

Rural educators struggle to meet student mental health with limited resources, study finds

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Educators in Maine's rural schools are struggling to meet the mental and emotional needs of their students due to a lack of resources, and

institutional support, according to a new study from the University of Maine.

In education around the world, there is a tension between meeting institutional goals like fiscal efficiency, literacy and numeracy while also meeting the emotional needs of students. That tension can be heightened in [rural communities](#) due to fractured, distant social service networks and the declining economic well-being of many communities.

Even so, the need to address the emotional and mental needs of students in schools is greater than ever. In addition to [adverse childhood experiences](#) like neglect, abuse, [mental illness](#), family issues and exposure to systemic adversity like poverty and racism, disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the need for trauma-informed practices for students.

Catharine Biddle, associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development, led a study analyzing focus group discussions with 110 rural Maine educators from 12 schools at various grade levels. Participants were asked questions about [teacher](#)-student relationships, the relationship between the school and the community, as well as strengths and challenges related to supporting student learning and healthy development.

Biddle framed her study through a lens of critical rural theory, which draws attention to the ways in which the purpose, activities and effects of education; the role of schools as institutions in a community; and the implicit assumptions in institutional and policy logics differ for nonurban areas. For example, professional norms and expectations within schools in rural areas may not be the same as those in cities; the diminished political economy of rural places may impact [educational policy](#); and the teacher's themselves may have a different relationship to

a rural community than they would in a city.

"Critical rural theory helps to highlight the ways in which our current educational system was not designed with rural schools in mind. Funding that relies on district capacity to write grants, narrowly defined credentials that ignore the many hats rural teachers must wear, and inadequate teacher support systems for those in our most remote schools are all examples of spatial inequities in education," Biddle says.

The teachers in the study described the increasing pressure on [student achievement](#), dwindling [financial resources](#) within their districts and little institutional attention to the changing student needs around stress and mental health. Teachers saw many ways in which stress directly interfered with their ability to address the curriculum, including rising [student](#) anxiety related to economic insecurity, such as hunger or transiency, or personal adversity such as parent death (often from substance use), removal from the home and placement with temporary caregivers or other family members.

The teachers also cited a lack of formal training in addressing these issues, and frequently worried that, in the absence of training, they were actually harming children through their lack of knowledge about childhood adversity.

To tackle these issues in light of the lack of institutional support, teachers described individual acts outside of their regular job descriptions, some that may even defy existing schools policies. Some of these actions included small gestures, such as hugging students even in schools that had policies against such engagement, to significant forms of resistance, such as refusing to engage with mandated reporting systems or issues around documentation because they are seen as doing more harm than good.

"I think one of the most surprising findings was how conflicted teachers felt about mandated reporting," Biddle says. "Clearly, more research is needed here to understand why some rural educators may not want to report and how the dynamics of mandated reporting play out in small communities."

Addressing students needs was found to come often at a great emotional cost to teachers, contributing to more burnout in the profession, but also sometimes at a financial cost to teachers, as they discussed keeping supplies to meet students' basic needs in their classrooms, including clean clothing, snacks, toiletries and other necessities.

The teachers in the study couldn't agree on exactly what changes are needed to help them better address their students increased emotional needs, but their responses clustered around three key themes: adequate resources to achieve the high expectations laid out by the state; a broad base of community supports for families; and, finally, a model of teaching and learning that recognizes humanity.

Biddle hopes that the insights from this study may contribute to better designed policy to address both teacher burnout and childhood adversity in Maine's rural communities.

"Teachers were clear: [school](#) is about so much more than achievement for [young people](#)," Biddle says, "Children and youth need to feel that they are appreciated as people by the adults around them, that they need adequate mental health supports, and that our current staffing solutions are not meeting those needs."

The study was published in the journal *The Rural Educator* in Volume 43, Number 4, in 2022.

More information: "'We'll probably all be in trouble for hugging a

kid': Rural teacher radicalism in addressing adverse childhood experiences." [scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/r ... ucator/vol43/iss4/4/](https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/rucator/vol43/iss4/4/)

Provided by University of Maine

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