

pressures, health problems, aging, over work, overcrowding, high test standards, fears about safety, concerns about students, money worries, benefits threatened by economy, overwork, lack of support from community, lack of administration support, pressure to raise grades, students worried about the future, peers leaving the profession, pay scale decline, noise, lack of materials, poor planning, commuting headaches, poor health benefits, poor health, headaches, constant pressure, irritating rules, disruptions,



Reaching Boiling Point

Managing stress and becoming resilient are key to teacher — and student — success

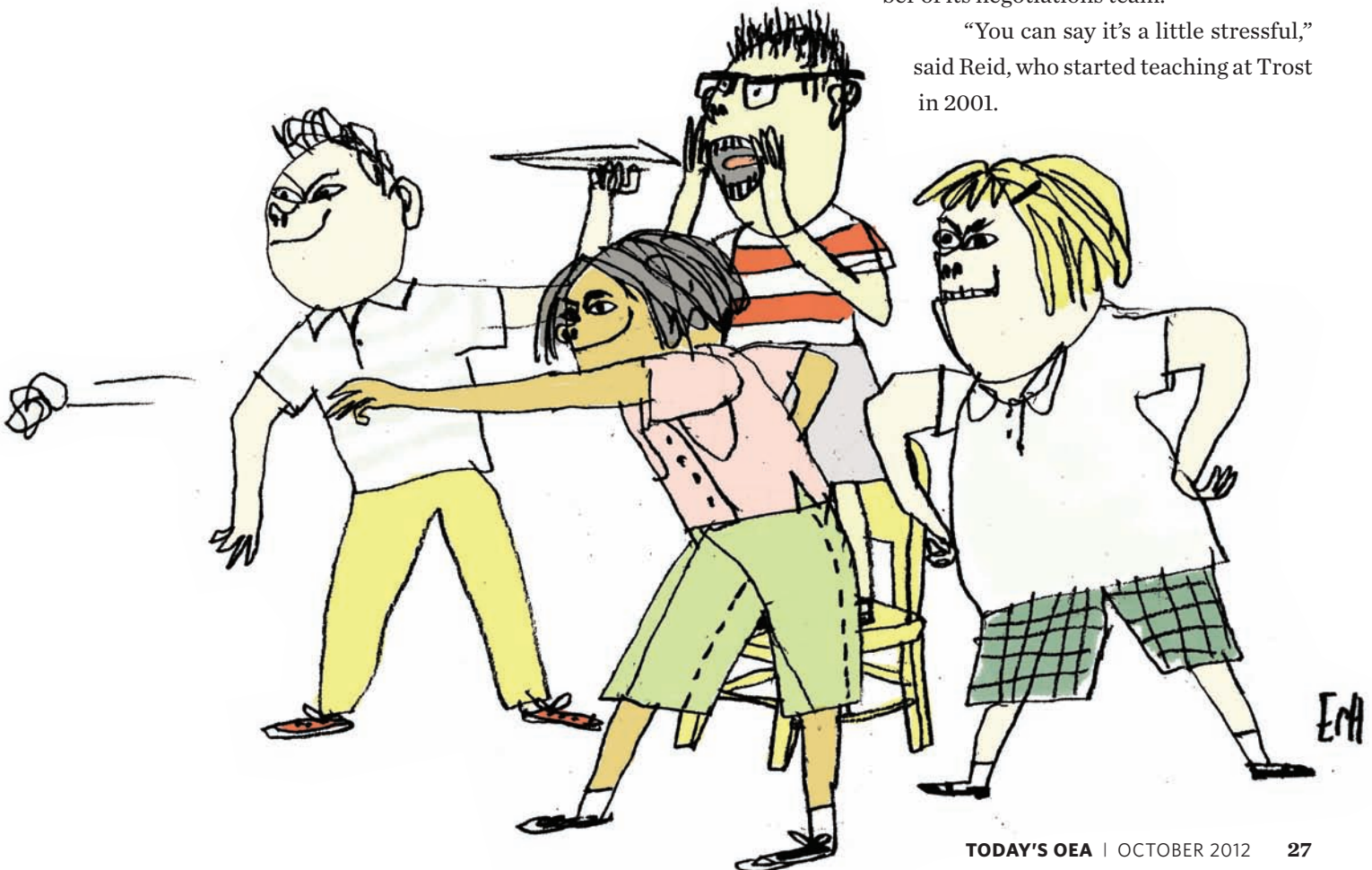
By Jon Bell • Illustrations by Eric Hanson


IT'S PROBABLY SAFE TO SAY THAT MELISSA REID HAS PLENTY ON HER PLATE.

