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Empowering Vidas by Affirming Motivation, Optimism, Resilience in Educators

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The E.V.A.M.O.R.E. Project

Empowering Vidas by Affirming, Motivation, Optimism, Resilience for Educators

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May 3, 2024

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Abstract

The state of California has a severe teacher shortage that poses a significant threat to the quality of education to our students. Through a survey conducted at one of the agency's school sites we were able to explore the issue, shedding light on its root causes, implications, and potential solutions. This crisis has been exacerbated by factors such as low teacher salaries, challenging working conditions, and a lack of resources in schools, particularly in underserved communities. The impact of the issue is creating a ripple effect that hampers student learning outcomes. This shortage disproportionately affects schools in economically disadvantaged areas, exacerbating educational inequities. Potential solutions to the crisis , including the need for policy reforms for compensation, professional development, and working conditions. Understanding the challenges faced by the school districts offers insights into potential strategies for mitigating the crisis and ensuring a robust and equitable education system for all students and faculty.

Keywords: Teacher shortage, pandemic, mental health and burnout.

Agency and Community Description

The Salinas Union High School District (SUHSD) serves approximately 16,525 students in grades 7 through 12 with a student-teacher ratio of 22 to one (SUHSD, 2023). The SUHSD has a 90.8% Latino student population, and according to their report, many of the students come from parents who work in the agriculture industry in Salinas. According to the U.S. Census, 20.3% of the people who live within the district live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Currently, 20.2% of working adults in Salinas work in the agriculture industry. In the Salinas Union High School District, where the suspension rate stands at 4.1% (California School Dashboard, 2023), the schools are actively working towards fostering a healthy, safe, and welcoming environment for their diverse student body. Despite the socio-economic challenges faced by 91.9% of students (California School Dashboard, 2023), the district is committed to providing supportive measures that go beyond academic achievement. This commitment to provide inclusivity and support is evident, showcased by efforts to create a positive atmosphere that prioritizes student well-being and ensures a conducive learning environment for all.

The district's mission statement is, "Guided by educational equity and through innovation, discovery, and support, the SUHSD will meet the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of each student to ensure achievement of their aspirations" (SUHSD, 2022a, para. 1). Within the school district, there are multiple departments that serve the day to day operations of the district such as the Department of the Pupil Personnel Services (PPS). The PPS Department "works cooperatively with all of our district schools and staff to plan, organize, and implement programs and services to serve the behavioral, social and emotional support needs of students in the Salinas Union High School District" (SUHSD, 2022b, para. 1).

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Social Problem: Teacher Burnout

The overwhelming issue of teacher burnout in California is highlighted in one phrase, "Thousands of teachers in the state express their stress and exhaustion, making it an alarming reality" (Fensterwald, 2022, para. 2). As educators deal with the daily demanding challenges of their profession, "work overload, multiple demands from (work and home), emotional labor, and a lack of psychological safety are among some of the challenges faced by teachers" (Ferguson et al., 2022, para. 3). The emotional toll becomes evident, especially when facing a chronic, heavy workload and relentless pressure to meet diverse student needs. The exhaustion experienced by teachers as they constantly juggle administrative tasks, curriculum demands, and emotional support for students, serves as a compelling depiction of the toll this takes on educators. The constant need for attention to the mental health and well-being of these dedicated professionals is emphasized, underlining the urgent need for systemic support and reforms to address the pervasive issue of teacher burnout in California.

According to a recent survey, conducted by the California Teachers Association (CTA) and UCLA on the teaching profession in California, over 4,600 of the surveyed educators identified inadequate resources and support systems as a primary obstacle, highlighting the pressing need for enhanced infrastructure and professional development opportunities (McDonald & Sum, 2022, para. 1). The survey further indicates that 68% of respondents cited an overwhelming workload as a substantial barrier, emphasizing the urgency of addressing workload management to alleviate stress and prevent burnout among educators. External factors, such as 62% of teachers' concern about societal changes impacting the education system, underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by the teaching profession (The Inverness Institute, 2023). These percentages provide a nuanced understanding of the hurdles educators encounter, urging stakeholders to implement targeted solutions for a more supportive and sustainable teaching environment in California.

