

In trying times, finding solutions to support educator wellness and resiliency is key to helping students and schools thrive By Meg Krugel

Resilience takes root

The day began like any other. Early on Friday, Jan. 11, Tyler Bryan drove to the job he loved at Cascade Middle School in the Bethel School District. Upon arriving at the building, he opened the shades, prepped his white board, greeted his seventh grade math students and started teaching.

And then the third period bell rang.

Outside, there was gunfire. From the window in his classroom, Bryan and his 34 students watched as a parent of a student was fatally shot in the entryway of the school by two police officers. The individual had drawn a loaded gun on police and fired shots, ignoring orders to leave school property. There is much that can be written about this shooting, of course — but this is instead a story about the people left inside the building that day: Bryan, his students, and the rest of the school community at Cascade Middle School. A story about what happened — or didn't happen — to help them find resilience and heal from an unspeakable trauma.

That weekend, two days after the shots had been fired, teachers and staff in the building met to discuss how the school would respond; staff were told it'd be "Business as usual" on Monday. The district stepped in to coordinate a meal train for two weeks and added short-term additional staff on campus to help students process the events of "1/11," as the day came to be known. But as the dust started to settle after a few weeks, the support seemed to dwindle. The trauma of that day, however, remained.

"It's really hard not to feel safe in a place you spend most of your time," Bryan says. "A lot of our kiddos experience intense traumas outside of the school, and then to have something like this take place in their 'safe space' — the place where they get fed regularly, where they're not yelled at and where they know they can be accepted by trusted adults... to have this happen absolutely pulled the rug out from under them."

The advice from their District, according to Bryan, was to move *past* it rather than move *through* it. There was pushback from the staff, but concerns went unheard. Staff urged their district to work with the Trauma Healing Project to support both the educators and students who were present in the building that day. The district obliged after a while, but for Bryan and his colleagues, it was too little, too





After a shooting took place outside his classroom while he and his students watched, Cascade Middle School math teacher Tyler Bryan and other teachers have worked to make their Eugene school a safe space.

late. Student aggression was steadily rising — in the three months following the shooting, there were more student fights on campus than there had been in the past 12 years combined. Staff asked for support from their union to work with HR and find time in the contract day to start planning how to heal the community - but overall, the experience showed what wide cracks exist in a system in the event of a trauma.

Of the many different ways Bryan says he and his colleagues could have used support, the biggest one was time. “Time to do projects — art projects that beautify the building and reclaim the space. Time to process what took place together with my students. Time to bring in professionals who could help us facilitate these conversations when we felt at a loss. It’s not easy to have a conversation with 35 seventh graders about how they’re [coping] in a safe space that doesn’t feel all that safe anymore. It can go south very quickly,” Bryan says.

The math teacher has tried a lot of this on his own — he invited his third period class in for a breakfast on a Saturday and together they repainted the wall that looks out onto the school entryway. “We wanted it to look different than it did that day,” he says.

Cascade’s educators have changed, too. On a personal level, Bryan has been seeing three therapists to help him work through the trauma of that day. “It changed me completely as a person... no, I’m not a completely different person, but I have been changed forever from this event.”

“We’re a close-knit family, and at the beginning of the year up through winter break, it felt so good to walk into our school building. I was ecstatic going to work every day. Now, though, I literally walk into my room and I feel differently than I did just being in my car on the drive to work. It’s not a job thing – it’s a type of trauma that holds physical space in my body. I’m sure the kids experience that, too, but you have to be acutely tuned in to notice that your heart is racing more, simply because you’re in a different place.”

The DSM-5 defines a PTSD trauma as any situation where one’s life or bodily integrity is threatened, like what transpired at Cascade Middle School. These situations are



Calming tools, like sand timers and glitter-filled shake bottles, help Bryan’s students recenter themselves when they begin to feel triggered.

typically known as big “T” traumas. On the other end of the spectrum, an accumulation of smaller “everyday” or less pronounced events can still be traumatic, but in the small “t” form. While one small “t” trauma is unlikely to lead to significant distress, multiple compounded small “t” traumas, particularly in a short span of time, are more likely to lead to trouble with emotional functioning.

