

# Mentorship as a Tool for Teacher Wellness

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Teachers face increasing demands, limited resources, and rising stress, especially in the wake of the pandemic. In response, a Large Urban California District (LUCD) launched Wellness Wednesdays (WW), a six-week professional learning series focused solely on teacher wellbeing. WW offered a protected space for teachers to reflect, breathe, move, and connect. Survey results showed teachers more than doubled their wellness practices and felt calmer and more supported. Due to its impact, wellness is now embedded in teacher credentialing, induction, and mentoring programs. LUCD affirms that when teachers are cared for, they are better able to support students and sustain their practice in challenging times.

Keywords: Mentoring, wellness, wellbeing, self-care, induction

## Introduction

Teachers face mounting responsibilities and stress amid diminishing resources. In response, a Large Urban California District (LUCD) launched Wellness Wednesdays (WW), a six-week optional professional development offering wellness strategies such as breathing, movement, and social-connection. WW was developed and facilitated by central office administrators that have previous teaching and principal experience.

These administrators currently oversee teacher mentoring and administrator coaching programs. WW provided a protected space for reflection and support. This mixed-methods study explores its impact on teacher stress and wellbeing. Due to its success wellness is now a required content area in the district's teacher mentoring programs affirming its value in educator support. The mental health needs of educators are often overlooked in preparation and professional development (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Many educators also experience secondary traumatic stress from hearing about student trauma. In addition to building teacher pedagogy mentors serve a critical role in addressing this along with compassion fatigue especially as educators often bear the weight of these stressors. The pandemic and recent political unrest have only magnified the urgent need for intentional wellbeing support systems for educators.

Teachers in the LUCD serve a diverse student population across urban communities with varying assets and needs. They navigate high expectations for academic achievement, social-emotional support, and inclusive practices, all amid evolving educational policies and limited resources. Post-pandemic challenges such as learning recovery and increased student trauma have intensified teacher responsibilities. LUCD prioritizes professional

development, wellness initiatives, and mentoring to support educator effectiveness and wellbeing.

Survey results from the WW professional development showed a significant positive impact on teacher wellbeing. Over six weeks, participants more than doubled their use of wellness strategies and reduced neglect of key self-care areas. Teachers reported feeling calmer and more connected to people with many committing to continuing the practices beyond the end of the course. WW created a protected space focused solely on self-care, affirming that teacher wellness is essential for thriving school communities and that mentors are well-positioned to support this work.

## Literature Review

The increasing demands placed on teachers, particularly in under-resourced urban school districts, have led to rising levels of stress, burnout, and attrition (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Williams et al., 2022). Despite this risk, educator wellbeing is frequently overlooked in professional learning and induction programs (DeMatthews et al., 2019). This is particularly concerning given that many teachers may not only experience high stress levels but also experience secondary traumatic stress due to ongoing exposure to student trauma, which may result in compassion fatigue and diminished professional effectiveness (Hydon et al., 2015; Ollison, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these pressures, exacerbating preexisting inequities and compounding the emotional toll on educators. Teachers, especially in large, urban districts, were tasked with managing learning recovery, addressing student social-emotional needs, and adapting to shifting educational policies, all while navigating their own personal wellbeing (Carver-

Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). As a result, there has been growing demand for systemic responses that center wellness for educators as a condition for educator wellbeing.

Recent scholarship supports the integration of wellness practices, such as mindfulness, breathing, movement, and social connection, into professional development spaces. Such approaches have been linked to increased resilience, emotional regulation, and higher job satisfaction among educators (Nava et al., 2021). Crucially, teacher mentors play a key role in supporting novice teacher wellbeing, not only through instructional coaching, but also by modeling self-care and facilitating supportive relationships (Pérez-Luño et al., 2022; Qi, 2025). The Wellness Wednesdays (WW) initiative launched by a large urban California district (LUCD) aligns with these findings. By embedding structured, holistic wellness practices into a six-week PD series, LUCD addressed the urgent need for teacher-centered wellbeing support. The district's subsequent decision to incorporate wellness into its formal mentoring curriculum underscores a growing recognition that educator wellbeing is essential to sustaining healthy, high-performing schools.

## Methods

The WW mixed-method study took place during the 2023-2025 school years. Over 2,600 teachers participated in the wellness training that occurred over the course of six sessions spanning two months. WW created a high interest level among teachers. There were two surveys administered measuring the quantity of wellness and self-care strategies participants reported engaging in at the beginning of the course and at the end of the course. The surveys contained five Likert scale items and 2-3 open ended questions. The open-ended questions inquired about teacher's current state of being, what they hoped to learn in the course (pre-survey), what learned wellness activities they continued to engage in (post-survey), and the impact the course had on their continued wellbeing (post-survey). Open ended responses were coded for themes.

