

‘I Was Weary and Knew I Needed Something’

A superintendent in need details a partnership model with a local healthcare foundation and a personal coach for supporting the mental health and well-being of education leaders

BY TERRY M. METZGER

When the COVID-19 crisis unfolded last spring, superintendents across the United States were under immense stress as we made decisions about closing schools, feeding students and protecting employees. Many of us hoped the situation would be resolved during the summer with schools resuming in the fall.

That did not happen in many communities. Instead, school district leaders spent the summer developing multiple reopening scenarios that considered factors never previously addressed: social distancing, hand-washing protocols, face-covering requirements, providing substitutes when students participate in a hybrid model and responding to student or employee exposure to the virus. My team and I were exhausted, and there was no end in sight.

As local education leaders, we often are busy caring for others. Although we are advised

to take care of ourselves and get some rest, that's hard to do in the superintendency and even harder while navigating a school system through a global pandemic. Truth be told, many superintendents are workaholics, and we tend to wear it as a badge of honor.

Proper Self-Care

Chronic and acute stress is the reality as we lead schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the surface-level self-care strategies that worked for education leaders in the past are not working under the current conditions. Many colleagues in my region in northern California admit they are burned out or close to it. Several will resign or retire at the end of this school year, specifically citing unsustainable stress as the deciding factor.

Proper self-care, as I have learned, is less about getting a pedicure or running three miles



a day and more about paying attention to stress cycles. It starts with self-awareness, being honest about what's working and what's not, identifying triggers and responses and admitting when we are close to hitting "the wall." This can be difficult to do on our own or even with friends and colleagues without some structure and guidance. The question is, how do education leaders learn to take care of themselves, particularly through challenge, crisis or change?

Not long after we closed campuses, I was approached by Jeffrey Lewis, president and CEO of EMC Health Foundation, based in nearby Turlock, Calif., who was collaborating with Lauren Hodges, a performance coach and wellness expert, about how to support and improve the mental health of high-level education leaders. As Hodges explained, burnout happens when demand consistently exceeds capacity. Leaders generally have high capacity, but the current demands are greater than ever.

Our discussions last spring led to the creation of a performance and mental well-being coaching program for superintendents and other school administrators, specifically designed to help them work through the mental and emotional impact of COVID-19. All superintendents in EMC's two-county service area were invited to work with Hodges. Eleven of us accepted. (See related story, page 45.)

Performance Coaching

Somewhat counter-intuitively, we started our confidential individual meetings in the midst of the public health crisis. As a veteran leader and instructional coach, I eagerly entered this opportunity. I was weary and knew I needed something that would sustain me as a leader. However, I also did not need "one more thing" added to my plate, and I was somewhat concerned that diverting my focus from the immediate needs at work would lead to greater stress.



Health care executive Jeffrey Lewis sees school organizations benefit when their leaders are resilient.

HEALTH CARE CEO:

Personal Wellness Leads to Organizational Health

BY JEFFREY R. LEWIS

I followed closely the impact of COVID-19 nationally, especially among local education leaders, throughout last spring. As the president and CEO of a health care foundation, I recognized the widespread burnout that Natasha Singer of *The New York Times* called a "crisis among educators that could lead to a wave of retirements, undermining the fitful effort to resume normal public schooling."

A nationwide survey in August 2020 by the National Education Association indicated 28 percent of educators said the coronavirus had made them more likely to leave teaching or retire early, including 55 percent of veteran teachers and 20 percent of teachers with less than 10 years of experience. If left unchecked, this burnout crisis could result in the loss of an entire generation of experienced educators.

Healthier, more resilient leaders have a significant positive impact on their organizations and employees, research suggests. Thus, our organization predicted healthier, more resilient education leaders would impact the teachers

and students they serve. Yet performance coaching and wellness support tools for the education field are not readily available, leaving a gap in the market we hoped to fill.

Eleven education leaders, three superintendents and eight other administrators enrolled in the program free of charge. The strategy was twofold:

- 1) Provide the school district leaders with tools to better manage their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being; and
- 2) Demonstrate how using charitable dollars as venture capital could develop an innovative solution to a complex problem.

While the leadership coaching initially was designed to span the summer, the participants' responses were so overwhelmingly positive the program was extended through December.

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PERFORMANCE COACH:

Reimagining Control Over One's Boundaries

BY LAUREN B. HODGES

When I met this group of educational leaders, it was clear they were nearing burnout (or already were there) and didn't even know it.

As a performance consultant, I helped them to reimagine a sense of control over their boundaries, thoughts and work schedules. I had them reconnect to their "why" and to dive into the mindsets driving stress. Some of the participating superintendents believed rest to be unproductive. They were forgoing sleep and time with loved ones, in spite of research indicating sleep deprivation *decreases* personal productivity and *increases* the risk for burnout.

