

# BEYOND BURNOUT

A ROADMAP TO IMPROVE EDUCATOR WELL-BEING



# A LETTER FROM THE AFT PRESIDENT



Educating the next generation has been one of America's highest priorities. Yet, we rarely treat teachers and school staff in ways that reflect the importance of their work. Teachers want what students need—that's reaffirmed for me each day in the thousands of conversations I have with members every year. Educators play a crucial role in the lives of our students. When educators are well-supported, they provide even better learning experiences for their students. Yet, educators face stress every day from the strain of managing the trauma and anxiety

that is showing up in student behavior, the non-stop paperwork and administrative tasks, and culture wars that make it difficult for them to teach what students need to know. But it doesn't have to be that way. **By prioritizing educator well-being, schools can create an environment that fosters growth, resilience and, ultimately, better educational outcomes** (Harding et al., 2019).

This report describes some of the work we undertook to support educators starting in the early days of the pandemic. We gave them a set of research-based strategies to help them deal with stress. We had the advice and support of several wonderful partners who helped us probe deeper, including an ongoing collaboration with Educators Thriving. We asked educators what well-being looks like in the context of their profession and daily work. The early results are described in the pages that follow: an educator-generated measure of well-being that can serve as a barometer of a healthy school climate and form a solid foundation for union-district collaboration. And a professional development experience that, early results show, has immediate impact on educators' sense that their work is, indeed, sustainable despite daily challenges. It is our strong desire to share and spread both the well-being measure and the learning experiences that can move the needle in a positive direction. **We believe these approaches to measuring and incorporating educators' input can help improve well-being across the entire education system.**

Our aspiration—communities full of public schools where educators want to work, students want to learn, and parents want to send their children—requires long-term commitments and solutions. But thankfully, there are actions we can take right now that will help us get there.

– *Randi Weingarten, President of the AFT*



# BEYOND BURNOUT:

## A ROADMAP TO IMPROVE EDUCATOR WELL-BEING

“ I wish that it was clear to everyone in the US that when it comes to schools, working conditions are learning conditions. ”

AFT EDUCATOR

In 2022, for the first time since the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) began testing students in the 1970s, scores in math dropped. Reading scores fell by the largest margin seen in 30 years (NAEP, 2022). The pandemic had devastating consequences on student development—both academically and socio-emotionally.

Addressing these crises will take solutions at multiple levels—all of which require adults in schools to be reaching ever closer to their full professional potential.

But there’s another problem: the adults on the front lines—the teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school-related personnel who are tasked with solving this problem—are not experiencing well-being.

There is a critical link between student and teacher relationships, well-being, and developmental outcomes (Harding et al., 2019). Education leaders must tend to the well-being of staff so that they can tend to the learning and well-being of their students.

It is far too easy to succumb to the narrative that problematically high educator attrition is somehow unavoidable—that burnout is inevitable in this profession.

“ When I am taking care of me, I’m really able to show up for them. ”



AFT’s and Educators Thriving’s joint efforts suggest something entirely different: educators want to enjoy their jobs and stay committed to their work. They care deeply about their impact. Their well-being can, in fact, be improved. Now is the time for individual and systemic solutions that enable educators to do their best work.

## THE PROBLEM

Staff shortages—alarming before the pandemic began—are now at crisis levels. **Intentions to leave the profession have continued to climb for both teachers and principals**, and schools remain understaffed across all positions (AFT, 2022). Leaders, families, and educators themselves are calling for us to attend to the well-being of our educator workforce, but no consensus exists about what this means. Many of the solutions suggested are inadequate to meet the challenge. While some districts are in fact taking action, too few solutions address the systemic factors contributing to our current challenges.

“ I feel like much of this year I’ve been in crisis mode, crisis-hopping. When you’re living that way, it’s not sustainable, there’s no longevity. And you’re not thinking long-term either. It’s the complete antithesis of well-being. ”



## A TWO-PRONGED SOLUTION

To better support and retain educators, we need both broad, system-wide changes as well as immediate relief. To tackle the persistent and growing need to support educator well-being, Educators Thriving and the AFT joined forces in a two-pronged approach. AFT members in 11 locals across the country participated in either 1) a personal development course to immediately address individual well-being or 2) a rigorous research process to develop an educator-generated well-being scale so that we can meaningfully equip leaders to measure and improve well-being system-wide.

