



# Preventing burnout in schools

School resources

Teaching is demanding - that is one reason why it is worthwhile – and all teachers have stressful days. But a teacher who experiences a series of stressful days and struggles to cope may begin to feel emotionally and physically exhausted: burned out. Burnout is associated with feeling unsuccessful and increasingly detached from work. Burned out teachers struggle to teach well and to keep going. This guide explains what causes burnout, and what schools can do to help prevent it.

## Why does burnout happen?

Burnout happens when the demands teachers face exceed their resources. Inspiring, supporting and educating a class full of unique individuals is inherently demanding. Usually, teachers can cope with everyday demands and with occasional periods of additional pressure, like the last week before exams or the holidays. But when teachers face excessive and sustained demands, burnout can occur. High demands do not cause burnout on their own, however – a tricky class can be particularly satisfying for a teacher who is able to support them to make progress. Burnout develops when teachers lack the resources they need to meet those demands. These resources include support from leaders and colleagues, personal characteristics (like skill, confidence and self-belief), and anything else which helps (like humour). These resources can help teachers to avoid burnout.

Extensive research has been conducted into the causes and correlates of burnout among teachers, which enables schools to be relatively confident about the need to balance demands and resources. However, there has been very little experimental research into preventing burnout among teachers, so this guide draws on both evidence from schools and experimental evidence from other professions, particularly studies in medicine, since clinicians face analogous pressures to teachers, such as balancing multiple tasks with limited time. It also draws on pilot research currently being undertaken into preventing burnout among teachers in English schools<sup>1</sup>.

## Preventing burnout: Getting the demands right

Since burnout occurs when teachers lack the resources needed to cope with the demands they face, schools can help to prevent teacher burnout by ensuring that the demands on teachers are manageable and that they have the resources to meet them.

### Help teachers focus on the most important tasks

Schools can reduce the risk of burnout by ensuring that teachers can focus on a few carefully chosen priorities and avoid less important ones. This means deciding and communicating which activities matter most for students, and which have a lower priority. It also means limiting and removing the unimportant tasks that can clutter teachers' time and attention, such as duplicative paperwork, unclear requests, and technological barriers. Demands must also be fairly distributed and tailored to teachers' capacities: for example, newer teachers should be given less demanding classes.

### What principals can do to get the demands right

Teachers often feel that they must do everything they possibly can so, when a new initiative begins, they add it to their to do list. This is stressful and exhausting. Principals and leaders can mitigate this by **ensuring that teachers have clear priorities** (whether these are set by teachers themselves, or by leaders).

One way to achieve this is to create a hierarchy of tasks (rather than a list), which clarifies what is essential and what is an optional extra. For example, 'our priority this term is ensuring students can recall key ideas – please give retrieval practice all the time it needs, even if that means shortening your starter activity'. Any new task should be presented as part of this hierarchy and should replace an existing task: for example, 'we're encouraging whole-class feedback – you don't need to close-mark students' writing as well'. These priorities can be reinforced by the way principals and school leaders communicate: an email with a clear, limited purpose feels more manageable and is more likely to evoke action than a series of action points.

Even if priorities are clear, minor tasks can prevent teachers from acting on them. For example, a teacher may want to focus on their planning, but find their time taken up by technological problems, administrative requirements or a specific student whose needs fall outside their role. Principals and leaders can help teachers focus on priorities by **identifying and removing these obstacles**: getting the tech fixed, streamlining paperwork, or providing whole-school support for individual students. One way to help identify these barriers is to ask teachers what they are – for example, by sending a two-minute survey to teachers each week. Principals and school leaders can use this information to tweak policies, clarify requests and address problems.

