

# Study asks what personal and professional factors help mitigate teacher burnout

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A new study from two University of Maine researchers suggests that the personal protective factors of resilience and compassion satisfaction, and

the professional factor of working in a positive school climate are key to mitigating burnout among teachers.

Compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress and [burnout](#) have long been identified as commonplace in so-called helping professions like [health care](#), [social work](#) and law. When people work closely with others who have experienced traumatic life events, some of that trauma rubs off on them and leads to feelings such as cynicism, despair, exhaustion and inadequacy, or what scholars call "cost to caring."

UMaine researchers Sherry Pineau Brown and Catharine Biddle surveyed more than 540 Maine teachers in an attempt to understand the extent to which educators experience cost to caring, and what factors might mitigate its effects. Their results are published in the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education*.

Brown earned her Ph.D. in education with a concentration in prevention and intervention from UMaine in 2020. She's an adjunct lecturer with the College of Education and Human Development and academic dean of students at a central Maine [high school](#). The study is from her dissertation research. Biddle is an associate professor of educational leadership and leads the Rural Schools Collaborative's New England Rural Education Hub, housed at UMaine. She served on Brown's dissertation committee.

Although several studies have examined costs to caring in other professions, Brown and Biddle note a lack of empirical evidence of its prevalence among teachers, as researchers have "all but ignored educators in the discussion." That has started to change recently with growing interest in the impact of trauma and [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs) on educators and schools.

Two questions guided Brown and Biddle's research. First, what is the

extent to which teachers experience costs to caring and personal and professional ACEs? Second, what personal and organizational mediating factors contribute to the extent to which teachers experience cost to caring? The teachers who participated in the study completed a 91-question survey designed to measure personal and professional ACEs, [school](#) climate, personal protective factors (resilience, empathy and compassion satisfaction) and cost to caring.

On the first question, the study's participants reported similar levels of cost to caring as people in other professions.

"Levels of burnout in the sample, for example, mirrored those of the reported norms, and the level of secondary traumatic stress in the sample were also only slightly lower than the norm," Brown and Biddle write.

Participants also had "a higher-than-expected prevalence of having experienced four or more ACEs, the cutoff score typically used to determine higher levels of risk." Brown and Biddle also found a correlation between teachers' personal ACEs and their perception of their students' ACEs.

"We theorize that teacher empathy may be a factor, as teachers who have experienced difficulties in childhood may be more apt to recognize such difficulties in others or even seek out work in environments with students who they believe have similar ACE histories to their own," they write.

On the second question about the factors that mediate the extent to which teachers experience cost to caring, Brown and Biddle found that ACEs had a negligible effect on cost to caring, specifically burnout.

"This finding is encouraging from a policy and practice perspective," they argue, "as there is little that teachers can do about their childhood

experiences or those of their students."

Compassion satisfaction—defined in part as the pleasing feeling of being successful and capable as a teacher—and personal resilience had the strongest effect on burnout, with a total effect four times higher than the risk factor of teachers' personal ACEs.

"Given that teachers have a degree of control over their personal resilience and compassion satisfaction, these findings suggest that personnel practices that enhance these aspects of teachers' professional experiences will mitigate burnout," Brown and Biddle say.

Although school climate did not have a direct mitigating effect on burnout, according to the results of the study, the researchers found a strong indirect effect.

"A positive school climate had a strong direct effect on a teachers' personal resilience and compassion satisfaction, which in turn has a strong negative effect on teachers' burnout," they write.

Importantly, the study and its findings were completed before the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to disrupt schools in the United States and abroad, leading many teachers to leave the profession citing burnout and other costs to caring-linked factors.

Overall, Brown and Biddle say they hope their study can be used as a model for school leaders, policymakers, researchers and others seeking to inform changes in education.

"By understanding the impact of adversity and empathy, creating schools with positive climate, and building resilience and compassion satisfaction in teachers, stakeholders may be able to mitigate the costs to caring that [teachers](#) face," they write.

**More information:** Sherry Pineau Brown et al, Testing a teacher costs to caring resilience model to identify burnout mediators, *Teaching and Teacher Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tate.2023.104078](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104078)

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