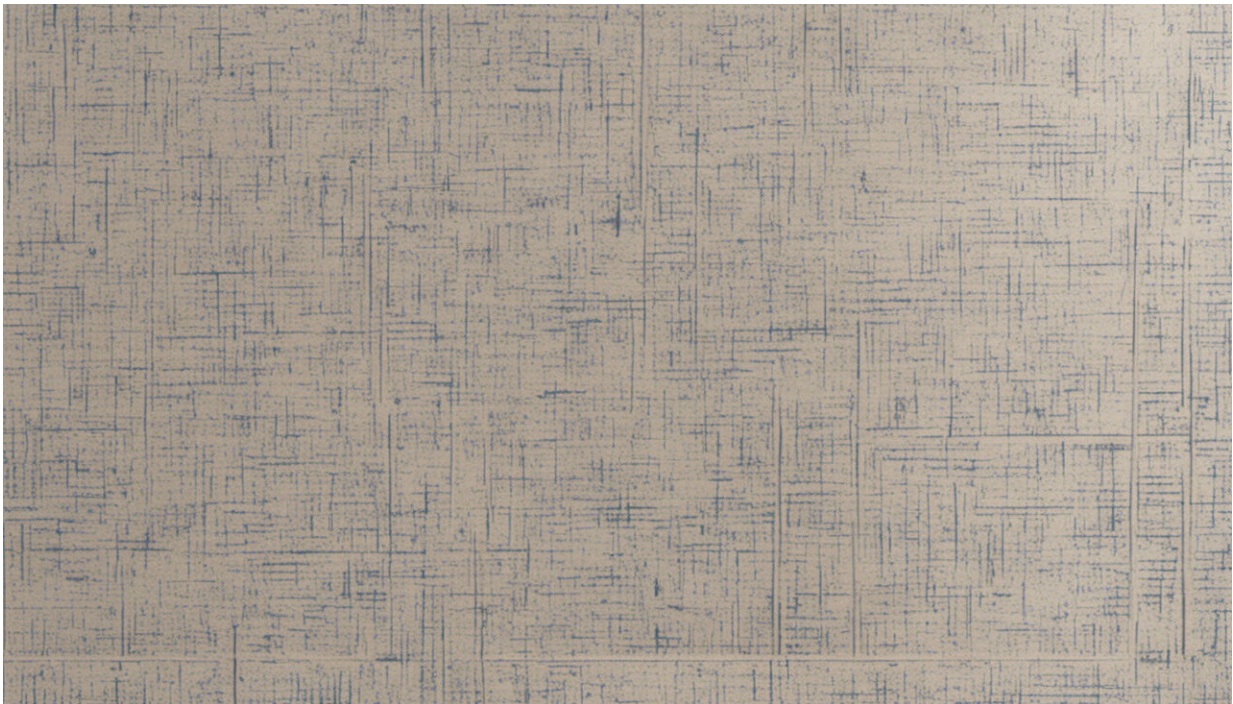


Teachers' stress isn't just an individual thing, it's about their schools too

June 3 2022, by Rebecca J. Collie and Caroline F. Mansfield



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Stress is common among teachers, and [recent reports](#) suggest it's getting worse. We need to understand the sources of this stress to improve support for teachers. Growing [teacher shortages](#) in Australia underscore the need for this support.

It is also important to identify whether there are patterns of [stress](#) experienced by individuals and groups of [teachers](#) within a school. This knowledge will tell us whether support for teachers should be targeted individually or to a teaching staff more broadly.

[Our study](#) involving 3,117 teachers at 225 Australian schools shows sources of stress do vary among individual teachers. At the same time, the [school environment](#)—workloads, student behavior and expectations of teachers—appears important. At some schools the stress experiences of individuals mirror those of the teaching staff more broadly.

So managing stress is not just the responsibility of individual teachers. Schools have an important role to play in developing a workplace that helps to minimize their teachers' stress.

What are the sources of teachers' stress?

In [our study](#), published in [Teaching and Teacher Education](#), we examined three common sources of stress at work to see how these affect well-being among individual teachers and across a whole school teaching staff.

These three sources of stress are:

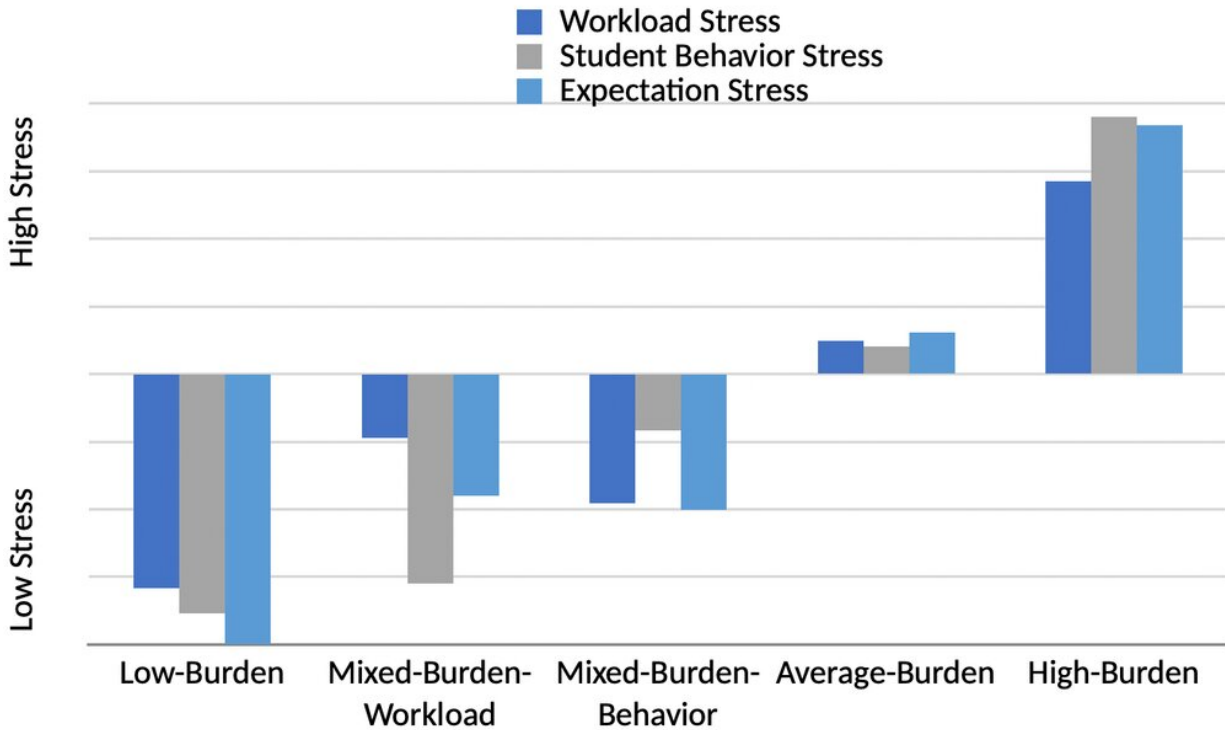
- workload stress—teachers' sense they have too much lesson preparation, instruction or marking work in the time available to them
- student behavior stress—teachers' sense that student behavior is overly disruptive or aggressive
- expectation stress—teachers' sense that professional/registration bodies and parents are placing very high or unrealistic expectations on them.