The California State Superintendent, Tony Thurmond, states that he is leading the State of California "to confront the California teacher shortage" (Thurmond, 2023, para. 2). He illustrates the proactive stance taken by the State in addressing the critical issue of teacher shortage crisis. Thurmond's strategic vision is to collaborate with stakeholders, and advocate for comprehensive solutions to tackle the multifaceted challenges contributing to the shortage. Navigating the educational landscape toward sustainable solutions, from incentivizing teacher training programs to fostering supportive environments for educators, is vital in retaining new teachers. California's education system can be seen as a little brighter by actively confronting and ameliorating the persistent teacher shortage issue.

Figure 1 below illustrates the problem model indicating that teacher burnout is a social problem along with the contributing factors and consequences affecting this problem.

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Increase in student incidents	Teacher Burnout	Lack of quality education for students
Social problems from pandemic		Teacher attrition
Gap between pay and cost of living		Mental health issues

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors

Increase in student incidents

The pressing need to recognize and prioritize the mental health of teachers, shining a light on the intricate challenges they grapple with in their profession, urges a crucial conversation about the well-being of educators. These issues draw a direct connection between the escalating incidents involving students and the alarming phenomenon of teacher burnout. It intricately highlights the symbiotic relationship between heightened stressors experienced by teachers and the surge in student-related incidents, ultimately emphasizing the profound impact on the mental health of educators. "Teachers are reporting breaking up fights in schools and are raising concerns about their own safety. Students have been caught with guns or other weapons on campuses in several high-profile incidents. And school shootings in 2021, though still very rare, are on track to surpass their pre-pandemic high" (Sawchuk, 2021, para. 2).

According to a survey conducted by EAB company in 2022, "EAB wanted to better understand educators' perspectives on the new challenges that schools face when it comes to student behavior today" (EAB, 2023, para. 5). The survey confirmed that educators nationwide agree that student behavioral concerns have increased since the 2018–2019 school year. "Seventy-seven percent of all respondents agree that student behavior is one of their top concerns this year (up from 61 percent prior to the pandemic). The survey data also shows that students' relationships with each other and adults have gotten increasingly fraught with reported increases in bullying, violence, and opposition since 2018 (EAB, 2023, para. 5) Another connection between "increase in student incidents" and "teacher burnout".

Social problems from pandemic

Significant predictors were found for high teacher burnout-stress. Those predictors were "COVID-19 anxiety, current teaching anxiety, anxiety communicating with parents, and administrative support" (Pressley, 2021, para. 1). The results are important for schools and

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researchers to consider when it comes to the impact of COVID-19 on teachers and quality of education for students. With mental health issues on the rise in our country, it is no wonder why teachers are burning out faster. Not only are students feeling overwhelmed, so are staff and faculty. Mental health affects everyone whether you are an educator, staff personnel, parent or student. Compared to a regular school year prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, "72 percent of U.S. public schools reported an increase in teacher absences during the 2021–22 school year. Compared to last school year 2020–21, 49 percent of public schools reported that the rate of teacher absences had increased" (Press Release, 2022).

Gap between pay and cost of living

The gap between pay and cost of living is one of the reasons why teachers are leaving. "The results of a new CTA/UCLA survey show that better pay and working conditions are key to preventing educators from leaving the profession" (Peeples, 2022, para. 1). The cost of living has skyrocketed in the last decades in California alone. It is getting too expensive to live here and teacher's salaries are not fulfilling their housing needs. "We are hemorrhaging talented teachers, which ultimately negatively impacts the quality of a public education for our kids" (Lambert, 2022, para. 3). Addressing the glaring gap between teacher pay and cost of living, sheds light on how educators, despite their vital role in shaping the future, grapple with the financial strain exacerbated by stagnant wages and the escalating cost of living. "At a time when costs of living in our state, including the skyrocketing cost of a four-year degree, are greatly outpacing the rate of stagnating teacher pay, it's absolutely essential that we fund a significant increase in pay so educators, including classified employees, can remain in the communities they teach in" (Thurmond, 2023, para. 11). This economic disparity emerges as a substantial source of stress, fatigue, and overall dissatisfaction among teachers, ultimately fueling the pervasive issue of burnout. This should serve as a rallying cry for systemic reforms, advocating for improved compensation and working conditions as essential components in addressing the teacher shortage crisis and, by extension, mitigating the toll of burnout on the invaluable professionals shaping the educational landscape.