She's married and has two children under the age of four. Her husband travels frequently for business, so Reid often finds herself a single parent. Every summer, Reid relocates her family to Warrenton out on the Oregon Coast, where she acts as director for the Camp Kiwanilong summer camp.

A former Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras, Reid is also a 5th grade teacher in the bilingual program at Canby's Trost Elementary School, where more than half of her students are enrolled in English as a Second Language programs and nearly 70 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Topping it off, she is both secretary for the Canby Education Association and a member of its negotiations team.

"You can say it's a little stressful," said Reid, who started teaching at Trost in 2001.





Yet Reid, who comes off as energetic and matter-of-fact, practically unfazed by a schedule and daily life that might overwhelm others, is really just half-joking when she talks about her classroom life as stressful. Instead, she chooses a different term to truly describe the hectic days of teaching at Trost, where on top of student achievement, behavior and other standard concerns, educators also work with a large population of migrant families and students who may be homeless one week and not have enough to eat the next.

"I don't see this as stressful," Reid said. "I see it as challenging."

Call it stressful, challenging, hectic, even overwhelming — the teaching profession demands a great deal of its practitioners. And the more that's asked of them, whether it be giving up school improvement funds for new books or sticking around after hours to offer extra help to a struggling student, the thinner teachers find themselves stretched.

"People feel greater pressure than ever before, and yet they have fewer resources to do what they need to do," said Nora Howley, manager of programs for the National Education Association's Health Information Network.

Pulled too far and in too many directions, some educators end up mired in stress that not only detracts from their performance, but that ultimately — and negatively — impacts the ability of their students to learn and succeed.

Yet with the right mix of peer and administrative support, physical and mental well-being, creative problem solving and a few hearty laughs here and there among coworkers, friends and family, teachers can achieve the sweet spot known these days as resiliency; a state where teachers are able to face the challenges of the modern-day classroom, work through them and remain on the path that led them into education in the first place.

"The original motivation for most educators is to make a difference and be involved in meaningful ways," said John Lenssen, an educational consultant with

"FOR TEACHERS TO BE RESILIENT, THEY HAVE TO HAVE SUPPORT, OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE . . . AND TIME TO DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES AND STUDENTS AND COLLEAGUES."

JOHN LENSSEN
educational consultant

John Lenssen and Associates who specializes in cultural competency, violence prevention and education. Lenssen, who also serves as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Oregon, Lewis & Clark College and Pacific University, says "for teachers to be resilient, they have to have support, opportunities to participate . . . and time to develop relationships with families and students and colleagues."

WHILE EDUCATORS don't necessarily have an exclusive hold on workplace stress, they often have a much deeper well of causes to contend with. The most common include disruptive students, a lack of resources, large class sizes, a limited (and often shrinking) amount of time for planning and preparation, and a feeling of isolation because there's so much focus on high-stakes testing and often little time for connecting with colleagues.

In reflecting on collaboration in her own school building, "For the most part, we never really have enough time," said Erin Beard, an English teacher at North Medford High School. "We all go into our classrooms and close our doors behind us."

Back when Beard started at North Medford seven years ago, the school still had access to school improvement funds for certain supplies or new classes. Budget tightening has since done away with that money, just one sign of reduced resources constraining teachers. Another sign that times are tough: several double-endorsed teachers in Beard's department have been asked to teach multiple subjects to make up for a shortage.

"We are stretched, but we make it work the best we can," said Beard, whose freshman English classes all average around 35 students.