## Results

Based on participant self-reported responses, the results for the WW indicate that the course had a positive impact on teacher wellbeing. They were asked to use three words to describe the emotions/feelings they experienced the most over the past several weeks. The five most common words they reported on the pre-survey were:

- Overwhelmed, tired, stressed, happy, and exhausted The top emotional states are overwhelmingly negative, with burnout related emotions dominating the responses. There was one small but notable positive emotion word, "happy." On the post-survey, the five most reported feelings/emotions were:

- Overwhelmed, Tired, Stressed, Happy, and Calm While negative emotions like "overwhelmed" and "stressed" still appeared prominently, there was trend toward positive emotions with words like "happy" and "calm" appearing in the top five. Participants were asked to respond to several Likert scale questions regarding the frequency of engagement on a variety of wellbeing activities. There were 2,623 respondents on the pre-survey and 2,074 on the post-survey. The following is a summary of their responses to selected survey questions. In the past month, how often did you engage in an activity that tended to your emotional wellbeing?
  - Pre-Survey: Daily/Most Days - 31%, Once/ Never - 45%
  - Post-Survey: Daily/Most Days - 49%, Once/ Never - 20%
- In the past month, how often did you engage in an activity that tended to your social wellbeing?
  - Pre-Survey: Daily/Most Days - 28%, Once/ Never - 46%
  - Post-Survey: Daily/Most Days - 44%, Once/ Never - 26%
- In the past month, how often did you engage in an activity that tended to your cognitive wellbeing?
  - Pre-Survey: Daily/Most Days - 32%, Once/ Never - 44%
  - Post-Survey: Daily/Most Days - 48%, Once/ Never - 23%
- Where would you rate your current level of stress?
  - Pre-Survey: High/Very High - 53%, Low/ Very Low - 7%
  - Post-Survey: High/Very High - 37%, Low/ Very Low - 15%

## Discussion

The results of the Wellness Wednesdays (WW) initiative indicate a meaningful positive shift in participants' self-reported emotional states and wellbeing practices. Teachers were initially asked to describe their emotions using three words. On the pre-survey, the most frequently mentioned emotions/feelings were overwhelmed, tired, stressed, happy, and exhausted. These responses underscore the intense pressures educators face, with burnout-related terms dominating their emotional state.

By contrast, post-survey responses showed a modest but significant shift. While overwhelmed and stressed remained prevalent, positively attributed words like happy and calm emerged as key descriptors. The presence of "calm" in the top five post-survey words, replacing "exhausted," suggests that some participants were beginning to feel more grounded, likely due to the intentional emphasis on mindfulness and restoration practices offered during WW sessions.

The proportion of participants engaging in emotional wellbeing activities on a daily or near-daily basis rose from 31% in the pre-survey to 49% post-survey. Simultaneously, the number

of participants who reported infrequent or no engagement dropped from 45% to just 20%. Similar gains were observed across social and cognitive wellbeing practices, with regular engagement increasing by 16% and 15% respectively, and the proportion of respondents indicating minimal engagement nearly halved.

Perhaps most notably, and importantly, self-reported stress levels declined. While over half (53%) of participants rated their stress as high or very high on the pre-survey, that number dropped to 37% in the post-survey. Reports of low or very low stress more than doubled, from 7% to 15%, indicating that the program may have helped educators develop tools to better regulate their stress levels.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Wellness Wednesdays provided a much needed opportunity for teachers to pause, connect, and invest in their own wellbeing. Although not a complete remedy for the systemic pressures teachers face, Wellness Wednesdays demonstrated that regular, structured support focused on the protective qualities of self-care can lead to measurable emotional and behavioral shifts in a short timeframe.

### Conclusion

The Wellness Wednesdays initiative affirms that prioritizing teacher wellbeing is urgent, impactful, and popular. Teaching, while very rewarding, is a profession that may be marked by chronic stress, secondary trauma, and shifting demands. This structured wellness program offered more than temporary relief, it cultivated habits of care, community, and reflection. The data from over 2,600 participants reveal that intentional, protected time for self-care can shift both perception and practice. Teachers reported not only feeling calmer and more connected, but also demonstrated increased engagement in emotional, social, and cognitive wellbeing strategies.

This initiative's success underscores a powerful truth: when educators are supported in caring for themselves, they are better positioned to care for their students. While WW is not a cure-all for the deep systemic challenges within education, it represents a scalable, research-informed model for integrating wellness into professional learning. The district's decision to embed wellness content into its teacher mentoring program reflects a growing recognition that mentoring must attend to both pedagogical development and personal sustainability. As education systems continue to navigate post-pandemic recovery and policy shifts, initiatives like WW offer a hopeful path forward, one rooted in care, connection, and the wellbeing of those at the heart of every classroom.

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