### Equipping Individual Educators

A group of 222 educators completed a well-being professional development program during the summer and fall of 2022. They learned about strategies empirically proven to increase well-being, spent time connecting deeply with fellow educators in small groups, and practiced applying new tools to their personal and professional lives. Sample session topics included identifying and leveraging strengths, having difficult conversations, and prioritizing. All participants had access to a customized program website, and those who completed all program requirements received a stipend to compensate them for their time.

The program was well received: **92% of participants agreed that the program has made**





## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM SESSIONS

Educators Thriving's professional learning programs are driven by robust research and led by former and current teachers and administrators. Targeting the preventable causes of burnout and fatigue with evidence-based strategies, sessions help educators lead balanced lives and enjoy enduring career growth.



### PURPOSE, VISION & GOALS

Participants are guided to clarify a vision and set of goals for their life, their classroom, or both.



### STRENGTHS

Participants reflect on their top strengths and how they might use them in new ways moving forward.



### DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Participants dive into the research on restoring relationships in the face of conflict and consider a framework for having difficult conversations.



### THE FIVE PITFALLS

Participants learn about five common pitfalls that make sustainability and well-being challenging for educators.



### PRIORITIZING

Participants learn a framework they can utilize to ensure they are prioritizing not only what is urgent but also what is important for their long-term well-being.



### CORE VALUES

Participants are guided to clarify the core values that matter most to them.



### HABITS

Participants learn about the science of habit formation and consider the habits they'll want to sustain moving forward.



## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM SESSIONS



### **MINDFULNESS**

Participants learn foundational tools of mindfulness meditation and the outsized importance of mindfulness in achieving well-being.



### **BOUNDARIES**

Participants reflect on their boundary preferences as well as their ability to set effective boundaries. They then establish a plan to close any potential gap between boundary preferences and boundary enactment.



### **TIME MANAGEMENT**

Participants learn about the science of task management and plan making. Additionally, they learn a research-based methodology for identifying and articulating how to use their time in service of what matters most.



### **FINANCIAL WELL-BEING**

Participants learn about the research related to the impact of our financial well-being and consider strategies they might pursue to increase it.



### **RELATIONSHIPS**

Participants review research about the role of relationships in achieving well-being and craft a plan to further develop the strength of their relationships.



### **PROGRAM SYNTHESIS**

Participants review the strategies we covered, reflect on the program as a whole, and consider ways to continue to apply the program content in their lives moving forward.

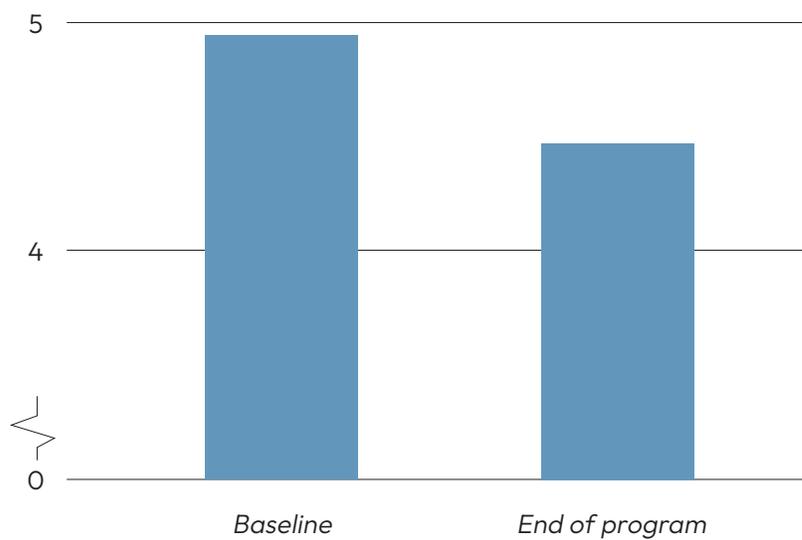
Participants engage in a series of synchronous sessions, discussing and reflecting on what they're learning with a small group of colleagues.

