

## How do we support the Whole Educator?

Each morning, my own kids enter the gates of their Tacoma Hilltop elementary school and they are greeted with three prominent phrases painted on a cement wall outside the building: *“Care for Yourself, Care for Each Other and Care for This Place.”* While at first glance you cannot help, but want to embrace these words, you wonder if these words were part of a student art project that started and ended just as quickly as they were painted or if these words have life and a true context beyond that static wall. When you dig a little deeper you realize that *“Care for Yourself, Care for Each Other and Care for This Place* is the school’s mantra. Kids own these words and the staff have embraced the culture surrounding them. Even my kindergarten son has told his younger brother that, *“we need to care for each other and care for this place.”*

I suspect that the school’s mantra and its culture was spurred through Tacoma Public Schools’ Whole Child Initiative, which has redefined how our schools addressed the social emotional needs of students. Prior to the inception of the Whole Child Initiative in 2013 our students were struggling and we had a difficult time responding to their social emotional needs.

It has been five years since Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) launched the Whole Child Initiative. We have been nationally recognized for this work and our kids are better supported. They are safer, healthier, better challenged and more engaged. Today however, in the path of a national teacher shortage and a polarized society we are now asking, what about are educators?, Do they feel supported?, Are they safe?, Are they healthy?, Are they engaged?

In the last month alone, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) shared survey results of 5,000 educators. 61% reported that work is “always” or “often stressful” (Toppo, 2017). The article went on to read that, “More than half of the educators point out their mental health is an issue: 58% said their mental health was “not good” for seven or more of the previous 30 days. A similar survey in 2015 found just 34% of respondents felt the same.”

In addition to this trend of educator stress, our teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. According to an article published by the Washington Post, (Strauss, 2015) and research from Richard Ingersoll a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, 40-50% of teachers leave the profession by the end of their fifth year.

It has become more apparent than ever that we need educators at the top of their game. The research alone suggests that our employees need more support. Furthermore, healthier employees equal better results. Dr. Anastasia Snelling from American University in DC and a leading expert on teacher health and wellness said, “A healthier teacher workforce translates into less absenteeism, higher retention rates, and improved productivity,” (Snelling & Stevenson, 2013).

Because of this need, TPS district level leadership began to ask questions. What does adult support look like in TPS? How can we develop a system and a culture that responds to employee needs? One critical question though emerged to the top and ironically, it was the same question we were asking about our students five years go.

**How do we support the Whole Educator?** We began to rally. In our first attempt at answering this question, we launched the Whole Educator Initiative and essentially replicated the Whole Child tenants by focusing our supports on employee health, safety, and engagement.

TPS started this work by developing a one stop internal web site that allows TPS employees to access several resources to support them. These resources include, health and wellness options, a variety of professional development opportunities, and community partner information to name a few. Over the last three months, the Whole Educator Initiative has also been a staple at employee events across TPS. A Whole Educator Academy was held in mid-August of this year drawing in more than 500 teachers to attend this two-day conference. Teachers could choose to attend a variety of sessions that supported their work in the classroom and beyond. Our second phase to this initiative included developing the metrics to measure employee safety, health and engagement as well as encouraging employees to get active every day.

Most recently in our schools, some principals have taken on the Whole Educator Initiative and made it their own. Employees in these schools have reported being more energized and motivated to attend work each day. One specific example, is a newly established spin class at one of our comprehensive high schools. Spin class participants gather after school in the gym and spin for at least 20 minutes each day. Other schools have created time in the main office to socialize and engage in collegial celebrations prior to the first bell.

While we have much more work to do around the Whole Educator Initiative to fully address the needs of all our *employees*, it is a start and we have begun to answer our original critical question, **How do we support the Whole Educator?** It is our belief that once each employee feels safe, healthy and engage they will truly thrive. In turn, so will the students we serve.

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