Consequences

Lack of quality education for students

The issue of teacher burnout and its profound impact on student achievements unfolds in the research. It shows educators facing overwhelming stressors, leading to emotional exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, and, ultimately, burnout. It also illustrates how this phenomenon creates a detrimental ripple effect, directly influencing student achievements. "Specifically, burnout diminishes teachers' job satisfaction, commitment, and ability to provide adequate emotional and academic support to their students" (Xue et al., 2023, para. 5). The interconnectedness of teacher well-being and student success, portrays teacher burnout as a formidable barrier to academic achievement. By emphasizing the urgency of addressing teacher burnout, we can safeguard the educational outcomes and overall well-being of students in the educational environment.

The teacher shortage has become a crisis in the quality of education because teachers have to be worried about everything all at once. Housing affordability, new social and emotional issues with students, and having to work extra hours contribute to burnout. And, because there are not enough staff to focus on educational programs that are needed for schools that have a large population of disadvantaged students, teachers are having to fill that need. Teachers say, "It's really hard to be able to manage all of that and then be able to really show up and be your best for students" (Walker, 2022, para. 21).

Teacher Attrition

The chronic stress, overwhelming workloads, and emotional exhaustion teachers take on, ultimately leads to a state of burnout. This burnout becomes a pivotal factor in the high rates of teacher attrition. The cumulative impact of these stressors propels many dedicated professionals to exit the profession. "Prolonged teacher stress negatively correlates with job satisfaction and positively correlates with intending to leave the teaching profession" (Agyapong et al., 2022, para. 2). Evaluating the current state of educators serves to urgently take a closer examination of the systemic issues contributing to teacher burnout and, subsequently, the critical need to address these factors to mitigate the concerning rates of teacher attrition now.

About 8.5 percent of teachers in California appear to be leaving the profession (or the state) each year (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Attrition or turnover rates were highest in schools serving higher proportions of students from low-income families, in Title I schools, and in those serving a large concentration of students of color. The opposite of teacher attrition is teacher *retention*, which not only benefits students, but also helps save money for schools.

Mental health issues

Teachers play a critical role in shaping the future, but the demands of the profession often expose them to high levels of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression. The challenges of managing classrooms, meeting educational standards, addressing diverse student needs, and navigating administrative responsibilities can lead to a range of mental health issues among educators. In a survey conducted by RAND in 2021, it was discovered that teachers exhibited "symptoms of depression nearly three times more often than other adults but only 2% of educators said that their school districts provide comprehensive mental health assistance to support the well-being of staff" (Mendoza, 2023, para. 9). Recognizing and addressing the mental health concerns of teachers is essential not only for their own health and job satisfaction but also for the quality of education they can provide to students.

According to the International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health, there are many scholarly explorations navigating through the complexities of the teaching profession, revealing the toll that constant challenges, high expectations, and demanding workloads take on the mental well-being of educators (Agyapong et al., 2022). The scholarly explorations mentioned above elucidate the intricate connection between the nature of teaching and the prevalence of stress, burnout, and other mental health concerns among educators. It artfully weaves together research findings, personal accounts, and expert insights, painting a comprehensive picture of the mental health landscape within the educational realm. This narrative serves as a crucial cornerstone in understanding the nuanced challenges educators grapple with and underscores the pressing need for systemic support and interventions to foster a healthier and more sustainable work environment in education. Furthermore, focusing on mental health that extends to educators and support staff can help create a more supportive and resilient school environment for all. "By fostering mental well-being, educational infrastructure has become more resilient and better equipped to support pupils effectively" (Weirdermann et al., 2023, para. 11).

Project Description and Justification

Project Description

For my capstone project I conducted a school wide teacher survey regarding navigating and overcoming challenges in the school work environment. The survey results were used to decide if an initiative should be created in order to establish wellness site support for educators and staff. These site supportive services allowed for the District to provide a safe place where

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staff personnel can learn to navigate and overcome challenges in the school work environment. This survey helped recognize the demanding nature of the education sector, and helped begin programs that integrate resilience-building strategies with sustainability principles to create a positive support system.

Project Justification

By prioritizing teacher well-being, the education sector in California can attract and retain skilled educators, addressing shortages and promoting professional growth. Ultimately, a focus on alleviating teacher burnout has a ripple effect on the entire education ecosystem, creating a more sustainable, effective, and nurturing learning environment for students and educators alike. The long-term goal is to enhance mental health and wellbeing amongst faculty and staff and to increase quality education for all students. The school district expects to use the survey results to increase teacher retention and decrease stressful and toxic work environments. As a result of the survey, they expect to enhance teacher knowledge and train them with the necessary resources to address the societal changes that are happening in the education system. The problem that was addressed was to reduce teacher/staff burnout which will in turn increase teacher retention.