Organizations may choose an experience fully facilitated by Educators Thriving or to receive access to the content and training that enable internal facilitation.



their job feel more sustainable and 94% agreed that it helped improve their well-being. Following the program, participants also reported statistically significant reductions in emotional exhaustion—a leading indicator of burnout. This is particularly notable as many participants took the baseline survey during their summer break and the end-of-program survey in October, which tends to be a high-stress month for educators.

Figure 1: Participant Emotional Exhaustion Over Time



“ This was a fantastic opportunity for self-reflection, learning new strategies, considering my priorities, and connecting with colleagues in a meaningful way. ”

“ I loved to discover that I am not going through this alone. Sharing and collaborating with my group gives us more strength together. I felt a lot better after each session, especially during really tough days. ”

## PARTNER PROFILE

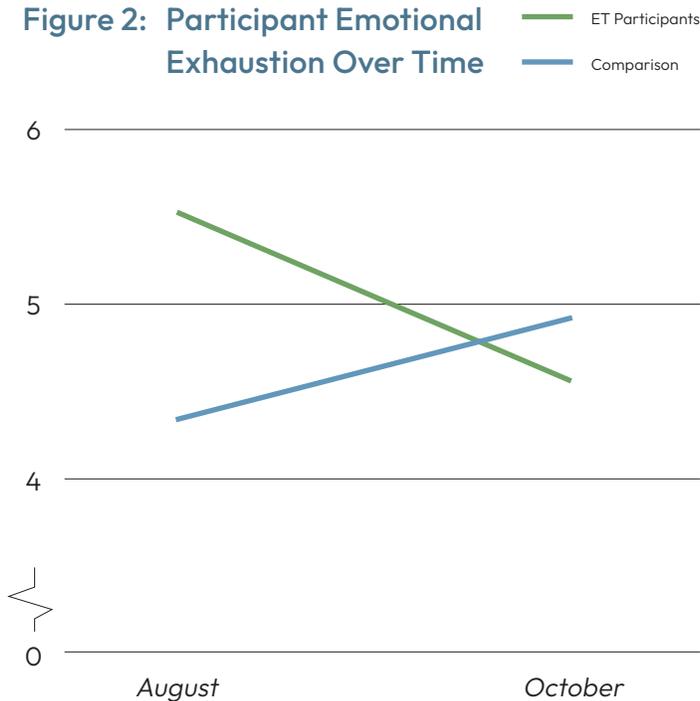
### WHITE BEAR LAKE

For Tiffany Dietrich, President of the White Bear Lake Area (WBLA) Federation of Teachers, the well-being of her members is a top concern. **“Educators in our district were continuing to navigate the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on their students and their families. Secondary trauma was on the rise, and teacher exhaustion was at a high.”** Presented with the opportunity, she eagerly signed up to partner with Educators Thriving to provide her members with professional learning opportunities to learn about, practice with, and apply strategies empirically proven to increase well-being. Wanting to assess the efficacy of the programming, she sought out a comparison group of WBLA educators with similar levels of experience and attributes to program participants.



*Tiffany Dietrich, President  
WBLA Federation of Teachers*

**Figure 2: Participant Emotional Exhaustion Over Time**



The comparison group took the same well-being surveys as the program participants at both time points. Whereas the comparison group reported what we might expect—increases in emotional exhaustion from August to October—participants reported significant reductions in emotional exhaustion. Similarly, the comparison group reported declines in positive emotion over time while program participants reported an increase from August to October.

The district and union are now partnering with Educators Thriving to bring data, coaching, and professional learning to all WBLA leaders and schools. President Dietrich hopes for lasting change: **“Together, we will search for ways to bolster the mental health and personal well-being of educators to ensure positive outcomes for students.”**

## PARTNER PROFILE

# NEW HAVEN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

When Leslie heard about the program, she knew it would benefit her members. Leslie presented the opportunity for New Haven educators to take part and over 100 applied. Sessions took place once a week, September through October.