In addition, North Medford and other Oregon schools have stepped up graduation requirements and have begun to implement proficiency grading and new Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math. While teachers like Beard acknowledge the benefits of such initiatives, the transition period can be a stressful one. Throw in a slim amount of prep time and in-service days — North Medford staff got just three days to get ready for the 2011 school year last year — a few disruptive students here and there, and Beard said that there's enough to stress about.

"There are definitely moments of being overwhelmed," she said.

But the list of stress factors goes on. Reid, at Trost, said that because every student brings his or her own home issues to school, every teacher becomes, in essence, a "mini social worker." For Reid, that sometimes means trying to focus on achievement while also being concerned about whether a student is getting enough to eat.

"It's hard to frame a test as more important than what a child might have to eat over the weekend," she said. "You can't solve every kid's



problems, but that doesn't mean that we aren't all trying all the time."

Beard and others worry that young teachers today aren't being prepared well enough for these non-academic aspects of the modern classroom. As a result, they may be easily overwhelmed when they finally do get into the classroom and find that their responsibilities are much greater than they'd expected. A 2011 report from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future found that more than 1/3 of the nation's new teachers quit within five years, and in urban schools, it's almost 50 percent — due in no small part to the inability to become resilient.

Reid, who's lived in Canby for as long as she's taught there, also said teachers who aren't able to live where they teach have the added stress of commuting and not being as connected to the community as those who live nearby.

"I think it's more stressful for people who can't live in the community," she said.

Language barriers can also create stress for teachers and students as well, as can technological changes. Wendy Simmons, employee wellness coordinator at Lane Community College, said that in addition to instructors facing larger classes and being asked to do more with less, the increase in online learning opportunities has added another layer for teachers and students to learn. Technology such as email has also made teachers much more accessible to students, who may think nothing of emailing their instructor at 10 p.m. — and expecting an immediate response.

"We have seen a lot of stress with transitioning to the online environment," Simmons said.

On top of all these issues, teachers also must wade through normal workplace personality issues, labor and association concerns and, of course, their own personal lives and the stress present there. It's no surprise then, according to Jeffrey Sprague, a professor of special education at the University of Oregon and co-director of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, that at least one study has shown that teacher stress and distress levels are higher than those of the general

WHILE 20 PERCENT OF THE GENERAL POPULATION WILL LIKELY EXPERIENCE A BOUT OF MAJOR DEPRESSION AT SOME TIME IN THEIR LIVES, AMONG TEACHERS THE PROPORTION IS 30 PERCENT.

population. Similarly, while 20 percent of the general population will likely experience a bout of major depression at some time in their lives, among teachers the proportion is 30 percent.

"All of those factors can make any of us feel like we're not in control," said Sprague. "And if a teacher feels stressed and negative, you're much more likely to see the negative in the classroom."

WHILE THERE hasn't been much formal research to date on the link between educator stress and resiliency and their impacts on student achievement and success, it makes sense that the two would be directly correlated. A teacher who must constantly react to a disruptive student not only diverts valuable instructional time but also, in his repeated responses, may actually increase his own stress levels in the process.

"It's of course better for kids to be academically engaged as opposed to having teachers who are always doing reactive behavior management," Sprague said.

Educators who are stressed and lack resiliency may often find themselves tired — they're likely not getting enough sleep — unmotivated and low on energy and enthusiasm. Improper coping mechanisms, such as working too many hours, eating too much or not exercising regularly, can have detrimental physical consequences

and increase teacher absences. It can also lead to "presenteeism," meaning that they come to work feeling sick and, as a result, aren't as effective in their teaching.

Educators not up to physical par can also have bigger impacts on schools, from increased use of sick days to higher health insurance and substitute teacher costs.

"Presenteeism, when teachers are not totally on their game as a result of some of these stress factors, can also be a real cost drain on resources for schools," said Holly Spruance, Executive Director of OEA Choice Trust, which awards grants to qualified schools for employee wellness programs.

Although there is a paucity of formal research linking educator resiliency and student success, that is about to change. In May 2011, Teresa McIntyre, a research professor at the Texas Institute for Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics at the University of Houston, kicked off a three-year study of middle school teachers and students. The study, which is following 200 teachers and thousands of students, will look at teacher stress and its links to student achievement.