Teaching and working in today’s public schools feels ripe with small “t” traumas: there is a documented crisis around disruptive behaviors in classrooms that often result in multiple room clears in a single day. Students come in to our buildings experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, threat of deportation, abuse and neglect – and educators are the trusted ears who hear these stories first. Class sizes have grown so large it’s impossible to attend to every student’s need. Educators carry the weight of these stories close to the heart – over time, feeling the impact of “1,000 cuts” in very significant ways – an experience that’s known as compassion fatigue.

An Informational Brief published in 2018 by the Oregon Department of Education’s Oregon Mentoring Program looked at the root causes of compassion fatigue and proven strategies for addressing this crisis in the educator workforce. According to the brief, *Building Resilience to Address Compassion*

Fatigue, “Compassion fatigue is the reduced ability to refuel due to the emotional strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Secondary traumatization and burnout often go hand-in-hand with this form of fatigue.” Compassion fatigue carries with it physical, emotional and behavioral impacts – it can cause a flooding of adrenaline and cortisol into the system, resulting in physical symptoms such as headaches, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and lowered immune response, according to the American Institute of Stress.

A Gallup poll done in 2014 showed that 46 percent of teachers report high daily stress during the school year, tied with nurses for the highest rate among all occupational groups. Stress not only has negative consequences on educators – it also results in lower achievement for students and higher costs for schools. A New York City study showed higher teacher turnover led to lower fourth and fifth grade student achievement in both math and language art. This same study suggests that the cost of teacher turnover is estimated to be over \$7 billion per year.

Finding strategies to deal with both the big and little traumas is at the heart of resiliency work. Danielle Vanderlinden is the Trauma Informed Coordinator at Central

High School in Independence, and focuses a great deal on supporting resiliency — in students and educators alike.

“A dysregulated teacher cannot support a dysregulated student. We know that our students are carrying around increased levels of stress from various sources. If our educators have a safe space where they can sit quietly, get a warm cup of coffee, and take some deep breaths without being interrupted, we predict they’ll have a better tolerance for using best practices in their classroom,” Vanderlinden says.

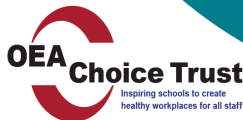
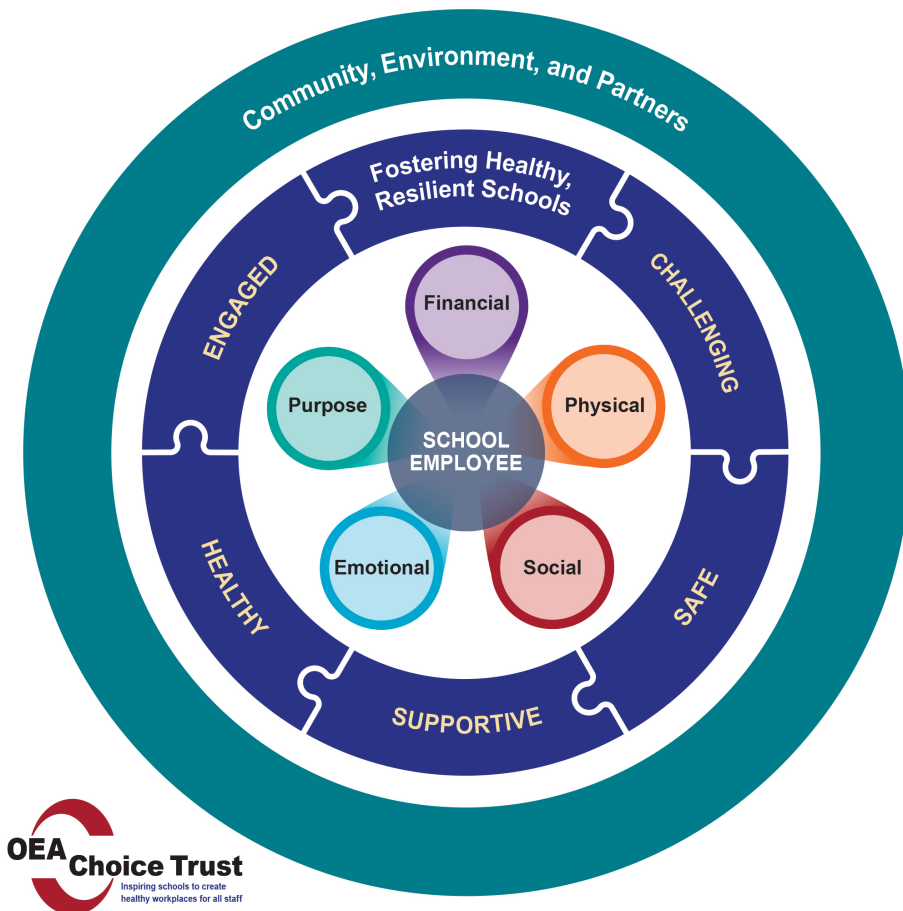
Educators at Central High School are part of the OEA Great Public School’s Network Improvement Community, which has helped member leaders explore how the culture and climate of the school feeds into academic performance and influences student assessment practices. Vanderlinden’s background in quality improvement practices helps guide her work around creating systems in which both students and educators can thrive at Central.