“*The educator shortage has hit us doubly hard with people not only leaving the profession but also leaving New Haven for districts with more support and more resources. To counter this, we wanted to deliver meaningful professional learning and support with the goal of retaining our educators.*”

**LESLIE BLATTEAU, PRESIDENT,  
NEW HAVEN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS**



The feedback among participants was overwhelmingly positive. Not only did educators enjoy the sessions, but they reported appreciating the opportunity to learn about concrete tools and strategies to help them navigate stressful or even toxic climates.

“*Instead of running toward each other, we were shutting our doors on our prep, complaining about other people complaining, talking in circles about the teacher shortage, and just not really helping each other get out of this.*”

**SAMANTHA CONWAY, TEACHER + PROGRAM PARTICIPANT**

After going through the training, Conway and a fellow participant joined forces to “bring life back into the hallways of our school.” This looks like warm greetings for students and staff in the mornings, leaving their classroom doors open more often, and turning complaints into proactive action to improve the school.

“*We want to institutionalize this. We want this to be standard practice in American education, starting here.*”

**ED JOYNER, SCHOOLBOARD COMMITTEE CHAIR**

Having heard about the results, Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Leadership Keisha Redd-Hannans, in partnership with President Blatteau, is committed to offering the program to more school staff and administrators in the 2023-2024 school year.



## CREATING AN EDUCATOR-GENERATED DEFINITION OF WELL-BEING

We know what educator burnout is—but what is educator well-being? Educators Thriving, in partnership with AFT members, sought to create a definition of well-being—and an accompanying survey tool—generated by educators. To accomplish this, Educators Thriving led a series of focus groups with educators from across the country and developed a preliminary measure based on key themes. Nationwide, 1,285 AFT members completed the pilot survey. The Educators Thriving Research team then analyzed the survey data to identify key predictors and trends related to well-being.

Statistical analysis of the pilot survey found that a 26-item scale composed of **six key predictive factors reliably measured educator well-being**.

The scale also had strong internal reliability and was significantly correlated with related measures such as job satisfaction, stress, burnout, and mental health (see the full scale on the following pages).

Figure 3: Six Predictive Factors of Well-being



“ I feel heard; this survey reflects my experiences as an educator. ”



## EDUCATOR WELL-BEING MEASURE

Respond to each item on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

FACTOR	ITEMS
<b>RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP &amp; SUPPORTIVE CULTURE</b>	<p>My administrator(s) take(s) my concerns seriously.</p> <p>My administrator(s) work(s) to unify the staff.</p> <p>I trust my administrator(s) to do the right thing for students.</p> <p>My administrator(s) do(es) what they say they will do.</p> <p>My administrator(s) help(s) me problem-solve around student needs.</p> <p>My administrator(s) ask(s) me, "How can I help?"</p> <p>My administrator(s) integrate(s) others' input on meaningful issues.</p> <p>My administrators'/'s expectations of staff are consistent.</p> <p>My administrator(s) respond(s) to my requests directly.</p> <p>My administrator(s) encourage(s) staff to set healthy boundaries related to work.</p> <p>The administrator(s) at my school is/are fair in their discipline processes and procedures with students.</p> <p>My administrator(s) has/have told me that they trust me to do my job.</p> <p>I get the relevant information I need in time to plan.</p> <p>Staff at my school share their challenges without being judged.</p> <p>I have the same opportunities to perform up to my full potential as others in my district.</p>
<b>GROWTH</b>	<p>I am motivated to learn new things at work.</p> <p>I embrace bringing new strategies into my practice/work.</p> <p>I continually try to grow as an educator.</p>
<b>ACCEPTANCE</b>	<p>I know when not to take something personally at work.</p> <p>When I feel difficult emotions, I accept them without being derailed.</p>
<b>PERSONAL WELL-BEING</b>	<p>I engage in hobbies outside of school that energize me.</p> <p>I am content with my life outside of work.</p>
<b>DEPLETION</b>	<p>At the end of the day, I'm too exhausted to do anything.</p> <p>I'm often so busy thinking about other things that I'm not able to enjoy the moment.</p>
<b>ADAPTABILITY</b>	<p>I generally view myself as even-keeled at work.</p> <p>I can be flexible even when things don't go my way.</p>



## EDUCATOR WELL-BEING MEASURE

### OPTIONAL ITEMS

The previous items were predictive of educator well-being and should be administered as a whole. The items that follow are optional but could provide additional information about school or district needs.