I identified strategies based on the individual's needs and the unique ways stress surfaced in his or her life, including:

- ▶ Setting reminders to breathe deeply once per day.
- ▶ Blocking lunch hours on the work calendar to eat or decompress.
- ▶ Tracking food intake and mood for a day, looking for patterns.
- ▶ Building boundaries around phone use after work hours.
- ▶ Protecting time for exercise.
- ▶ Constructing a personal purpose statement and reading it daily.
- ▶ Setting reminders to shut down devices 30 minutes prior to bedtime to ensure 7-9 hours of quality sleep.
- ▶ Leveraging vision boards, positive affirmations and other tools to provide perspective when tensions are high and self-doubt creeps in.

Implementing these too-small-to-fail actions can "snowball" into sustainable behavior change that has a dramatic downstream impact on an organizational leader's happiness, resilience and performance at work and at home, where it matters most.

The bottom line: We cannot change the daily demands education leaders face, but we can certainly improve their capacity to manage stress.

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Consultant Lauren Hodges works with organizational leaders on sustainable behavior change.

Scheduling the weekly coaching appointments into my workday and using a videoconferencing platform helped the program seem doable. The pre-assessment opened my eyes to areas that needed my attention. Early sessions consisted of instruction about the neuroscience behind how stress and the proposed solutions affect the mind, body and spirit. There was built-in time for guided reflection on how things were going in my district. The sessions were engaging and productive. Each week I received too-small-to-fail assignments to apply my learning and develop new ways of thinking. (See related story at left.)

While I initially anticipated the coaching would be focused on my professional work, addressing my personal health in mind, body and spirit was a game changer. I started seeing results in my energy and attitude, and I started seeing how those improvements affected those I lead. Later sessions focused more on sustainability of my new perspectives and habits, as well as how

to support the mental health and well-being of my team using the concepts I had learned.

The three biggest outcomes for me were (1) getting better sleep, which increased my cognitive function; (2) becoming drawn toward exercise and movement instead of doing them because I should, which has increased my stamina and positivity; and (3) being more aware of and confident in supporting my team in their own stress-resilience patterns, making us a better team overall.

At the end of the program, I made a commitment to connect with participating

colleagues so we could hold each other accountable. Four of us check in via text and e-mail throughout the week, and these connections have been a lifesaver! We speak a common language of self-care and resilience. We eagerly anticipated our 90-day check-in meetings with Hodges.



Anecdotal Testimony

The overall results indicate the regimen was an overwhelming success. Pre- and post-self-assessments revealed that every participant improved his or her sense of well-being across all dimensions of wellness. Post-assessments showed an average 32 percent improvement in self-reported quality of life, perceived control over stress, happiness and physical health. Significant areas of growth were found in managing physical well-being (sleep, nutrition and exercise) and mental well-being (mindset, perspective and mindfulness in moments of stress).

The anecdotal reflections speak volumes. One of my colleagues noted a particularly useful strategy, saying, "I have learned to steal small increments of time away from work throughout the day to perform short breathing exercises, which has been very helpful in reducing anxiety that often develops during work hours."

Another leader shared, "Performance coaching has been an awakening of my mind, body and spirit as it relates to my professional and personal life. It has deeply impacted how I see the world. I have gained insight into the narratives that drive behavior, not just in my thoughts and words but also my actions."

In addition to finding personal success in reducing our feelings of burnout and stress, many of us designed scalable solutions to bring these same services to our teams. We leveraged a small portion of our COVID-19 relief funding to provide training in the form of webinars, small-group "huddle" coaching and/or individual performance

Terry Metzger, superintendent in Denair, Calif., believes her participation in a performance coaching program has helped her deal with the demands of the coronavirus pandemic.

coaching to effectively support the mental health and well-being of our teachers and staff. Feedback surveys from staff have been overwhelmingly positive, with many participants reporting the basic strategies to be helpful and doable.

These district-initiated programs remain in place through the end of the 2020-21 school year.

Opportunity to Act

This is a *really* hard time to be a leader, yet I have remained strong through much of the pandemic. While I can't reduce the demands of the job, I have increased my capacity to handle them. I attribute that to my participation in a performance coaching program and believe similar models could be implemented across the nation.

Partnering with local organizations committed to health and mental health is one way to provide the focus, resources and funding needed to implement these one-to-one and small-group support systems for our education leaders, teachers and staff who occupy the front line for our students. We need to provide them the tools to show up at their best, personally and professionally, for our future generations. ■

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