“I will be the first to say — I don’t see 120 kids a day and I don’t have a ton of grading to do at home. My job looks very different than that, so I can’t speak to what that must feel like. However, I do know that in education, there is this expectation that you come to school early and you take work home in the evening. At some point, we have to step back and say — is this healthy? It’s very easy to get pulled into this work and it’s very hard to create true balance. I think some of that is a systems issue,” Vanderlinden says of her work.

Vanderlinden notes that the Sanctuary Model can help an organization or individual who has been through trauma to reshape those systems at play. “One of the things this model really encourages is to have both a safety plan and a self-care plan,” Vanderlinden says — noting that she’s not entirely comfortable with the term ‘safety plan’ because it does elicit a fear response. “A safety plan is really about the moment in which you are triggered — what you do to take care of yourself... something like ‘I try to unclench my fists, clench and release, and I get a drink of water.’ What can you do to keep yourself regulated enough to get through that moment?”

A self-care plan, on the other hand, are

School employee health, well-being & resilience model



the things you do every day that help restore and rejuvenate your sense of self. “One plan is reactive, and one plan is proactive. I have always found that to be really helpful in thinking about resilience because it’s so easy to fall in that reactive trap, but resilience is really about being proactive in taking care of ourselves,” she says.

To this end, Vanderlinden plans to spend the month of June redesigning a neglected staff lunchroom into a wellness space for educators in the building. The room is in the basement of the school and is rarely used — long conference-style tables and hard chairs fill the entire space, which is lit by harsh fluorescent lights. Vanderlinden plans to remove the long tables and replace them with a couple of small round tables for communal eating. She’s putting in an iced tea dispenser and a popcorn machine, and adding a few couches, soft lighting, yoga balls, and a place

to work on puzzles and other activities with your hands.

“Over and over again I’ve heard ‘this is the first time I’m eating something today.’ Those basic needs are just not well met for our educators. Part of it is offering the space, and the other part is changing the systems in place here. I think it will be huge to offer a space where, when you feel yourself starting to become dysregulated, you can make a phone call to an administrator who will cover your class for five minutes while you walk down to the staff lounge, grab something to drink, and walk back to class. Between that movement, the quiet, and nourishing your body, it will become a resiliency tool,” she explains.

These practices are very much in line with the OEA Choice Trust’s school employee health, well-being and resiliency model, which is a holistic approach that recognizes the dynamic interaction between individuals

and the places where they live, work and play. According to the Trust, “individuals are better able to put health-promoting behaviors and resilience skills into action when their workplace practices and social norms collectively create the opportunities to be healthy, safe, supported, engaged and challenging.”

Through the OEA Choice Trust wellness grant program, school districts can apply for grants of \$100,000 to be used over a 5-year period. From 2009 through January 31, 2019, the Trust has awarded close to 3.8 million dollars to 65 Oregon public school employee groups. Currently there are 23 active grantee groups. The Employee Wellness Grant Program has touched over 35,934 lives; not including the trickle-down effect to students, family and community.