- **Foundational Supports.** We recommend asking about educator perceptions of foundational supports—compensation, professional learning, and staffing—particularly if these are areas of concern among organizational leadership.
- **Demographics.** When a survey is anonymous, participants are more likely to provide honest responses and more detailed feedback. However, subgroup trends among larger samples can help identify particular groups of educators who are thriving or who need additional support. We suggest the demographic items below and the privacy best practice of only displaying data from subgroups of at least five individuals.
- **Retention.** We often ask about educators' intentions to remain in the profession. Workplace well-being is strongly correlated with job satisfaction and engagement.

FACTOR	ITEMS
<b>FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORTS</b>	<p>My total compensation (benefits, salary, pension, leave policies) is adequate for the work I do.</p> <p>The professional development opportunities I am offered meet my needs.</p> <p>We have the staff we need to adequately meet student needs.</p> <p>I feel appreciated by families in my school community.</p> <p>I connect with a few of my colleagues on a personal level.</p> <p>The union takes my concerns seriously (if applicable).</p>
<b>DEMOGRAPHICS</b>	<p>How do you identify (race/ethnicity)?</p> <p>How do you identify (gender)?</p> <p>How many years of experience do you have working in education?</p> <p>What grade levels do you primarily serve?</p> <p>What is your role?</p> <p>How many hours per week are you allotted for collaboration?</p> <p>How many students attend your school site?</p>
<b>RETENTION</b>	<p>I plan to stay a pre-K–12 educator for at least five years.</p> <p>I plan to stay at my school for at least five years.</p> <p>I am considering leaving my school at the end of this year.</p> <p>I am considering leaving the district at the end of this year.</p> <p>Teacher and staff retention is a priority at my school.</p> <p>I would recommend my school as a great place to work.</p>



## THE STATE OF EDUCATOR WELL-BEING

Results from the nearly 1,300 educators who took the survey suggest that they are feeling depleted, but they are not giving up: **86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they “continually try to grow as an educator,” yet half of them also agreed or strongly agreed that “at the end of the day, I am too exhausted to do anything.”**

While mindsets such as acceptance or adaptability can help educators navigate the many unanticipated challenges of the job, responsive leadership and supportive school culture are critical predictors of educator well-being. Survey results (Table 1) suggest that educators are committed to the profession but need greater support from leadership. **Less than half of respondents felt their administrators take their concerns seriously, and less than a third receive the relevant information they need in time to plan.** These simple but pivotal actions by administrators have the power to significantly impact teacher experience and well-being.

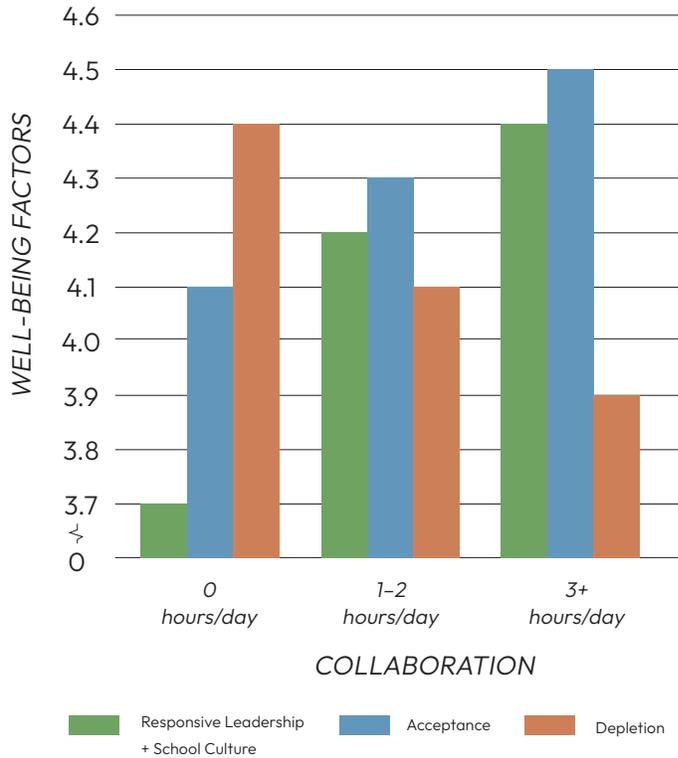
**Table 1: The State of Educator Well-being**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree or Strongly Agree</i>
My administrator takes my concerns seriously.	47%
Staff at my school share challenges without being judged.	35%
My administrator encourages staff to set healthy boundaries related to work.	39%
I can be flexible even when things don't go my way.	79%
I continually try to grow as an educator.	86%
At the end of the day, I'm too exhausted to do anything.	49%