"Teacher stress affects various aspects of teacher health and may influence how effective teachers are in the classroom, with potential consequences for their students' behavior and learning," McIntyre said in a release at the start of the study.

Closer to home, Sprague and his colleagues have been involved in a grant-funded program called "Reducing Teacher Stress and Building a More Effective School Culture," which is studying the wellbeing of middle school teachers and various training methods that can reduce stress and increase cooperation among staff.

"The point of the study," Sprague said, "is to see if we can make a difference."

ALTHOUGH THERE are times when Beard feels a little overwhelmed, as a role model for her students and as leader of her department, she tends to wear a poker face. But that doesn't mean she keeps her stresses bottled up inside. Instead, while

she may remain strong and stoic at school, she makes sure to let off a little steam by talking with her family after hours. She also schedules time with a trusted administrator every other week for sessions that are part constructive venting, part problem solving.

Sprague said airing concerns in just such a constructive way is one of the many keys to resiliency.

“Complaining just for the sake of complaining is not good,” he said, “but it’s OK to make your frustrations public, because we also want people to know that it’s normal.”

Reid shifted to half-time at Trost this year, which she said helped her out immensely. And another factor that has helped her stay resilient?

“My best friends are teachers,” she said, “people who are right here in the building who I can talk to.”

Reid also said Trost’s principal Angie Navarro is “amazing” in her support for teachers.

“That’s such a huge stress release by itself,” Reid said.

"I WAS AMAZED WHEN I STARTED GETTING REPORTS BACK ABOUT PEOPLE LOSING 10 POUNDS OR 30 POUNDS. WE HAD BEEN FOCUSING ON STRESS, BUT WE WERE LOSING A LOT OF WEIGHT AS A RESULT."

WENDY SIMMONS

Employee Wellness Coordinator

Having such buy-in from administrators can be a big factor in setting up teachers for resiliency, according to Lenssen. He said principals who are caring, who take the time to get to know their staff and connect with them are doing everyone at the school a favor. Same with those administrators who carve out time for collaboration and preparation.

A prime example of that came this year at North Medford, where Beard said administrators added two extra days before the start of the school year and two additional days in October for collaboration with colleagues.

Another major approach to managing

stress and promoting resiliency among educators is physical and mental wellness, which can mean anything from a 10-minute walk at lunch to a school-wide weight-loss program.

“Physical activity, eating right, getting enough sleep... all of those are such an important part of managing stress,” said Howley of the NEA.

OEA Choice Trust grants are designed specifically to seed wellness programs at schools across Oregon. To date, the Trust has given out nearly \$1.25 million to 26 Oregon public school employee groups. The grants have been used for everything from converting a classroom into a gym in Port Orford to exercise classes, fitness challenges and workout stations in the Jefferson County School District.