Benefits

The idea behind the schoolwide survey was to address the growing need for more impactful supportive services and a safe place that will encourage positive change in the school environment and provide continuous awareness of societal changes. Reducing teacher burnout contributes to the overall improvement of the education system by ensuring a stable and motivated teaching workforce. This, in turn, enhances the quality of education provided to students, fostering a more positive and conducive learning environment. Moreover, addressing burnout can positively impact student outcomes, as less stressed and fatigued teachers are better equipped to engage students, tailor their teaching methods, and provide the necessary support for academic success.

Conducting a survey among educators and school personnel holds immense potential for addressing the multifaceted challenges within the school environment. The survey's benefits lie in its ability to capture nuanced insights into the mental health and well-being of educators, shedding light on stressors, burnout factors, and specific needs. The results from such a survey can serve as a powerful tool in designing targeted interventions, policies, and support systems. By identifying stressors and challenges, educational institutions can tailor the implementation of wellness site support to address specific concerns, fostering a supportive environment. These site supportive services can offer resources such as counseling services, stress management programs, and professional development opportunities, ultimately enhancing the overall resilience and job satisfaction of educators and school personnel. The survey results, thus, become a roadmap for creating a more sustainable and nurturing educational ecosystem.

Expected Outcomes & Assessment Plan

The primary goal of the schoolwide survey was to comprehensively assess the current state of employee wellbeing. This encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological aspects, as well as factors like workload, stress, work-life balance, and job satisfaction. The survey helped identify specific stressors and challenges that employees face in their daily work. These may include issues related to workload, communication, student behavior, administrative support, or any other factors impacting wellbeing. By gathering data on wellbeing, we can pinpoint the types of support and resources employees need to enhance their overall wellness. This information can guide the development of targeted programs and initiatives. The survey also gauged the perception of wellbeing in the school environment and identified areas where the school can improve the culture to better support the mental and emotional health of employees.

The survey results can also provide data-driven insights, enabling the school to make informed decisions and implement targeted interventions that address specific challenges. By addressing stressors and providing the necessary support, the school administration aims to improve the overall wellbeing of the District's employees. A healthier and happier school staff is better equipped to support and nurture students, contributing to improved academic and social outcomes. It will also help create a positive work environment where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated. Over the course of one month from December 15, 2023 until January 12, 2024, there was a survey delivered to all 107 employees at Harden Middle School via email communication. The expected outcome was that over half of all 57 educators would respond to the survey by the end of the survey period and that supportive staff also would respond within a timely manner. With an expected outcome of 50% or more of recorded responses, we were able to demonstrate the needs of the respondents to the PBIS District Coordinator.

The implementation of a schoolwide employee survey to promote wellbeing was a significant step toward creating a healthier, more productive, and supportive school work environment. It demonstrates the school's commitment to the wellbeing of dedicated staff, which, in turn, will have a positive and lasting impact on both employees and students, fostering a culture of wellbeing and excellence in the school.

In Figure 2, the logic model that was implemented introduces responses from educators from a survey regarding self-resilience in the school environment.

Figure 2: Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
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School educators and supportive staff personnel	Develop a 10 question survey	Questionnaire is reviewed and finalized by the agency.	Increased positive student attitudes toward learning
Retired teacher mentors	Distribute Survey to all District Personnel via email	100 surveys are sent to school personnel	Promotes wellbeing in school-teacher- student relationship
PBIS Director Support	Design teacher workshops	Curriculum is developed for five workshops	Promotes trust and reassurance

Implementation Process

By implementing and conducting a survey, the SUHSD wants to be able to understand the need and promote self-resilience in the workplace for educators and staff within the district. The goals are to create opportunities for growth and an investment in our future with far-reaching benefits. It not only positively impacts the professional lives of employees but also contributes to better educational outcomes for students and a stronger, more engaged community. By promoting self-resilience, administrators, educators and supportive staff can create a more supportive and nurturing educational environment, ultimately enriching the lives of everyone in the district and the communities they serve. By providing in-service workshops, peer group chats and one on one connections throughout the school year school personnel will have an ongoing support system at the school sites.