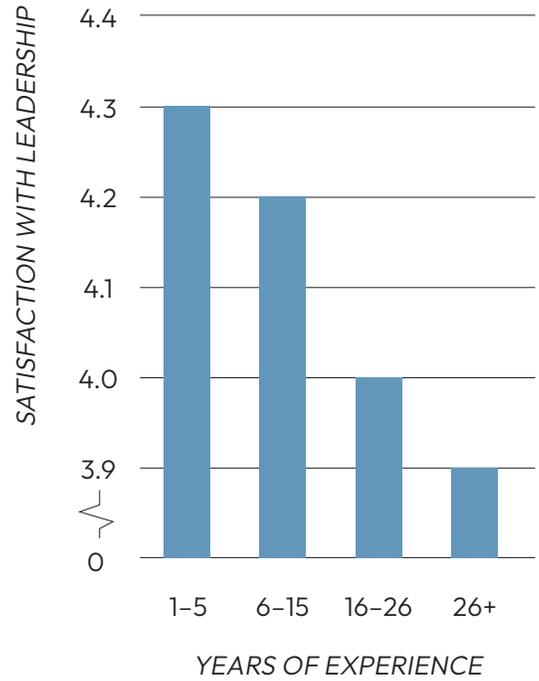
Educators Thriving also analyzed survey responses by hours of collaboration, experience levels, role, and identity. Educators who reported the most hours of collaboration also reported the highest levels of overall well-being (Figure 4). Educator experience significantly—and negatively—predicted satisfaction with leadership; the more years of experience reported, the less supported educators felt by administrators (Figure 5).



**Figure 4: Impact of Collaboration on Well-being**



**Figure 5: Impact of Experience on Well-being**

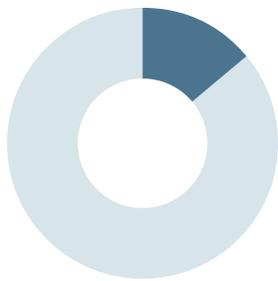


“ When I feel that I’m thriving, I feel really confident that what I’m doing is making a difference and I have a lot to give—but when I have a lot to give, it’s because I’m supported. ”

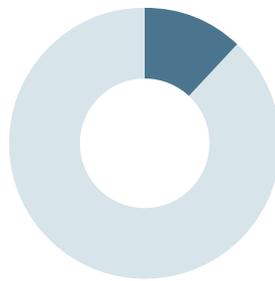


Other factors related to foundational supports (e.g., adequate pay, staffing) were strongly linked to educator burnout. These conditions are critical—and foundational—for educators to do their jobs. Our findings suggest that, while we strive to improve school cultures and support positive educator dispositions to increase well-being, we must also attend to educator compensation and working conditions.

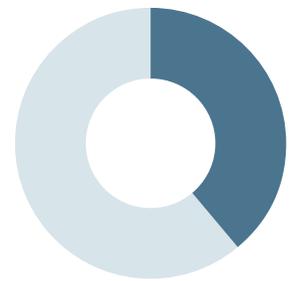
**Figure 6: Foundational Supports + Burnout**



*14% of respondents feel they are adequately compensated for the work they do*



*12% of respondents feel they have the staff they need to adequately meet student needs*



*39% of respondents feel their school buildings are physically and emotionally safe*

## DATA-DRIVEN COLLABORATION

After analyzing the pilot survey data, Educators Thriving shared findings with union leadership and district management. Leaders responded with interest and enthusiasm, saying of the data, “we can control these things” and “this is actionable.” We have begun to see system-wide results from these findings. Read about ABC Unified’s experience on the following page.