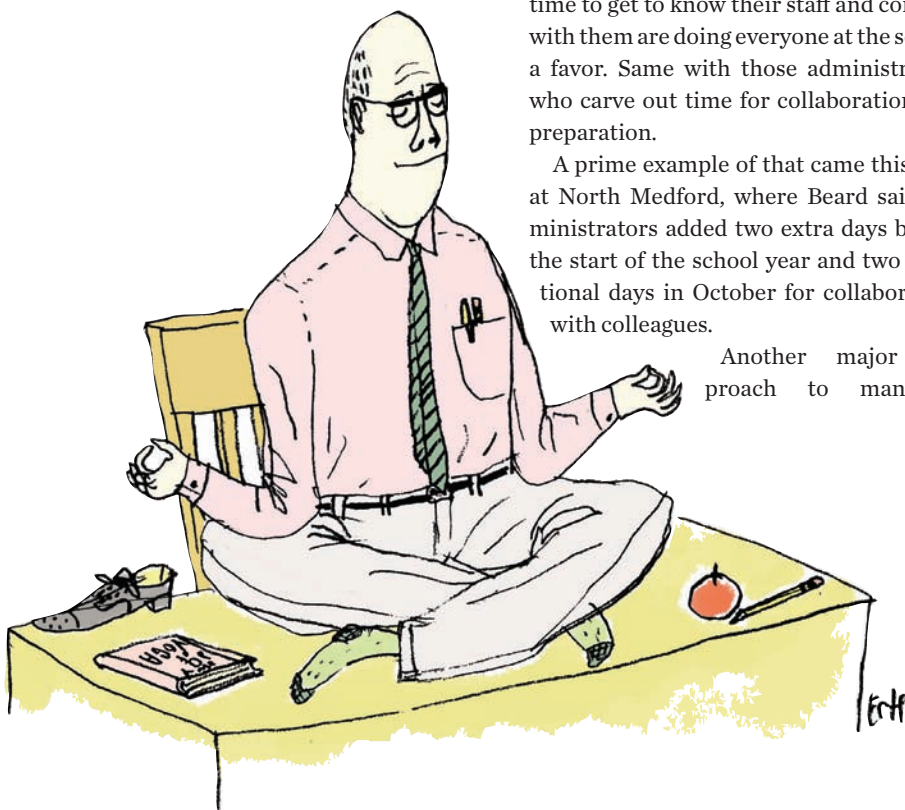
At Lane Community College, Simmons used a grant from the Trust for an “Undress the Stress” campaign, which offers regular tips for employees to reduce their stress levels. Combined with the college’s other wellness offerings — on-site workout facilities, exercise classes, fitness challenges and more — the stress-relieving campaign helped keep staff members on a healthier track and even lead to better eating habits and significant weight loss for some.

“I was amazed when I started getting reports back about people losing 10 pounds or 30 pounds,” Simmons said. “We had been focusing on stress, but we were losing a lot of weight as a result.”

Inge Aldersebaes, employee wellness program manager at OEA Choice Trust, said the Trust is looking to take school employee wellness to a new level to help educators address wellness, stress and resiliency through a more holistic approach. It is just in the initial stages of mapping out a program development plan, convening a group of experts and laying the early groundwork.

“It’s really about how do we not only help the individual cope, but how we can create an entire culture that recognizes and honors this whole theme around resiliency,” she said. “And right now, it is so much the right time to do that.”