#### What teachers can do to get the demands right

If teachers are struggling with their workload, they may need to approach their team leader, head of department or principal to **ask for clearer priorities and the removal of extraneous tasks**. If leaders are struggling to prioritise explicitly (perhaps suggesting that everything is important), teachers may be able to elicit priorities by framing questions as dilemmas: for instance, 'I have one free period on Fridays – should I prioritise planning or marking in that time?' or 'If our students could only leave the school having achieved one of these things, which would it be?' Teachers can also **let those responsible know about the barriers they are facing**: principals and leaders may simply not know how long administrative tasks are taking or how often the photocopier is broken. If leaders and principals listen carefully to teachers' concerns and act on them, this should help to reduce demands on teachers and provide greater support.

### Preventing burnout: Getting the resources right

Schools need to ensure teachers have the resources to meet the demands they face because, while they can set priorities and remove barriers, teaching will always be demanding. Some resources are obvious, such as training and [coaching](#) in the skills needed to meet students' needs. Others are powerful, but less obvious. For example, people in demanding roles are less susceptible to burnout if they feel they have **social support**: colleagues with whom to share challenges, support and moments of humour. Extensive evidence demonstrates that people thrive when they have strong social relationships and feel that they belong. The power of social support is particularly clear in combating burnout: people are much less susceptible to burnout if they have colleagues with whom to share challenges and offer support.

Demanding tasks also seem more manageable and motivating when people see them as meaningful, so leaders and principals can help by supporting teachers to **see the meaning and value** in their work.

**Personal coping strategies** help too: working efficiently, managing tasks, and relaxing properly through physical activity and meditation, for example. No resource is a panacea, but numerous studies have shown that these resources help people to cope with the demands they face.

#### What principals can do to get resources right

When principals understand the demands teachers are struggling with, they can **provide support that is tailored** to meet them. This may mean offering training or coaching, or it may involve modelling sustainable behaviour like going home promptly at least some evenings. Principals can **promote**

**supportive relationships** by creating an environment which encourages social connection: for example, they can schedule dedicated planning time for teams and departments, and provide comfortable chairs and refreshments in the staff room at the end of the day. Principals can also help teachers avoid burnout by encouraging them to pause and **recognise their successes**. The weekly survey mentioned above is a great way to find out about successes that teachers have enjoyed during the week: ask ‘who has been a great support?’, ‘what are you proud of?’ or ‘who have you made a difference to this week?’ Recognising and sharing teachers’ successes underscores their importance and emphasises teachers’ skills and achievements.

#### What teachers can do to get resources right

Teachers can organise some of these supports themselves. They can **set aside time to plan or talk through current challenges with colleagues**, or get together at the end of the week to celebrate and commiserate. However, it is important to note that those who need support most are least likely to access it: teachers may know they should take a break or talk a problem through, but feel too busy or stressed to do so. Teachers can try to provide these resources for one another by asking questions like ‘what do you need?’, ‘how can I help?’ and ‘what did go well today?’ This also helps to strengthen relationships and build social connection among colleagues, which research demonstrates is essential to [wellbeing](#) and resilience.

### Addressing burnout

This guide describes ways to make schools better workplaces which should help to prevent burnout. However, if a teacher seems to be experiencing burnout – if they are mentally and physically exhausted and struggling to continue – these measures are unlikely to suffice. Burnout is closely associated with depression, and teachers who are already suffering burnout may need clinical help. As a colleague or a principal, you may need to highlight the help available, encourage individuals to access it, and ensure they get the support needed to recover. Burnout will not go away of its own accord: **schools must ensure teachers get the support they need**.

Two good places to start are:

- The Health Promotion Agency’s page on [depression](#), which offers useful guidance on diagnosis and treatment
- The Mental Health Foundation’s [list](#) of helplines

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### Endnotes

1 This pilot research forms part of the author’s doctoral research.

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Harry has worked in schools in Japan, India and the UK, teaching history and leading teacher development. He’s now a teacher educator at Ambition Institute, and the author of *Responsive Teaching: Cognitive Science and Formative Assessment in Practice*. For his next book, he’s spent two years researching the behavioural science influencing student behaviour. You can find his blog at [improvingteaching.co.uk](https://improvingteaching.co.uk); he’s on Twitter as [@hfletcherwood](https://twitter.com/hfletcherwood).