“ More than they need to meditate or take a walk...what people need is for other people to listen and support them. ”



“ I hear from a lot of people they feel better when they’ve had a voice, even when they expressed something and the district went a different direction. If they get that empathic experience and know everything isn’t going to be turned upside down tomorrow, know what to expect, are respected enough that they’re being heard. ”

## PARTNER PROFILE

### ABC UNIFIED

In December of 2022, 120 school site union representatives, administrators, and system-wide leaders in ABC Unified School District in California engaged in a daylong retreat to review educator well-being data. **There was palpable excitement in the air as teams sat side-by-side to talk about well-being in a data-driven way.** The data enabled site-based collaboration, sharing of promising practices, and data-informed decision-making at the district and union level. As President Ray Gaer said, “starting the day with conversations about wellness and depletion truly had an impact on the conversations beyond the superficial discussions.” **Since this retreat, school principals have opted into site-based data collection to analyze the well-being of their staff and make site-specific improvements.** The union and district plan to repeat the retreat next year, making well-being an ongoing conversation between administrators and union representatives.



Ray Gaer, President



## LESSONS LEARNED

Our collective efforts suggest that educator well-being can in fact be improved when it is meaningfully prioritized. AFT members reported significant improvements in their well-being after engaging in experiences to develop personal—not just professional—skills to navigate the demands of the job. However, equipping individual educators to increase their own workplace well-being is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We must also consider how to change systems to create the conditions that foster educator well-being and retention. Until now, there has been no unifying articulation of what well-being means to educators. Typically, well-being is measured by its absence—levels of burnout and attrition—but we have not had a “north star” to meaningfully measure what allows educators to truly be well and thrive in their professional capacities. We do now.



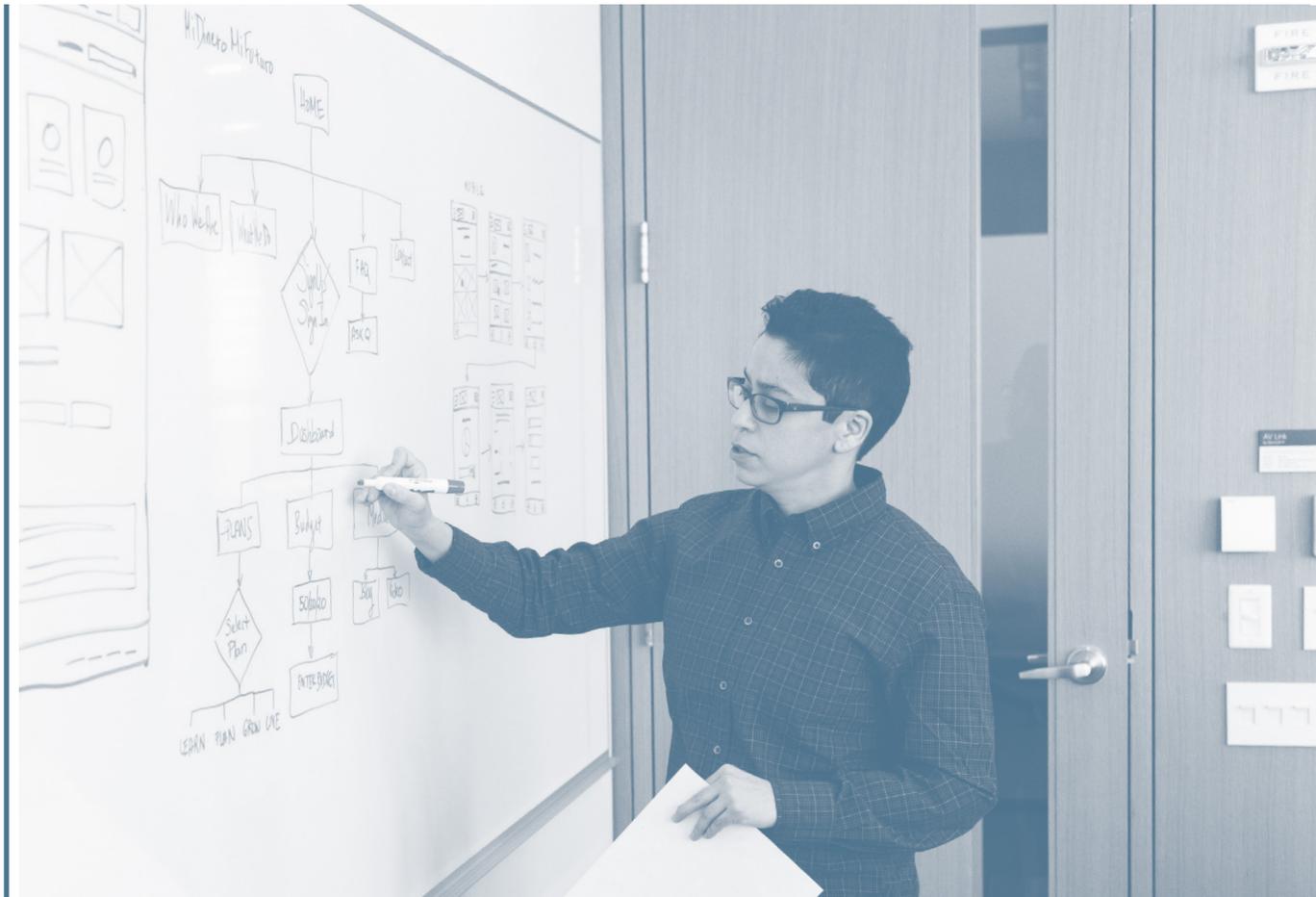
## Supplement Professional Development with Personal Development