Combined, support from colleagues,

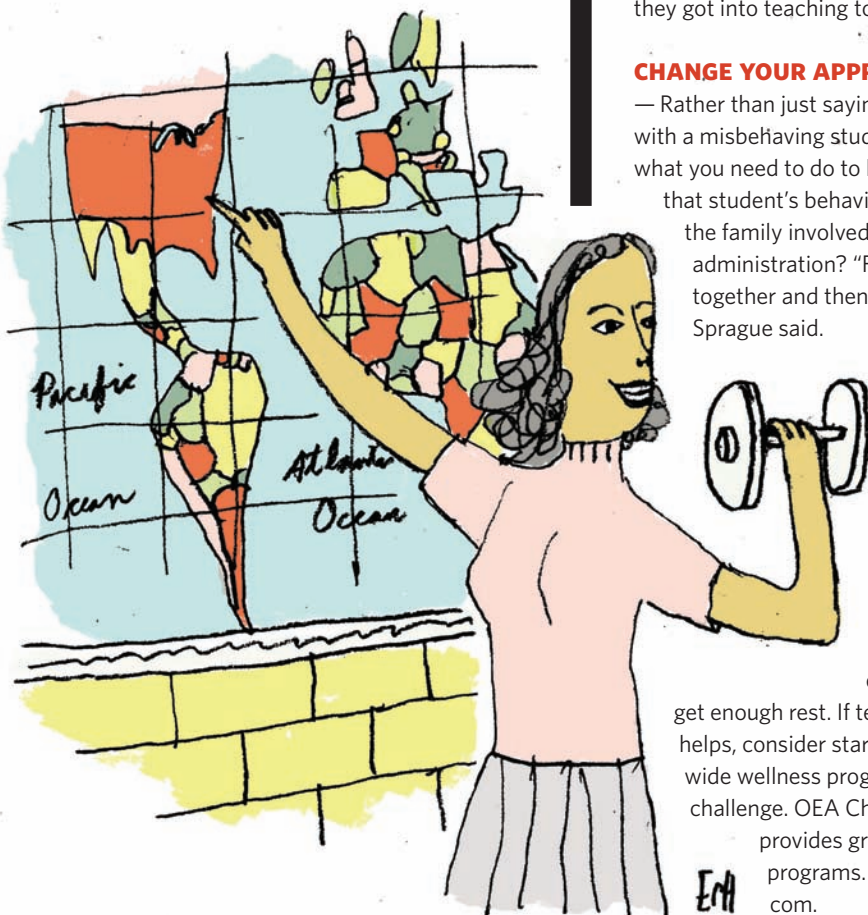


Keeping your cool — and bouncing back

administration and the community, ample resources and time, and healthy exercise and eating habits can help educators manage stress and become more resilient. It is a tricky balance to achieve, especially in this day and age of tightened budgets, increased responsibilities and the challenges of self-discipline. Resiliency *can* be achieved, however, at least to a certain degree by most educators. It helps, Reid said, if you can be a master multi-tasker, one who can juggle all the separate pieces of public education at once while still always being able to see the bigger picture.

Over her 11-year career, Reid has also found one or two other pearls that have helped make — and keep — teaching something that she loves to do.

“Laughter,” she said, “and joy. You’ve got to have joy in the job or the stress is going to overwhelm you one way or the other. Chocolate helps, too.” ■



Eight ways teachers can reduce stress and build resiliency

TAKE CHARGE — Don’t hesitate to work with counselors and other teachers to find the right class schedule for the right students. When one particular student kept disrupting Erin Beard’s English class at North Medford High School, she took note. After observing that the student didn’t do well in this core class at the very end of the school day, Beard switched him to an earlier class — and calmness ensued.

TALK ABOUT IT — It can be frustrating to work with colleagues who may not be as committed to the work as you are. Talk to them about it. “Teachers need to be clear about their values with their colleagues,” said Jeffrey Sprague, professor of special education at the University of Oregon. “You may even reconnect them with the original reason they got into teaching to begin with.”

CHANGE YOUR APPROACH — Rather than just saying you’re angry with a misbehaving student, think about what you need to do to help change that student’s behavior. Is it getting the family involved? Bringing in administration? “Fuse those ideas together and then take action,” Sprague said.

GET WELL — Physical and mental wellbeing are key to stress management and resiliency. Make time for exercise, eat right and get enough rest. If teaming up helps, consider starting a school-wide wellness program or fitness challenge. OEA Choice Trust provides grants for just such programs. www.oechoice.com.

BENEFIT FROM YOUR BENEFITS

— Many school employee health insurance plans include offerings, such as health coaching, tobacco cessation and weight management programs, that can help you achieve wellness. Check your plan and get started.

TAKE IT PERSONALLY — Nobody can be 100 percent resilient and entirely immune from schoolhouse stress. When the days get overwhelming, consider taking a personal day to unplug, recharge and set aside some time for yourself.

JUST SAY NO — Sure, being involved in your school and sitting on committees shows that you’re playing an active role. But don’t spread yourself too thin. “Say no to another committee or a student that wants to email you late at night,” said Wendy Simmons, employee wellness coordinator at Lane Community College. “You have to have some of your own time.”

FIND YOUR FANS — “Make sure you spend time with people who support you, whether it’s family, teachers, students or a mentor” said educational consultant John Lenssen. “You have to prioritize time with people who lift you up and support you. And if you are in a challenging school with a lot of stress and they are not organized to support that, you have to do it yourself. That’s where OEA can be helpful. If it’s not coming from school, it can come from the union and its members.”

DIG IN — The following web sites offer more information on teacher stress, resiliency and wellness:

- www.oechoice.com — OEA Choice Trust.
- www.teacherstaffwellbeing.com — A research program on teacher wellbeing.
- www.neahin.org — NEA’s Health Information Network. Navigate to Mental Health and Wellness for tips on managing stress.
- <http://tinyurl.com/9dsgfqq> — The Resiliency Wheel.