In recent years, popular, professional, and scholarly journals and periodicals have carried a significant number of articles concerning the teacher burnout phenomenon. This phenomenon is described as "physical, emotional, and attitudinal exhaustion" and results in a significant decrease in teacher job satisfaction and performance. It is caused by high levels of stress related to inordinate time demands, inadequate relationships, large class sizes, lack of resources, isolation, fear of violence, role ambiguity, limited promotional opportunities, lack of support, etc. In addition to resulting in a number of emotional and physical illnesses, burnout manifests itself in increased job turnover and absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, mental and physical withdrawal and detachment, increased inter- and intraindividual conflict, and a general reduction in individual and ultimately school performance. Some solutions which hold considerable promise for reducing this phenomenon are improved teacher status; rewarding ambition, commitment, motivation, and performance; job enrichment or redesign; preservice stress preparation; teacher conditioning; improved supervision and support; implementing quality circles; joint student-parent-teacher problem solving; and participatory team leadership.

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In recent years, popular professional and scholarly journals and periodicals have carried a significant number of articles concerning a phenomenon that seems to be growing among American teachers—teacher burnout. Maslock (1976, 1977), a social psychologist from the University of California at Berkeley, has described burnout as "physical, emotional, and attitudinal exhaustion" which results in a detached attitude toward clients and a reduction in the quality of work performance. "Burn out" means "to wear out; to become inoperative; to become exhausted." Spanoilon and Caputo (1979) state that people describe themselves as "worn-out" when they have given beyond their limit and have no more to give, or when they lack the needed energy to put into their work. "Burnout" is defined as the inability to cope adequately with the stresses of one's work or personal life.

Burnout has no single cause and can be produced by anything to which our stress mechanisms respond excessively or inappropriately. For example, interference with the fulfillment of natural drives leads to as much distress as the forced prolongation and intensification of any activity beyond the desired level. Intense levels of distress typically lead to frustration, fatigue, and exhaustion which can progress in more severe cases to...
mental or physical breakdown.

Burnout results in reduced pupil-teacher rapport, teacher warmth, teacher satisfaction, pupil motivation, and ultimately teaching effectiveness. With burnout comes increases in absenteeism, truancy, career changes, and early retirement. Timothy Weaver (1978) suggests that such conditions cause those considering teaching to view it as a profession with marginal benefits and to choose it only as a last resort.

TEACHER BURNOUT: FAD OR REALITY

One source of information regarding the burnout phenomena in education is professional organizations such as the NEA, AFT, AASA, NAESP, and NASSP and their state and local affiliates. In addition to many articles in both state and national professional journals, some organizations have dedicated most of one issue to this topic (NEA, 1979; NASSP, 1978; ATE, 1980). Perhaps the strongest focus on this problem took place at the 1979 NEA annual meeting in Detroit when it became a major issue of discussion and resulted in a resolution which encouraged local affiliates to work with local school authorities to develop programs which “facilitate the recognition, prevention, and treatment of stress related problems.” William McGuire, 1979 NEA president, underscored the importance of implementing this resolution and stated: “Mental and physical stress is driving thousands of American teachers out of the classroom. Stress is leading to ‘teacher burnout’ and the problem threatens to reach hurricane force if it isn’t checked soon.”


Over 1,000 successful workshops on teacher stress have been given across the country. One such NEA workshop entitled “Stress, the Mess, and You” has averaged enrollments approximately three times the normal attendance for previous workshops. A very successful national conference on this topic, entitled “The First National Conference on Teacher Stress and Burnout,” was sponsored by Learning magazine and the Learning Institute and took place in New York City in April 1980. The attendees concluded that burnout was a significant problem and that much could and should be done to help school systems reduce it.

More than 9,000 teachers responded to a study on teacher health (Landsmann, 1977, 1978, 1979) conducted by Instructor magazine. The