

Resonant Leadership: The Key to Sustainability for School Leaders

By Dr. Ellen W. Turk and Dr. Zora M. Wolfe



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Do you feel physically exhausted, emotionally drained and apathetic at times? For today's educational leaders these symptoms are unfortunately a common reality. The past three school years have presented leaders, teachers, students and parents with a new set of seemingly overwhelming challenges. In addition to the many typical responsibilities school leaders already managed, they are now also dealing with increased mental health and social-emotional issues within their communities. These relentless challenges are resulting in burnout for many leaders. To successfully overcome these challenges, leaders must utilize resonant leadership, and maintain their resonance by engaging in the renewal process to sustain their physical and emotional health and that of those they lead.

More than ever, *resonant leadership* is essential. Resonant leadership recognizes the importance of the leaders to create positive "resonance" so that their work can reverberate and be reinforced throughout an organization. Resonant leaders engage in the introspective development of their own emotional intelligence and utilize their emotional intelligence to build and maintain trusting relationships that foster a vibrant work environment. Resonant leaders are individuals who manage their own and others' emotions to create a collective energy that drives organizational success and personal achievement (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Finally, they engage those they lead in this insight-oriented approach to personal and professional development.

Burnout is a Personal and Organizational Issue

Throughout the past few years, an increased emphasis has been placed on the self-care of leaders. However, as stressors continue for educational leaders, it has become clear that more than self-care is needed to successfully lead. Leaders must be cognizant that burnout is both a personal and organizational issue (Wiens & Loper, 2021). It is not sufficient for leaders to just focus on their own self-care. They must assess and maintain the organizational health of their school community.

Resonance is the Antidote for Burnout

While the thought of one more responsibility might be overwhelming, resonant leadership is necessary to remain an effective educational leader. Your leadership must permeate throughout all facets of the school community. You lead teachers, counselors, nurses, school support staff, students and parents. The past three school years have presented a host of challenges specific to each group. Your job now is to support, unify and reenergize all parties as each readjusts to this new reality. This daunting task might seem unachievable; however, resonant leadership can serve as the proverbial oxygen mask. However, to sustain resonant leadership, you must apply your mask before you help others apply their masks.



Practice Renewal and Encourage Others to do the Same

The introspective process of renewal is critical for resonant leaders (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). They must take proactive steps to overcome the inevitable stressors associated

and assist those they lead to do the same. Boyatzis & McKee identify mindfulness, hope and compassion as essential elements of the renewal process.

- **Mindfulness** - Mindfulness includes a leader's ability to reconnect with positive aspects of oneself and one's school community. As a principal, you are a problem-solver (so you see all the problems!). At times it can feel like you are a firefighter constantly putting out fires. This responsibility can result in an overgeneralization of the negative aspects of your role and the school community. It is essential that principals focus on the multiple successes of their leadership and school community and help others to do the same. You should take the time to appreciate achievement, recognize prosocial behavior, praise effective teaching and learning and recognize hardworking staff and students.

A key aspect of mindfulness is being present. To remain present, principals should reach out to others and help others to do the same. If you struggle to identify the positives, identify supportive individuals who challenge you to engage in this practice. Everyone needs a partner who can provide support with overwhelming tasks, comic relief and guidance. As principals, we must foster professional and personal relationships. We must be present leaders and help others to engage in this practice. Instead of sending an email or making a phone call, get out of your office and connect with individuals. Let people hear your tone, see your smile and engage in a reciprocal social interaction. This personal interaction is essential to a leader's ability to initiate and sustain resonant leadership, particularly since most leaders thrive on being relational.

To remain present throughout the school day, principals must create and maintain professional and personal boundaries. Everyone needs time to rest, reflect and recharge. Educational leaders face relentless responsibilities; however, it is not sustainable to constantly work. We all must take time to rest. As a principal, you can reinforce the importance of this practice by not contacting others with non-urgent items outside of the school day. While many leaders work in the evening, consider drafting emails to send in the morning versus sending them in the evening. This practice models to others that evenings and weekends are time to recharge.

