

The National Report on Teacher Stress and Coping

What research from the Missouri Prevention Science Institute suggests about supporting teachers and strengthening schools

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Take Home Message:

Teacher stress is not simply a coping problem. It is also a systems problem shaped by leadership, climate, workload, discipline structures, and the fit between school demands and the supports available to teachers.

About this report

This report synthesizes a set of studies on teacher stress, coping, professional competence, school climate, leadership, and intervention outcomes conducted by the Missouri Prevention Science Institute over the past decade. It is organized around the Coping–Competence–Context (3C) framework and is written as a policy-relevant research. The aim is to provide a strong and actionable direction to support teacher wellbeing.

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Executive Summary

This report is intended to summarize and integrate findings from a series of 15 studies on teacher stress conducted by the Missouri Prevention Science Institute (MPSI) over the past decade. The studies converge on a simple theme: Teacher stress is pervasive, consequential, and increasingly difficult to address as an individual problem. Across the studies, several patterns emerged. First, teachers report very high levels of occupational stress, and those patterns are evident across elementary, middle, special education, pandemic, post-pandemic, and international samples (Herman et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2020a; Herman et al., 2021; Reinke et al., 2025). Second, the harmful consequences of teacher stress extend beyond teachers themselves: teacher emotional exhaustion is associated with harsher classroom responses and exclusionary discipline, and teacher stress/coping profiles are linked to student behavior, engagement, and classroom climate (Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2020a). Third, the evidence does not support a narrow “teachers just need better coping” interpretation. Coping matters, but competence and context matter too, and in many cases the context is what makes stress persistent or makes coping insufficient (Herman, Reinke, & Eddy, 2020; Herman et al., 2023; Reinke et al., 2025).

The strongest organizing idea across the papers is the Coping–Competence–Context (3C) framework. In this model, teacher stress is shaped by three interacting domains: coping resources and stress-management strategies; professional competence, especially classroom management efficacy; and context, including leadership, climate, school discipline structures, workload, expectations, and support (Herman, Reinke, & Eddy, 2020). This framework is useful because it moves the field away from blaming individuals for stress and toward a more complete explanation of why some teachers remain well-adjusted in difficult environments while others move toward burnout and attrition.

The practical implication is straightforward. Schools should not rely on wellness messaging or coping workshops alone. Those approaches can help and several interventions in MPSI’s portfolio have meaningful effects on stress and coping, especially cognitive-behavioral and bibliotherapy-based supports (Eddy et al., 2022; Eddy et al., 2026; Ghasemi et al., 2022). But the same studies also show that stress reduction by itself is often not enough to improve teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, or classroom interaction patterns unless there are corresponding improvements in support, coaching, and working conditions (Eddy et al., 2022). **The best synthesis of this body of evidence is that teacher stress is a system design challenge.** Improving teacher well-being requires strengthening coping resources, improving professional competence, and redesigning school conditions so that teachers can do ambitious work without paying for it with chronic stress and burnout.

1. Why teacher stress deserves national attention

The MPSI teacher stress studies present a coherent picture: teaching is a high-stress occupation, and the problem is not confined to a small subset of schools or a single phase of a teacher’s career. In elementary school samples, nearly all teachers reported moderate to high work stress, and in middle school samples the overwhelming majority of teachers fell into profiles marked by high stress, though not all of them showed the same consequences because coping differed (Herman et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2020a). During the pandemic, teacher well-being remained tightly connected to efficacy and school conditions, and in the post-pandemic survey 78% of teachers reported thoughts of leaving the field or were actively leaving (Herman et al., 2021; Reinke et al., 2025). *Together, these studies suggest that high teacher stress is no longer a niche concern; it is a workforce challenge with direct implications for classroom quality and school improvement.*

This matters because teacher stress is not just about adult discomfort. The MPSI studies repeatedly show that teacher well-being sits upstream of several outcomes schools care about. Herman et al. (2018) linked teacher stress/burnout/coping profiles to student behavior and academic outcomes. Eddy et al. (2020) found that teacher emotional exhaustion was associated with increased office discipline referrals and in-school suspensions; for students with teachers experiencing more burnout, the odds of receiving an in-school suspension increased by a factor of 1.74. Eddy et al. (2024) further showed that teacher-student relationship quality predicts in-school and out-of-school suspension risk. *The implication is that teacher well-being is not secondary to school performance; it is one of the conditions that makes healthy school functioning possible.*

THE IMPLICATION IS THAT TEACHER WELL-BEING IS NOT SECONDARY TO SCHOOL PERFORMANCE; IT IS ONE OF THE CONDITIONS THAT MAKES HEALTHY SCHOOL FUNCTIONING POSSIBLE.