We first examined how the three sources of stress co-occur among teachers to identify teacher stress profiles. That is, we wanted to see if there are distinct types of teachers who experience similar patterns across the three sources. For example, are there teachers with low or high levels of all three sources of stress, and are there teachers who have mixed levels of the sources of stress?

Next, we wanted to ascertain whether different types of schools are identifiable as being more or less stressful based on the make-up of their teacher stress profiles. That is, we set out to identify different school profiles.

Once we had identified teacher and school profiles, we examined whether the different profiles were linked with work strain and work commitment. Work strain refers to the adverse outcomes of stressful work—such as feeling highly stressed and reduced mental or physical health. Work commitment refers to teachers' attachment to their profession.

Ideally, teachers experience low strain at work, but high commitment.



The five teacher stress profiles reflect their experience of the combined impacts of workplace stress, student behaviour stress and expectation stress. Credit: Collie & Mansfield 2022, Author provided

What teacher profiles did we find?

[Our analysis](#) used data from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey ([TALIS](#)) 2018. We identified five teacher profiles:

- low-burden [profile](#) (7% of teachers in our sample) displaying very low levels of all three stressors
- mixed-burden-workload profile (15%) displaying below-average workload stress, very low student behavior stress and low expectation stress
- mixed-burden-behavior profile (19%) displaying low workload

stress, below-average student behavior stress and low expectation stress

- average-burden profile (41%) displaying slightly above-average levels of all three stressors
- high-burden profile (18%) displaying high workload stress and very high student behavior and expectation stress.

Looking at links between profiles and outcomes, the low-burden profile and the two mixed-burden profiles generally displayed the lowest work strain and highest work commitment.

What school profiles did we find?

We then examined how these teacher profiles are distributed in schools. We identified three school profiles:

- workload-oriented-climate profile (17% of schools in our sample) composed mostly of teacher profiles with high workload stress, but also a sizeable proportion displaying lower stress
- behavior-oriented-climate profile (23%) composed mostly of teacher profiles with high student behavior stress, but also a sizeable proportion displaying lower stress
- higher-pressure-climate profile (60%) composed mostly of teacher profiles with above-average to high levels of all three sources of stress.

Teachers who collectively displayed the highest levels of work strain tended to work in higher-pressure-climate schools. Levels of work commitment were also lowest among teachers in those schools.

Research reveals Australia has the largest difference in stress levels between teachers in advantaged and disadvantaged schools—a difference of 10 percentage points compared to the

OECD average of 2 percentage points. Discover more >
<https://t.co/Wu97nLgd1f>

— ACER (@acereduau) [August 22, 2020](#)

What does this mean for teachers and schools?

One notable finding was the differentiation between workload stress and student behavior stress in two teacher profiles and two school profiles. Some teachers and schools were higher in student behavior stress. Others were higher in workload stress. And other profiles had similar levels of all types of stress.

These results suggest sources of stress at work are not necessarily specific to the individual, but reflect a broader school climate as well. So, teachers' stress isn't just an individual issue—some schools are more stressful places to work.

In practice, it is important that teachers have their own strategies to manage stress. At the same time, our findings suggest schools and educational systems should be aware of teachers' collective experiences of stress and provide school-wide supports.

To reduce workload stress, [research](#) suggests supportive mentors are helpful. It's also helpful to develop professional learning communities to share the loads of lesson preparation and marking moderation.

Reducing workload across the school is also critical. Decreasing teachers' face-to-face teaching time and administrative tasks have been [suggested](#) as ways to do this.

Providing [professional learning opportunities](#) to develop teachers' classroom management skills might help reduce [student](#) behavior stress.

A positive learning climate at school is also important. When students feel supported and are more engaged in their learning, they are less likely to be disruptive. In particular, [research](#) suggests it is important that all students feel cared for, have opportunities to succeed in their learning, and are given a say in content and tasks in the classroom.

Finally, [research](#) suggests school leaders can help reduce expectation stress by seeking out teachers' perspectives and conveying their trust in them as professionals. Likewise, positive school-home partnerships can help ensure teachers, [school](#) leaders, students and parents are aligned in their goals.

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