A survey questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the PBIS Director who has proficient knowledge in employee wellbeing and survey design. It covered a range of topics to provide a holistic view of wellbeing. The survey was distributed to all employees in the school, including teachers, staff, and administrators. It was accessible through various platforms to accommodate diverse preferences. To encourage open and honest responses, the survey was conducted anonymously, and data was treated with the utmost confidentiality. The survey was sent the last school week of December 2023 and responses were collected by me between the end of December 2023 and January 2024. I analyzed, recorded and presented for approval to and by the District Director of Pupil Personnel Services in February 2024.

Appendix A below illustrates the project implementation plan indicating what action took place to survey teachers and how that data was collected and reported and by whom.

Project Results

Is promoting self-resilience in the school work environment prevalent in preventing burnout? This question was one of the many questions included in the survey that had many educators responding that they strongly agreed and led to further discussion about how different professional development opportunities can be created. In this research I used Convenience Sampling as a description tool. I choose this because this type sampling draws from participants who are easily accessible like in the workplace. It is best used for testing as part of hypothesis generation, getting a "sense" of opinions or as an initial pilot before further research. There are a total of 106 school employees. My goal was to have at least 50% (approximately 53) of surveys completed all answering and say yes that they need promoting self-resilience workshops to prevent burnout during the school year. The results of a recent school wide survey conducted at Harden Middle School shed light on the prevailing sentiments among educators regarding the promotion of self-resilience in the school work environment. Out of the 57 educators surveyed, a notable 27 responded, offering valuable insights. Among these respondents, a significant 40.7% identified teacher burnout as one of the most pressing issues within the school work environment. These findings underscore the critical need for initiatives aimed at fostering

self-resilience among educators, ensuring their well-being and enhancing the overall quality of education delivery at Harden Middle School.

Appendix E below illustrates the results of the school wide survey from Harden Middle School.

Upon further review of the survey results SUHSD in collaboration with the PBIS department, the SUHSD agreed to conduct a book study session with educators and supportive staff at Harden Middle School where the survey was conducted. Beginning the first Wednesday of April 2024 the "Energy Bus" book was introduced to staff (the book was chosen by the PBIS District Coordinator). This book study session has been implemented in other districts nationwide and is based on creating positive energy in life and work. This book was meant to help overcome challenges of negativity and adversity converting them into actionable strategies and positive leadership by incorporating the *10 Rules to Fuel your Life, Work and Team with Positive Energy* (Gordon, 2007). The feedback from the book study will also be used to decide if they continue to provide mini sessions to keep positive motivation going throughout the school year.

Appendix F below illustrates the book study informational flier that took place at Harden Middle School.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, addressing teacher burnout requires a multifaceted approach that takes into account the various contributing factors, including student incidents, social problems stemming from the pandemic, and the gap between teacher pay and the cost of living. By implementing strategies to support teachers' mental health, improve classroom management, and address financial stressors, schools can create a more resilient and supportive environment for educators, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students alike. The results of the schoolwide survey brought to the forefront of crucial recommendations to the Salinas Union High School District. It is important that they continue to support their educators and support staff and administrators in the implementation of a comprehensive support program aimed at addressing the social-emotional well-being of educators and staff within our school community. As educators, we understand the critical role that social-emotional learning (SEL) plays in the overall success and happiness of both students and teachers. Therefore, I propose the establishment of supportive services that target essential character traits such as perseverance, self-resilience, proactive behavior, kindness, and mindfulness among our educators.

To begin, it is essential to offer tailored programs and resources that promote the development of these character traits. This can include workshops, training sessions, and access to counseling services that equip educators with the tools and strategies necessary to foster a positive and supportive learning environment. By investing in the SEL development of our educators, we not only enhance their personal well-being but also improve their effectiveness in the classroom and their ability to positively impact students' lives.

Additionally, I urge the consideration of affordable housing options for new educators and supportive staff. The cost of living in our community can pose significant challenges for those entering the field of education, often resulting in financial strain and instability. By providing access to affordable housing, we can attract and retain talented educators who are committed to serving our students.

Furthermore, I propose the implementation of financial incentives to encourage participation in wellness programs throughout the school year. These programs should encompass aspects of health, mental well-being, and financial literacy, empowering educators to prioritize their holistic wellness. By offering incentives such as stipends, bonuses, or professional development credits, we demonstrate our commitment to supporting the overall health and prosperity of our educators.

