



NEWS RELEASE

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ANXIETY AND TRAUMA TOP CHALLENGES FACING STUDENTS, SURVEY FINDS

Teachers point to testing, lack of resources, other factors

“I have seen an increase in the number of traumatized students and the frequency of such incidents in my 20+ years of teaching.”

“Especially in the younger grades, students struggle to communicate their trauma, and it manifests in violent outbursts.”

“I love working with children and teaching, but these days I spend most of my time dealing with behavioral issues, social-emotional issues, excessive data collection...and trying to implement a curriculum that is too challenging for most students.”

Connecticut is ranked among the best states in the country for K-12 education; however, findings from a new 2020 CEA/AFTCT/WFSB survey should raise alarms, as Connecticut teachers increasingly find themselves in unsafe work environments, encountering more children impacted by trauma or anxiety, and dealing with a persistent shortage of school counselors, social workers, and other supports necessary for their students. They also report classrooms that are harmful to their students’ health and safety, and their own, because of mold, mildew, extreme temperatures, and other conditions in buildings that have not been adequately maintained.

“This new survey echoes numerous national reports showing that toxic stress students experience as a result of repeated trauma outside of school is causing disruptive or dangerous behavior in the classroom,” said CEA President Jeff Leake. “Our teachers are in the classroom every day and witness firsthand the impact trauma is having on our students, especially among our youngest learners, but our schools don’t have the resources or school counselors needed to help get to the root of the behavior and help our students.”

Half of all teachers responding to the survey say trauma experienced by their students is a significant cause of disruptive behaviors in their classroom, and 47 percent point to anxiety as a factor as well.

- Virtually every Connecticut teacher surveyed (99 percent) wants support to deal with the root causes of student misbehavior.
- Nearly three out of four teachers (73 percent) maintain that not enough support is available at their school.

- Roughly two-thirds (65 percent) assert that not enough is being done to promote trauma-informed instruction and social-emotional learning to help reduce stress among their students. This is especially the case among elementary school teachers, 85 percent of whom identify insufficient interventions to help students in crisis and mitigate disruptions in their classrooms.
- Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of teachers overall say anxiety is the greatest challenge facing students.
- More than two-thirds of middle and high school teachers report anxiety as one of the biggest challenges facing their students. Anxiety is ranked highest among the challenges facing students in the elementary grades (as reported by 74 percent of their teachers).
- More than half of teachers (58 percent) have had to evacuate their classrooms because of disruptions that threatened the safety of their students. The problem is most prevalent in the early grades, where 78 percent of Connecticut elementary teachers report having to evacuate their classrooms because of concerns for the safety of their students.
- Almost all teachers (98 percent) strongly believe educators should have a say in the resources required to address the needs of disruptive students.
- Seven in ten teachers surveyed said schools are not placing enough emphasis on students' social growth versus academic growth.

Leake stressed, "This survey should be a wakeup call to legislators, parents, and community members about what's really happening in our schools and why we need to take action now to help our children, before it's too late."

Testing and socialization

SBAC and other high-stakes testing, combined with the lack of focus on students' social growth, are also contributing to the pressures placed on students. In spite of teachers' overwhelming assertions that SBAC has a negative impact on classroom instruction, Connecticut continues to spend millions of dollars on the test, which is administered to students in grades three through eight.

"The results affirm that students benefit more from authentic learning than drilling for tests," said AFT Connecticut President Jan Hochadel. "More than 90 percent of our members surveyed reported that standardized assessments are negatively impacting instruction in their classrooms. Five years after Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it's well past time for local and state policymakers to recognize that students are more than test scores."

"Our members' survey responses are backed up by extensive research demonstrating how little standardized testing actually informs instruction or reflects student achievement," Hochadel continued. "They also fail to account for social, emotional and economic factors that may impact a young person's ability to reach their greatest potential."

"Academic expectations have been raised to unrealistic levels that are developmentally inappropriate, and everyone is wondering why children are struggling."

"The superintendent claims we look at the whole child, but he looks only at scores."

"Our principal minimizes the time we spend on social growth and reminds us that it is NOT to take away on time spent to enhance test scores."