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The attrition findings make the problem more urgent. In a post-pandemic survey, stress and burnout predicted plans to leave the field above and beyond efficacy or coping, and teachers explicitly named lack of administrative support, workload, low pay, and challenging student behavior as major reasons for leaving (Reinke et al., 2025). A cross-national study reinforces the contextual nature of attrition risk: the United States sample showed especially high attrition risk, and the reasons teachers named varied with each country's working conditions and support systems (Ghasemi et al., 2025). *Even when individual resilience matters, the broader lesson is that teacher retention is shaped by school and system design.*

2. A better way to organize the evidence: The 3C framework

The strongest conceptual contribution in the MPSI papers is the Coping–Competence–Context (3C) theory of teacher stress (Herman, Reinke, & Eddy, 2020). The framework is valuable because it does not reduce stress to either internal psychology or external school conditions alone. Instead, it argues that teachers' outcomes reflect the interaction of three pathways. The coping pathway includes teachers' mindsets, awareness, emotion regulation, problem-solving, and practical stress-management skills. The competence pathway centers on the professional capacities that help teachers meet classroom demands, especially classroom management efficacy and the skills needed to maintain positive interactions with students. The context pathway captures leadership, climate, school discipline structures, workload, expectations, resources, fairness, and policy pressures.

This three-part model explains why simple interpretations of the teacher stress literature are often incomplete. If we focus only on coping, we miss the ways that school systems generate stress. If we focus only on context, we miss the fact that teachers with stronger coping or stronger classroom management capacity often fare better under similar conditions. If we focus only on competence, we miss the role of leadership, climate, and fairness in determining whether teachers can use their skills effectively. The 3C framework lets these findings co-exist without forcing a false choice between “teacher problem” and “school problem.”

Several papers provide direct empirical support for this framework. Woods et al. (2023) showed that coping moderates the relationship between stress and job satisfaction: high coping weakens the negative association between stress and satisfaction. Herman et al. (2021) found that teacher classroom management self-efficacy was a robust predictor of favorable adjustment during the

pandemic, while pre-pandemic collegial leadership and fair/equitable school discipline structures also predicted better well-being after the pandemic began. Herman et al. (2023) found that contextual features such as collegial leadership, disciplinary structure, safety, academic expectations, and professional isolation predicted special education teachers’ stress/coping profiles. Together, these studies show that teachers’ stress is simultaneously psychological, professional, and systemic.

The Coping-Competence-Context (3C) framework

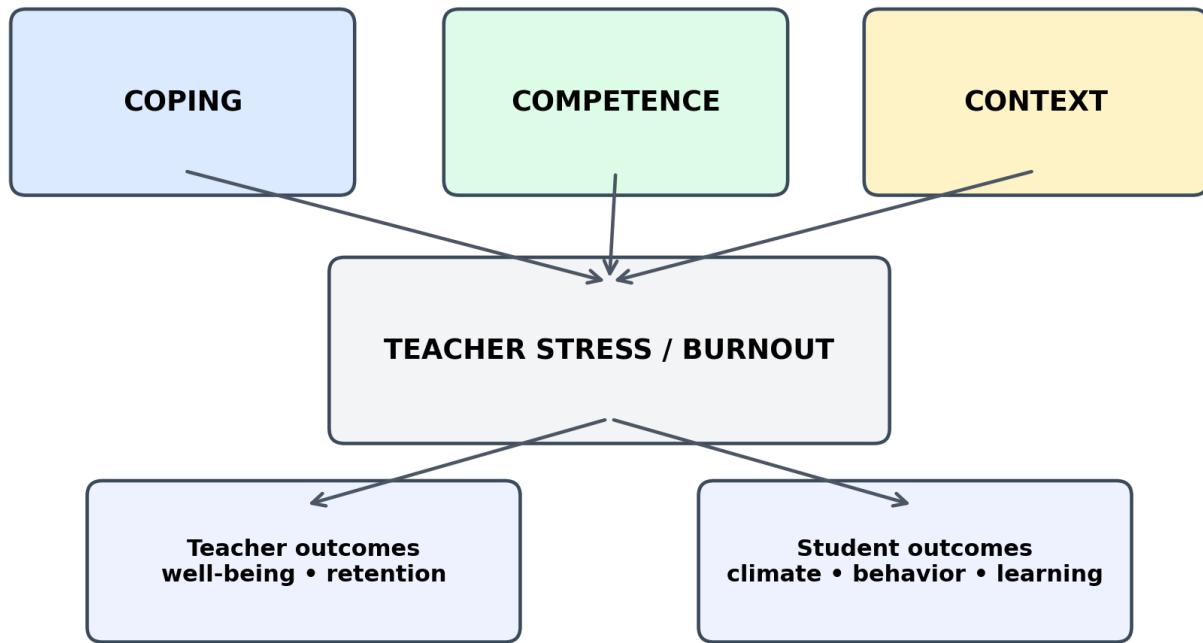


Figure 1. The Coping–Competence–Context (3C) framework. Teacher stress is shaped by the interaction of coping resources, professional competence, and school/system context. Adapted conceptually from Herman et al. (2020).