Corvallis School District has had a robust student wellness focus since 2006, with five schools winning ODE’s student wellness award between 2008-2015. And yet, despite onsite walking trails connecting school campuses, regular Walk/Bike to school events, and school-garden-grown fruits and vegetables offered during lunchtime, there was little in the way that focused specifically on educator wellness. To propel their efforts, Corvallis School District applied for an OEA Choice Trust grant to promote staff wellness.

The district began by setting up a subcommittee of the wellness team, who surveyed the needs and interests of staff members. Using the data, they launched changes across the district — wellness clinics, virtual walking challenges, fitness opportunities, fresh fruit delivery to staff rooms, mindfulness trainings, water “hydration station” installations in buildings, among other initiatives. In their Fall 2015 survey of program effectiveness, 51 percent of staff were eating healthier, 62 percent had increased their daily physical activity, and 91 percent of survey respondents agreed that “overall, my building is a healthy, positive place to work and learn.”

The impact that educator resiliency efforts have on student success cannot be overstated. Five years ago, Woodlawn Elementary school in Portland was experiencing a crisis in educator turnover. It seemed nearly impossible to keep a teacher working in the building for more than one or

Tips for Supporting Your Own Resilience at School and Work

- Educate yourself about the signs and symptoms of chronic stress, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma.
- Preemptively develop a list of positive coping strategies, such as being physically active, getting quality sleep, eating wholesomely, honoring your emotional needs, and connecting with family and friends, and practice those strategies.
- Implement mindfulness-based practices throughout the day.
- Set and maintain healthy emotional boundaries.
- Cultivate healthy friendships both in- and outside of work.
- Take advantage of available resources, such as participating in peer groups, personal therapy, or reading materials focused on the topic (e.g., *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the long haul*).

two years at a time. Unsurprisingly, student achievement was bearing the brunt of this epidemic. In 2014, the school had fallen into the “level 1” category for the third year in a row on the State Schools report card, which denotes the worst performing 5 percent of all schools in Oregon, regardless of socioeconomic makeup. That year, a leadership change brought in Andrea Porter-Lopez as the school’s Principal; in an article in the *Oregonian*, Porter-Lopez spoke of her commitment to retooling the school climate. “You can’t expect student achievement from disheartened teachers and students,” Porter-Lopez said in that *Oregonian* story.

Porter-Lopez immediately dug in to this journey by helping her staff find a sense of work/life balance, community camaraderie, and better relationships with parent groups. As a school leader, she knew her staff also needed acknowledgement that the work they were doing was hard, yes, but deeply respected. A former Assistant Principal used to leave handwritten cards to staff in the building when she noticed a job well done. Porter-Lopez says that, to this day, the cards remain pinned to bulletin boards. “I’m not a greeting card kind of person,” she says with a little laugh, “but my teachers were telling me that those cards were actually really important to their job satisfaction and sense of being appreciated.”

One of the most impressive transformations at the school over the last couple of years has been the unveiling of a new staff wellness room, which sits adjacent to a

student wellness/calming space. The staff room is a transformed former Kindergarten classroom — and it feels night and day different from the typical staff lunchroom. “When I started here at Woodlawn, I noticed that our educators didn’t really intermingle. Some of our staff didn’t even know each other’s names, much less eat lunch together,” Porter-Lopez says.

The school’s Parent Teacher Association began the work of pulling the staff wellness room together as a place where staff could convene throughout the day and take a moment for themselves. There are no computers in the room, and the WiFi is intentionally spotty. “This is not a place to bring your grading or do work,” Porter-Lopez says as she walks through the room, pointing out feel-good conveniences like a coffee pot that’s always full, a lending library with photos of staff family members nestled in between books on the shelves, and an appreciation bulletin board with cards from students.

Sharnell Brown is an educational assistant in the K-2 classrooms at Woodlawn. On this day in the wellness room, she sits down with a lunch that’s been donated from a local restaurant. She gives a few hellos to her colleagues; the windows are open and a breeze blows through the room. The whole environment feels calm, happy even. “I’m new here in the building, but I love it here. The school feels like home. I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere else anytime soon,” she says.

In resiliency terms, that seems like a definite win. ■



Educators find fresh fruit, comfortable seating, notes of appreciation and photos of their own family in the staff wellness room at Woodlawn Elementary.