Teaching at the elementary level, there is no longer room in our curriculum for any emphasis on social skills. Education is no longer about the students; it's about the scores."

"Too much high-pressure testing is hurting students' mental health."

Teachers also reported that students' social growth is negatively impacted because students are starting school too young. Connecticut currently has the youngest established kindergarten start age (four years, eight months) in the United States. The vast majority (77 percent) of elementary school teachers surveyed say that should change to a minimum start age of five.

The majority of teachers (97 percent) say kindergarten socialization skills are a key factor in student growth and development. The survey found that socialization skills, interaction with peers, and play are more important than pure academic skills (65 percent) or equally important (32 percent).

"Providing universal preschool and changing the minimum start age for kindergarten makes sense," said Leake. *"It relieves much of the undue stress we put on our youngest learners, some of whom are only four-and-a-half-years-old and sharing classrooms with children who are six-and-a-half. We need to ensure that children entering kindergarten are developmentally ready."*

"Our young learners enter kindergarten sometimes at four years old and are expected to complete tasks that some of us did not learn about until first or second grade."

"The academic demands are not always developmentally appropriate, and we overemphasize strategies and skills and spend very little time on meaningful content..."

Classrooms in decline

Teachers responding to the survey described working in buildings that have fallen into disrepair, with classroom conditions that pose health and safety risks to them and their students. Among other chronic problems, they cited the presence of mold, mildew, dirty air vents, rodent droppings, and extreme temperatures.

Just under half of teachers surveyed (47 percent) reported that poor air quality in their classrooms or deteriorating conditions in their school buildings interfered with teaching and learning and are making them and their students sick.

Problems reported by at least one-third of teachers included

- extreme heat or cold in classrooms (85 percent)
- mold/mildew (60 percent)
- dirty air vents (49 percent)
- damaged walls or ceiling tiles (47 percent)
- leaking roofs (41 percent)
- rodent droppings (33 percent).

"There is mold in the building that causes both students and teachers to get sick."

"Students complain of headaches, feeling nauseous and lightheaded from obnoxious septic smells in our classroom."

“There is a huge mold issue in the district and especially in my building. Poor air quality and unhealthy working conditions have greatly impacted the overall health of staff and students.”

“The list of infrastructure problems in our school buildings is endless—from mold to extreme temperatures to air quality issues. Our union has filed OSHA complaints because that seems to be the only way to get the town to pay attention.”

“I did not have heat for three years, because the vents had never been cleaned since the school opened, and the air could not get through the dirt that had built up. I documented days when the temperature was 54 degrees and students had to wear their coats and hats in class.”

Leake concluded, “Connecticut’s teachers are among the best in the country, but they are facing a host of issues that they alone cannot solve. The state needs to step in and take action to address changes in our culture that are negatively impacting our classrooms and severely hurting our students. The problems highlighted in this survey must be addressed so that Connecticut can continue to be a leader in education in our country and our children can receive the world-class education they all deserve in safe and trouble-free classrooms.”

“We can only hope that policymakers will fixate on these latest survey results as much as they have on test scores,” added Hochadel. “The difference here is that we’ve provided real, actionable data that should be used to help bring about change.”

“Regardless, our members will demand those in power act to fund our future by investing in Connecticut’s public schools and the resources their students need to succeed,” she concluded.

Nearly 1,500 educators responded to the survey, which was administered in late January 2020 and which followed an earlier poll the unions and WFSB last fall coordinated among Connecticut teachers.

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The Connecticut Education Association is Connecticut’s largest teachers’ union, representing active and retired educators across the state. For further information contact Nancy Andrews at 860-725-6317, nancya@cea.org. Visit cea.org or follow us on Twitter @ceanews and on Facebook at CTEdAssoc.

AFT Connecticut represents approximately 30,000 professionals across the state, including PreK-12 teachers, paraeducators and education support personnel in 32 local and regional school districts. For more information contact Matt O'Connor, 860-221-5696 moconnor@aftct.org. Visit www.aftct.org or follow the labor federation on Twitter at @AFTCT and on Facebook at AFT Connecticut.