

Boosting teacher well-being at the start of term helps combat attrition and burnout, research suggests

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Supporting teacher well-being at the start of term is integral to sustaining their well-being long-term, according to UNSW research. Understanding

how we can better support teacher well-being and how it changes over time will help reduce the current high burnout and attrition rates, says Scientia Associate Professor Rebecca Collie from UNSW's School of Education.

"Teacher well-being is of critical importance to healthy functioning at work and to students' academic development," says the world-leading educational psychology researcher.

"Our research found teachers' levels of well-being at these starting points, as well as the perceived quality of their connection with students, are significant in shaping subsequent patterns of well-being."

A study published in late 2023, conducted with Scientia Professor Andrew Martin from UNSW, examined how teacher well-being changes over one school term, and the role of teacher-student relationships in how these changes unfold. It followed 401 primary (56%) secondary (38%) kindergarten to year 12 (6%) schoolteachers from all Australian states and territories, during Term 3 in 2021.

Teachers reported on their well-being and their sense of connection with students in weeks two, five and eight of the 10-week term. Teachers reported declines in well-being over the term, the research found.

"Importantly though, teachers who reported more positive teacher-student relationships at the start of term ended the term with higher [rates of] well-being than those teachers who started the term with less positive teacher-student relationships," she says.

"Our findings highlight the interconnectedness of teacher well-being and teacher-student relationships and underscore the importance of introducing efforts to bolster both."

A/Prof. Collie conducts research into motivation, well-being and social-emotional development using quantitative research methods. She works with unions, government and researchers in Australia and internationally to promote evidence-led change in educational policy and practice.

Her research is regularly cited in [OECD education reports](#) and referenced in Senate inquiries into education. It aims to identify how to support teachers and students to thrive socially, emotionally and academically.

"Our findings highlight the interconnectedness of teacher well-being and teacher-student relationships and underscore the importance of introducing efforts to bolster both," says A/Prof. Collie.

Teacher well-being can be understood as a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively at work, says A/Prof. Collie. "The 'feeling good' part is captured by factors, such as [job satisfaction](#), a sense of vitality, and low stress or burnout at work. In contrast, the 'functioning effectively' part of the definition is captured by factors like work engagement and occupational commitment."

These emotional, cognitive and behavioral elements of well-being were examined in the study using the [Tripartite Occupational Well-being Scale](#), developed by A/Prof. Collie.

The scale identifies three types of well-being as key to teachers' healthy and effective functioning: vitality—the energy and vibrancy that teachers feel in their work; engagement—the dedication and exertion that teachers channel into their job; and professional growth—teachers' commitment to enhancing their expertise and competencies.

The research found all three types of well-being declined over the course of the term. "This applied to all different types of teachers [regardless of

age, gender and experience], highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to support teacher well-being," A/Prof. Collie says.

The research did, however, reveal some interesting minor variations. For example, female teachers started the term with lower vitality, but higher engagement than male teachers. More experienced teachers started the term with higher engagement than less experienced teachers. These insights will help guide further research to help us tailor responses to improve teacher well-being, she says.

Teachers report some of the highest rates of psychological stress. [A national survey of more than 4000 teachers](#), conducted by the Black Dog Institute in 2023, found 70% reported having unmanageable workloads. In the survey, 52% reported moderate to extremely severe symptoms of depression and 59.7% reported feeling stressed (compared to 12.1% and 11.4% of the general population respectively).

Additionally, [Australian schools are facing unprecedented teacher supply and retention challenges](#), only exacerbated by the pressures of the COVID pandemic. Modeling of teacher supply and demand has suggested shortages could worsen over the coming years, with the demand for secondary teachers to exceed the supply of new graduate teachers by around 4,100 between 2021 to 2025.

"Historically, teaching has had a high rate of early-career attrition—teaching is a very rewarding profession, but it can also be challenging—however, this has now grown in all career-stage categories," A/Prof. Collie says. "The issue is sector-wide—affecting both public and [private schools](#)—and is a recognized problem internationally."

Teacher shortage has a huge cost to schools and to society more broadly, she says. [It is recognized as a critical risk to improving student](#)

[outcomes, now and in the future](#). As such, teacher well-being is receiving increasing attention in current reviews of the education sector, including within the Australian Government's National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and the Australian Teacher Workforce Data initiative.

How schools can sustain and support teacher well-being

A/Prof. Collie's [research into factors that support teacher well-being](#) is contributing to policy development as well as assisting school leadership with practical evidence-driven strategies for improving teacher well-being. This research was published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*

She has examined the relationship between social supports at work (job 'resources') and common challenges for teachers (job 'demands') with teacher well-being and their intentions to seek alternative employment (turnover intentions). 426 Australian school teachers participated in the study.

"Time pressure, disruptive student behavior and a lack of relevant professional learning opportunities are all common challenges for teachers," she says.

"Conversely teachers who experience social supports, such as school leadership that encourages teacher agency and initiative at work—and positive relationships with both colleagues and students consistently demonstrated higher rates of well-being and lower intentions to leave teaching."

[Streamlining teachers' work—reducing administrative tasks and face-to-face teaching time](#)—is important, particularly at the start of term.

Similarly, inviting teachers' input in decisions and school policies and providing rationales for work tasks are some of the ways schools can support greater well-being, she says.

["Fostering collaborative relationships between staff"](#) also promotes higher well-being," she says. "Providing common planning time, establishing professional learning communities and peer-mentorships, developing a shared mission and cultivating a supportive staffroom are relevant strategies for this."

These can help teachers experience greater well-being and interpersonal relationships in the workplace—leading to more optimal outcomes for both teachers and students.

Schools can promote high-quality student-teacher interactions through ongoing support and feedback as well as teachers' professional learning and goal setting around improving particular student-relationships, she says.

"Schools can consider strategies, such as professional learning opportunities on high-quality teaching interactions, considering how content and teaching approaches might be better aligned to student interests, or providing resources and support for managing stress and workload."

Finally, the role of helpful feedback cannot be underestimated, she says. [Her recent study of the role of job resources \(or forms of support\) for teachers from Australia, Canada, England and America](#) found that when teachers felt supported in terms of feedback, they were more likely to be committed to the profession.

"Feedback appeared even more crucial when teachers faced high levels of disruptive student behavior," she says. "The results were comparable

across all four nations."

The study used data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS).

These supports and challenges tap into the basic psychological needs related to autonomy, competence and connection essential for optimal human functioning, she says.

"It's a social imperative that we take care of workers in any field; low well-being negatively affects our interpersonal relationships and quality of life, increases the burden on medical services, and reduces economic productivity, among other reasons," she says.

Moreover, improving teacher well-being has significant societal impact. "Teacher well-being is relevant for creating successful schools, and helping students' long-term outcomes—academic, social, emotional, financial—as well as their well-being," she says.

"Schools play a huge role in developing these. Promoting positive [teacher](#) well-being has huge benefits for our society and for our future generations."

More information: Rebecca J. Collie, Teacher well-being and turnover intentions: Investigating the roles of job resources and job demands, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/bjep.12587](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12587)

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