

He aims to prevent teacher burnouts

By DENNIS ROSENBLUM

Dennis Sparks' mission in life is to keep teachers from becoming burnouts. He says it's a big problem.

"Some of the teachers I see getting burned out are the best ones," he says. "It is getting recognized and talked about."

Sparks runs workshops for teacher trainers in how to minimize the effects of job-related stress and what's known as burnout.

It's a subject that arises in every line of work, he says, but can be a special problem in education.

AS THE BABY boom has gone bust, school enrollments have declined and layoffs have increased. Younger teachers worry about their careers disappearing while older teachers find themselves stuck — without any mobility because of the tight job market in their field.

"It kind of wears you down to know you may be doing this for the rest of your life," Sparks says.

The symptoms of burnout are fatigue and a lack of enthusiasm, he says. They can have a disastrous effect on how we relate to others and how well we can do our jobs.

In education, stress can come not only from concern about layoffs, but from continuing problems with students and from uncooperative administrations, Sparks says.

Children today seem to have less of a desire to learn and less respect for their teachers, making the teacher's job tougher, he adds.

And if layoff time comes, an administrator can just hand a teacher a notice, leaving the teacher worrying about what will happen, or talk with the teacher, trying to explain why the move was necessary and helping figure out some options.

Sparks is director of the Northwest Staff Development Center, a federally funded teacher center in Livonia which serves seven area school districts, including Garden City, Wayne-Westland, Plymouth-Canton, and South Redford.

He travels around the country to give workshops to teachers on stress and burnout. He's leading one this week at the Renaissance Center in Detroit with participants from New York City and small towns in Oklahoma.

One of his recent workshops was in an Eskimo village in Alaska, where teachers live in their school and rarely get outdoors because of the weather and because there's nowhere to go.

"How do you keep your enthusiasm up?" he asks.

SPARKS' METHODS of dealing with the universal problems start with identifying strengths.

"Often people who are burned out can only see the negative things."

He helps people identify their stresses — both bad ("distress") and good ("eustress"). One person's eustress can be another person's distress, he says.

"Stress, if used properly, can help. You want stress to work for you," Sparks says.

Then the subject has to figure out the alternatives for dealing with the problems. You can change your mental attitude, you can just decide you have to live with it, you can find a new job, or you can try to change the way the place is run.

"Changing institutions is hard — you need to know that," Sparks says.

He also suggests using relaxation techniques, such as transcendental meditation, to deal with stress. He shows how a thermometer held in a hand will show a rise in body temperature as a subject relaxes.

"As you relax, your hands heat up," he says.

And in some cases, a change in personal habits — rest, diet and exercise — can help.

SPARKS MAINTAINS that many teachers who are losing their excitement for their work still do a good job because of their professional dedication.

But, he adds, "People who are proud of what they do better work."



'Some of the teachers I see getting burned out are the best ones. It is getting recognized and talked about.'

— Dennis Sparks

Cheater rate at 46%, UM researcher finds

Nearly half (46 percent) of the male students tested at another large American university were willing to cheat when given the opportunity, a University of Michigan researcher reports.

Dr. Lynn R. Kahle, of the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR), using secret pressure-sensitive paper to find out which subjects did or did not change answers on a test, found that people who value skill cheated more on a test of skill, while people who value chance situations cheated more on a test of chance.

The research findings, which suggest that people are more likely to cheat in situations which are personally important to them, was published in the January issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Dr. Kahle an ISR post-doctoral fellow, administered to 218 male student subjects at a Midwestern university a test of "skill" (vocabulary) and a test of "chance" (reading comprehension), and then a self-selected third test, after which they were given an opportunity to change and correct answers — to engage in cheating behavior which was subsequently detectable.

The U-M researcher reports that students rated as "externals," those more responsive to stimuli outside themselves, were more likely to select a test of chance, while "internals" and "middle" were more likely to prefer a test of skill.

In addition, males who selected the test of skill were more likely to cheat on that form, whereas males who preferred a test of chance were more likely to cheat on that form of the test.

This suggests, Dr. Kahle said, "that different types of people are attracted to different types of situations and that motivation is enhanced when people are in situations consistent with the type of person they are. Person-situation interactions in part result from individuals with certain factors selecting the situations to which they will expose themselves."

"People do select their own stimulus conditions. They do manipulate their environment to make it more compatible with their own preferences, desires, needs, traits, attitudes, and characteristics."

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