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Appendix A

Figure 1: Description of the implementation plan.

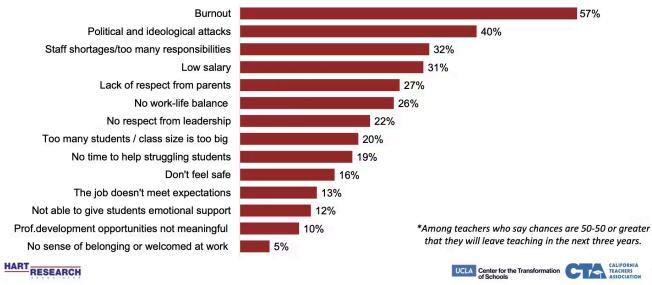
Tasks	Timeline/ Deadlines	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Deliverables /Completed Project
Attend planning meeting	October 15, 2023	Mentor, Jeannie Medina and student intern Irene Castro	Laptop, task list	Plan
Create survey	November 2023	Mentor and student	Laptop and QR code	10 question survey
Receive feedback	January 2024	Mentor and Professor	laptop	Changes to implement
Send out survey	December 2023	Agency staff and student	Laptop and faculty and staff emails	Data
Report data from survey	February 2024	Student	laptop	Report
Meet with educators & supportive staff	April 2024	Educators, mentor, Jeannie, CSUMB intern Irene and agency supportive staff	Wellness center	Self- resilience workshop

Appendix B

Figure 2: Distribution of stress, burnout, anxiety and depression among teachers.

Burnout is the top reason teachers might leave; political/ ideological attacks are also a top factor for many.

Top three reasons why teachers are considering leaving the profession.*



(McDonald & Sum, 2022).

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Appendix C

Figure 3: Educators leaving the profession within the next three years.



(Peeples, 2022)

Appendix D

Figure 4: Ten question survey on, Is Promoting Self-Resilience necessary?

Which of the following would you consider to be the MOST pressing issue in your school? (select one)*

How satisfied are you with the overall work environment at our school?*

During the current academic year, how many professional development opportunities were offered to you by the school to help you improve as an educator?

I feel my contributions as an educator are valued at this school.

I feel comfortable approaching school leadership with concerns, ideas, or suggestions for improvement.

I feel there is a culture of collaboration among the school staff.

I feel expectations about my role as an educator at this school are well-communicated.

I feel supported by the school leadership in fulfilling my job responsibilities.

I feel the school has a system in place for addressing conflicts among educators in a fair manner.

How satisfied would you say you are with the level of support you receive from the school administration in achieving your professional goals?

If the school were to offer a workshop, What time would be most convenient for you? (check all that apply)

Would you be interested in participating in a workshop if it met your schedule?

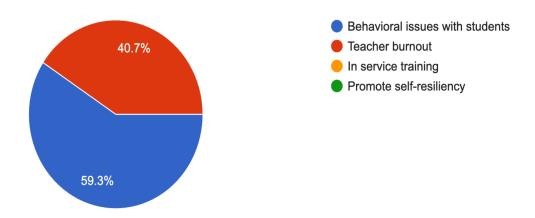
Please share with us the specific initiatives or practices, if any, you think would contribute to creating a more positive and supportive work environment for educators at our school

Appendix E

Figure 5: Survey results that approximately 40% of educators consider teacher burnout as a pressing issue.

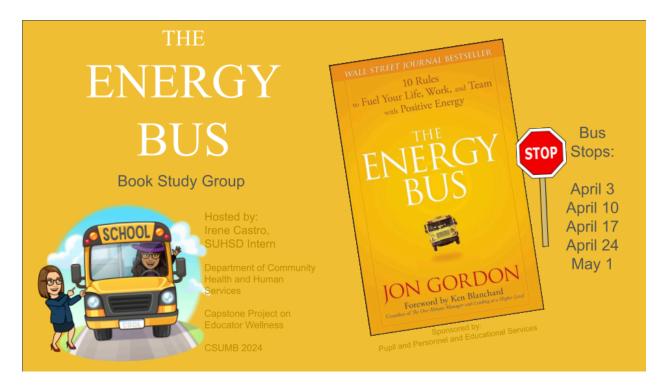
Which of the following would you consider to be the MOST pressing issue in your school? (select one)*

27 responses



Appendix F

Figure 6: The Energy Bus book study session



(Gordon, 2007)