- **Hope** - Principals must generate hope to engage in the renewal process. McKee, Boyatzis & Johnson (2008) describe hope as the ability to look forward to a feasible and enticing future. Principals should

develop and maintain an optimist mindset. If the last three years have taught us anything, we know that despite significant challenges, school communities and their members are flexible and resilient. There were also many positive developments that resulted from being stretched and needing to adapt to the pandemic circumstances. It is important to maintain a positive outlook as you look to the future while also accurately assessing and balancing the challenges that your school community faces. Many days the principalship can feel like a thankless job. To offset this reality, be kind to yourself and set reasonable expectations. You must approach each day with the mindset that each day you are trying to be more successful than the day before. Give yourself grace when things don't go as you planned since tomorrow is a new day.

- **Compassion** - According to Boyatzis & McKee's conceptualization of resonant leadership, compassion is a critical aspect of a leader's ability to engage in the renewal process thus supporting a leader's ability to initiate, utilize and sustain resonant leadership. McKee, Boyatzis & Johnson (2008) describe compassion as empathy in action. Principals need to maintain an awareness of their own feelings and those of others. They must take an active interest in others, engage in perspective taking and balance empathy and sympathy. Principals should utilize the skills of compassion in situations with teachers, parents, students, school community members and personal relationships. By modeling compassion during faculty meetings, supervision, student interactions and parent meetings, you will infuse compassion throughout the school community. Compassion is the lifeline of the school community. You are only a leader if individuals are following you. Your compassion is an integral part of forming and maintaining connections with members of the school community.

As we return to "normalcy" from the pandemic, educational leaders, teachers, students and parents continue to encounter relentless challenges. Instead of focusing on these challenges, it is imperative that energy be shifted to creating solutions. Resonant leadership is the most effective tool an educational leader can utilize to initiate and sustain leadership that impacts lasting change. Leaders must utilize their resonant leadership and engage in the renewal process to maintain their physical and emotional health and that of those they lead.

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The Pandemic Era and Mental Health: Social-Emotional Learning Strategies for Staff and Students

By Shane M. Cowher



About the Author: Shane M. Cowher has served as the Principal at Tyrone Area Middle School in the Tyrone School District since December 2020. Before that, he served as an assistant principal at Altoona Area High School in the Altoona Area School District from 2016-2020. He taught English and coached football at Juniata Valley Junior/Senior High School for 13 years prior to becoming an administrator.

Mr. Cowher earned a bachelor's degree in secondary education from The Pennsylvania State University, and he earned his master's degree from Saint Francis University. He is a native of Tyrone and still resides in the community.

In March 2020, our schools and communities were turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tyrone Area School District was no different. Not only was the pandemic itself hard on people, but disagreements about masking and government restrictions created even more tension in the community and at school. All of this added up to an incredibly stressful couple of years, and we are still seeing the residual effects as we are hopefully coming out of the pandemic era. At Tyrone, we have taken many proactive steps to promote a healthy mental outlook and self-care for our students and staff.

Student Mental Health

Student mental health was a growing concern before March 2020, and the pandemic only exacerbated this issue. Peer relationships and adult role models are vital for all students, especially middle school students. Spending extended periods of time isolated from peers, activities, and role models only added to our already growing mental health crisis. At Tyrone, we alternated between remote, hybrid and in-person learning models in 2020-21. Students finally returned to the building for full-time, in-person instruction in February 2021, and we recognized very quickly that student behavioral and mental health was a priority. These are various supports we have in place to support behavioral and mental health.

#1 School-Wide Positive Behavior Support

The School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBIS) program was already a well-established program when I began as principal last year, but due to COVID restrictions, we were unable to do a lot of fun activities in 2020-21. This year, we brought it back into full swing. Of course, we had to reteach and reinforce many of the behaviors that students should know by middle school, but they forgot during their time at home. At the same time, we recognized students for good behavior with several assemblies and student fun days as rewards.

One really important piece to our SWPBIS program is our student SOAR club, which promotes positive activities in our school.

The club manages our SOAR store, which allows students to trade in their tickets earned for positive behaviors. The club recognizes staff and students in positive ways, organizes spirit weeks, decorates the school for holidays and helps in any way possible to promote a positive school climate. This club has greatly enhanced the climate in our school.

#2 Student Assistance and Community- and School-Based Behavioral Health

Our higher tiers of behavioral support include our Student Assistance (SAP) and our Community and School-Based Behavioral Health (CSBBH) programs. Our SAP team has been pivotal over the past year in connecting students with valuable mental health services. Through SAP, we have several outside agencies that offer group counseling sessions and individual counseling within the building. School social workers, counselors and psychologists are an integral part of the team because they can connect students with higher level services outside of our school, if needed.