3. What studies show

MPSI studies converge on four broad conclusions. First, high teacher stress is common. Second, coping matters, but it is not the whole story. Third, teacher competence—especially classroom management efficacy—serves as a protective factor. Fourth, context is often what determines whether stress becomes chronic and whether teachers remain in the profession.

Table 1. Evidence snapshot across the uploaded studies

Domain	Representative studies	What the studies show	Implication
Coping	Eddy et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2023; Eddy et al., 2022; Eddy et al., 2026	Brief coping indicators predict later burnout; coping buffers the stress–satisfaction link; bibliotherapy and CBT-based supports improve stress and coping; increased coping strategy use mediated 31% of the intervention effect on stress and 69% of the effect on coping.	Schools should measure stress and coping briefly and use coping supports as one layer of prevention—not the only layer.
Competence	Herman et al., 2018;	Teachers with high stress and low	Build teacher skill and

	Herman et al., 2020a; Herman et al., 2021; Eddy et al., 2020	coping report lower efficacy and poorer outcomes; classroom-management self-efficacy predicted better pandemic adjustment; higher teacher efficacy was linked to lower odds of OSS, while emotional exhaustion predicted more ODR/ISS.	confidence, especially in behavior support and classroom management, as a stress-reduction strategy.
Context	Ghasemi et al., 2025; Herman et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2023; Reinke et al., 2025; Weigand et al., 2025	Preexisting collegial leadership and fair/equitable disciplinary structures predicted better well-being during crisis; stress/coping profiles vary with leadership, safety, disciplinary structure, and professional isolation; attrition reasons prominently include lack of administrative support, overwork, and role overload.	Treat teacher stress as an organizational design issue. Leadership and climate are levers, not background conditions.
Student impact	Herman et al., 2018; Eddy et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2024	Teacher stress and burnout profiles predict student behavior and engagement; emotional exhaustion relates to exclusionary discipline; stronger teacher-student relationships predict lower suspension risk.	Teacher well-being is a student outcome strategy, not just an adult wellness initiative.

Several studies sharpen this picture. Eddy et al. (2019) showed that single-item stress and coping items are not just practical but also meaningful: they predicted concurrent and future emotional exhaustion and were sensitive to change. Herman et al. (2020a) found that among middle school teachers, only the high-stress/low-coping group showed the most maladaptive set of outcomes, reinforcing the idea that stress alone is not destiny. Herman et al. (2021) then showed that teacher confidence in managing student behavior and preexisting leadership/climate features helped explain which teachers adjusted better to pandemic disruptions. Across these studies, teacher stress is consistently tied to both what teachers bring to work and what the school asks them to manage.

4. What works—and what does not work by itself

The teacher stress intervention evidence is useful because it shows both what works and what still falls short. Two findings stand out. First, cognitive-behavioral and bibliotherapy-based stress interventions can produce meaningful reductions in teacher stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Second, those gains do not automatically translate into improvements in teacher efficacy, classroom interaction patterns, or job satisfaction unless the intervention also addresses competence and context.

Eddy et al. (2022) evaluated a brief bibliotherapy-based stress management program and found improvements in teacher stress, coping, anxiety, and depression. But the study also produced an important caution: the intervention did not improve teacher satisfaction, teacher efficacy, or observed classroom management. The authors argue that this is likely because satisfaction is influenced by contextual conditions and efficacy is tied more directly to actual skill development and ongoing support. In other words, reducing stress is beneficial, but stress reduction alone does not automatically produce better instruction or better working conditions.

The follow-up mediation study deepens that conclusion. Eddy et al. (2026) found that increased coping strategy use mediated the intervention's effects on stress and coping, but not on depression or anxiety, suggesting that one mechanism of change is coping strategy uptake, but that more distal mental health changes may require additional supports or longer time horizons. This is a useful

practical lesson: if schools want to invest in teacher stress interventions, they should measure more than short-term stress scores. They should also ask whether the intervention changes practices, confidence, satisfaction, retention, and the school conditions that keep stress high.