Over and over again, we heard from educators how much they appreciated the fact that their unions had enabled them to supplement their professional development with personal development. Program results suggest that there are tangible strategies educators can apply to their personal and professional lives to reduce burnout and increase well-being. Many participants shared that it was one of the **“most meaningful PDs they have ever participated in”** and walked away feeling **equipped, empowered, and deeply connected** to others across their district.



## Listen First

Educator voices and perspectives matter. Throughout this process, we centered educator experiences to define well-being. The outcome—a new, educator-generated measure of well-being—is significant in and of itself. But it was only possible because the process was grounded in educators’ voices. Our definition and survey tool are not only guided by rigorous research but also reflect elements of well-being that are deeply meaningful to educators themselves.





## Measure What Matters

If we aim to improve educator well-being, system leaders must measure the specific job elements that tend to predict well-being as defined by educators. While the focus group conversations revealed a number of themes that matter to educators—their passion for teaching and learning and their focus on relationships with students shone through—**piloting the survey alongside other validated measures of well-being revealed six key factors that actually predict well-being.** The final 26 items offer actionable strategies that enable all stakeholders in the education ecosystem to improve how they support educators. Given that each item is grounded in educator voices, stakeholders can now measure, analyze, and act with confidence knowing that they are truly measuring what matters.

## Move Forward, Together

Progress towards improving educator working conditions and well-being will require collaboration at all levels of our education system. Using the data, school leadership teams can meet staff needs related to responsiveness and support. Mentors can support teachers with mindsets of acceptance, adaptability, and continuous learning. District teams can make meaningful system-wide shifts where they are needed most.



We are seeing the power and potential of collaboration around educator well-being across the nation. **With a meaningful and measurable definition of educator well-being, we can spark improvements within individuals and across systems.** Education leaders equipped with actionable data can understand subgroup trends, set goals around shared priorities, make improvements, and measure their progress.





With these powerful results and testimonials, we are ready to build on existing labor management relationships with the common goal of educator well-being to enhance collaboration, improve retention, and improve student outcomes. Our key findings, grounded in educator voice and experience, echo those of the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force: **we must create positive working and learning conditions for all—too much is at stake if we don't.**



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about Educators Thriving at [www.educatorsthiving.org](http://www.educatorsthiving.org). Access extensive reports and toolkits by scanning or clicking the QR code below.



## CONTACT

Reach out to [programteam@educatorsthiving.org](mailto:programteam@educatorsthiving.org) to continue the conversation.

## SOURCES CITED

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E D U C A T O R S  
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