CSBBH is commonly referred to as Clinical Homes, which is an older name. This is an outside agency, with bachelor's- and master's-level clinicians, that supports a roster of roughly 20 students within our school. This program builds relationships with high-need families and at-risk students to provide supports at home and in the school. The CSBBH team is housed within a classroom in our school. Students have this as a safe place to go for check-in/out and therapy sessions. The CSBBH team is a great resource when these students have behavioral or emotional issues, and they often prevent the students from escalating their behaviors to the point of a disciplinary problem.

#3 Social-Emotional Learning Team

Mental health, particularly as a result of trauma, is a growing concern in our community. In conjunction with the local intermediate unit and the National Dropout Prevention Program, we developed a team of teachers and administrators to learn more about the impact of trauma on students – the Social-Emotional Learning Team. This program is still in its infancy, but we are working to educate our staff on the importance of being sensitive to student mental health needs. Eventually, all teachers in our district will complete trauma-skilled training, which will increase their capacity to deal with student mental health issues.

The student mental health crisis is certainly not going away. Having multiple and tiered supports have been helpful for us, but there are days where our team feels overwhelmed. Taking proactive steps, like our SWPBIS program, to create a welcoming school environment has been helpful for re-engaging students after the pandemic.

These activities foster a welcoming, caring environment for students, but we know that many students continue to suffer from trauma. The more we can do to increase our understanding of trauma and student mental health issues, the better we will be in confronting them.

Staff Mental Health

The impact of the pandemic on student mental health is well-documented. What many fail to understand is that the pandemic was stressful for adults too. Our staff faced the added stress of learning to teach remotely, engaging students who were at home without support and keeping track of students who were quarantined. For this reason, we as an administrative team, made it a focus to talk to our teachers about self-care and managing stress.

Since our first in-service day, we have been stressing to our faculty that we as adults need to take care of ourselves, so we can be the best version of ourselves for our

students. Yes, this means getting enough sleep, eating right and exercising. It also includes taking time for yourself, spending time with friends and family and doing activities you like. These are some of the simple activities we have tried as a district to focus on staff self-care and stress relief.

#1 Getting People Together

Although it sounds simple, providing opportunities for staff to gather and collaborate has been helpful for the climate of our school. Our teachers aren't just colleagues; most of them are also good friends. Due to COVID restrictions, many lost valuable time with their colleagues just to talk and catch-up. I don't think many of our teachers realized how much they drew from each other's knowledge and strengths. Providing light refreshments, a common space and time to talk—all have been incredibly positive for our staff. This can be done before or after school, during meetings or even during in-service time.

#2 Providing Extra Time

Teacher planning time became increasingly limited during the pandemic. Many teachers lost valuable prep time because they had to cover for a fellow staff member. In addition, planning for hybrid learning (with students at home and at school) doubled the amount of planning. It also meant student assignments were coming in at various times, which often increased grading time. Simply understanding this as a hardship and providing extra time, when possible, has been helpful for our faculty. We have done this by allowing more independent work time during in-service days, cutting back on unnecessary meeting time and easing up on adding new initiatives.

#3 Focusing on Self-Care

In-service days are typically filled with professional development, and this is important. However, we recognized this year that we needed to set aside time for our staff to focus on self-care. For this reason, our director of curriculum and instruction, in conjunction with our team, incorporated activities into our in-service days to help recognize time for self-care and stress management. Some of these activities could even be considered "fun."

Several faculty members volunteered their services to lead a small group for a self-care activity. We offered a wide range of choices for our faculty and created an online sign-up. Some of the offerings included glass etching, jewelry making, basketball, sports talk, weightlifting and animal therapy (I took part in a jogging group). Everyone had to sign up, and there was something for everyone to do. The response we received was overwhelmingly positive! Most participants reported feeling less stressed after

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participating, and they felt like they had a more positive outlook heading into the next week of school.

The pandemic era has been stressful on everyone involved in education: from administrators to teachers to students. Yes, our students are struggling, but adults are struggling too. It is important to recognize this fact. We need to take care of ourselves so we can be there for our students. Our

students need us now more than ever! In the end, I am proud to work with an admin team that recognizes the importance of self-care and works with staff to provide stress relief opportunities. This has paid dividends for the climate of our schools and for results in the classroom.

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