The CBT trial by Ghasemi et al. (2022) reinforces the promise of structured psychological intervention. Teachers in the group-based CBT condition improved on overall burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment relative to controls, and gains were maintained at six months. Taken together with the bibliotherapy and mediation studies, the clearest conclusion is that teacher stress is modifiable. The next question is how to integrate those interventions into a larger system of support rather than offering them as isolated fixes for individuals.

5. What schools and systems should do now

The practical implication of MPSI's teacher stress studies is not that schools need more inspirational messaging about resilience. It is that they need a clearer operating model for supporting adults. A better approach starts by treating teacher well-being as a school-improvement issue. Schools should monitor teacher stress and coping regularly, using brief tools when necessary, because waiting for burnout to show up means intervening late (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2023). Stress and coping are more malleable than end-stage burnout and can serve as actionable leading indicators of risk.

Second, schools should invest in competence supports that reduce daily stressors. The strongest and most consistent competence signal across the studies is classroom management efficacy. Teachers who feel able to manage student behavior are more likely to report favorable adjustment, and those with greater efficacy appear less likely to use exclusionary discipline practices (Herman et al., 2021; Eddy et al., 2020). This suggests that teacher well-being initiatives should not be separated from instructional coaching and classroom-management support. In many schools, those are treated as separate agendas; the evidence here suggests they are intertwined.

TEACHER WELL-BEING INITIATIVES SHOULD NOT BE SEPARATED FROM INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING AND CLASSROOM-MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Third, school leaders should focus on systems that reduce ambiguity and isolation. Herman et al. (2023) found that collegial leadership, disciplinary structure, school safety, and the density of special educators in a building all mattered for stress/coping profiles. The implication is that supportive leadership is not an abstract morale booster—it changes the conditions under which teachers interpret and respond to stress. Practical moves include clarifying behavioral expectations, ensuring teachers perceive discipline systems as fair and consistent, building peer networks for specialist staff, and giving teachers predictable opportunities to solve problems collectively rather than alone.

SCHOOL LEADERS SHOULD FOCUS ON SYSTEMS THAT REDUCE AMBIGUITY AND ISOLATION

Finally, districts should resist the temptation to treat coping workshops as the entire response. Coping supports are worth providing, and the intervention evidence is promising. But the bibliotherapy study explicitly warns that relying on individual coping training can send the message that only teachers are

responsible for improving their working conditions, when many stressors are school-generated (Eddy et al., 2022). The more defensible position is that schools need a layered strategy: coping supports, competence supports, and context change.

6. What researchers should do next

The papers suggest the next generation of work. The first need is for stronger studies of context. *The field is no longer short on demonstrations that teachers are stressed; it is short on clear explanations of which organizational changes most reduce stress and for whom.* The context findings in Herman et al. (2021) and Herman et al. (2023) are particularly valuable because they show that leadership, fairness, disciplinary structure, safety, and isolation are not peripheral—they are central to teacher wellbeing. Future work should move further in this direction by testing changes to those features directly rather than only measuring them as correlates.

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The second need is for exemplar studies. One of the most useful next steps is to identify schools and districts where teachers report relatively low stress and high professional satisfaction despite serving students with significant needs. Instead of only studying where things break down, *the field should ask where teachers thrive and what those systems do differently.* Do they provide stronger coaching? More coherent discipline systems? Better schedule protection? More predictable leadership? Stronger peer networks? This would turn the literature from a problem catalog into a design resource.

The third need is to connect mechanisms to outcomes more precisely. Eddy et al. (2026) is important because it moves beyond asking whether an intervention works to asking how. The teacher stress field needs more of that. Researchers should track repeated mechanism measures such as coping strategy use, efficacy, relational quality, and perceptions of fairness to determine what actually changes first when teachers improve. This will strengthen both teacher stress theory and intervention precision.

Conclusion

The most important contribution of this set of studies is not any single statistic. It is the convergence across methods, populations, and study designs. Teacher stress is high. It matters for burnout, discipline, classroom interactions, student outcomes, and attrition. Coping matters, but it is not enough by itself. Professional competence matters, especially classroom-management efficacy. And context matters profoundly—leadership, climate, fairness, support, workload, and the organizational design of school life all shape whether stress becomes chronic or manageable.

That is why the 3C framework is useful. It gives schools and policymakers a model that is more realistic than either “teachers need grit” or “stress is entirely structural.” The evidence in MPSI’s portfolio of studies supports a stronger claim: *teacher well-being improves when schools build systems that help teachers cope, develop, and work in environments that are coherent, fair, and supportive.* This report can help move the conversation from teacher wellness as an individual afterthought to teacher well-being as a core condition for strong schools.

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