

Preventing Teacher Burnout in Agricultural Education¹

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Introduction

While teacher burnout, retention, and shortages are not new problems, they are rising issues for school-based agricultural education (SBAE) (Hainline & Smalley, 2023; Hur et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). Many states in the United States are experiencing struggles with agriculture teacher retention and/or recruiting (King et al., 2013a). Many SBAE teachers leave the profession within the first five years due to immersing themselves in their careers, which exposes them to burnout and exhaustion (Hainline & Smalley, 2023).

Teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations. Having increased stress leads to teacher burnout (King et al., 2013a). Burnout can be defined as a feeling of exhaustion, depersonalization, increased mental distancing, negative feelings, and/or reduced professional and self-efficacy (Croom & Moore, 2003; King et al., 2013a; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Burnout is now identified as an occupational phenomenon (WHO, 2019) that can lead to mental and physical health problems (Croom & Moore, 2003; Pierce, 2023; WHO, 2019).

This exhaustion in the classroom can appear in different ways, but Croom and Moore (2003) identified that teachers feel that working directly with people puts stress on them. For people whose work is focused on human services, such as teaching, this can lead to burnout within the workforce (Croom & Moore, 2003; King et al., 2013a). This is especially apparent in the SBAE classroom because the agricultural education three-circle model that is used in the SBAE classroom is composed of three demanding, human-focused sectors. These components are classroom and laboratory, FFA, and supervised agricultural experiences (SAE). The model helps identify what teachers are supposed to focus on. Do teachers overdo it? This publication provides insight into ways SBAE teachers can prevent burnout.

Factors Leading to Burnout within Agricultural Education

Factors identified by teachers that show they are struggling with burnout are connected to the amount of **responsibilities** they have as educators. Factors that add

to the workload of agriculture teachers are (Breeding et al., 2018; Croom & Moore, 2003; Doss et al., 2023; King et al., 2013a; Pierce, 2023):

- Teaching content and finding or creating original curricula;
- Assisting in planning of FFA chapter events and activities;
- Assisting in the preparation of FFA proficiency applications;
- FFA advisor responsibilities;
- Time constraints for different tasks and long working hours;
- Keeping students interested and engaged;
- Heavy workloads and paperwork for student trips and visits;
- Classroom management, student discipline, and grading;
- Coaching career development events (CDE) or leadership development events (LDE);
- Supervising SAEs or other projects;
- Personal factors; and
- Transitions from student teaching to full-time positions or a move to a new program.

Stress — another cause of burnout — is defined as anger, anxiety, depression, frustration, or tension, which can be caused by aspects of working as a teacher (King et al., 2013a). Pierce (2023) identified working long hours, lack of work-life balance, low support, and lack of organizational structure as workplace stressors. Agricultural educators have identified stress levels, **work-life balance**, and burnout as challenges for them (Doss et al., 2023; Pierce, 2023; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). Stress can be caused by personal interactions and relationships with people such as students, parents, administrators, and colleagues (King et al., 2013a). Another symptom of burnout is depersonalization. Depersonalization in the classroom can make teachers feel as though they do not care what happens to some students, or treat students as if they were impersonal objects (Croom & Moore, 2003).

Other key factors may be a lack of recognition or excessive comparison to others. **Recognition** plays a role in an individual feeling valued and appreciated. Doss et al.

(2023) identified a lack of recognition for work as a primary factor for occupational struggles among teachers. **Comparison** is a factor that is not widely reported, but Kitchel et al. (2012) mentioned that comparison is a negative experience that leads to burnout. Agricultural educators wear many hats, and all components of SBAE impact what they do. Comparison occurs when one compares oneself or their program to others who may be doing better (Kitchel et al., 2012). The more that comparison occurs and feelings of inferiority emerge, the higher the rate of burnout becomes (Kitchel et al., 2012). Understanding the factors that lead to burnout is the first step to decreasing burnout.

Ways to Decrease Burnout in Education

Reducing stress is a component of decreasing teacher burnout and increasing retention. Creating a plan with co-teachers to maintain a healthy balance of who is coaching, attending, and planning events for the SBAE program will aid in maintaining the workload and time management, while also communicating each other's duties. Additionally, all programs could benefit from capable volunteers, but single-teacher programs in particular may need to rely on volunteers to assist in some of these duties.

Managing work-life balance is not unique to the field of teaching. However, it is important to reduce expectations that teachers multitask or complete assignments that do not fall within their job title (Pierce, 2023). King et al. (2013b) indicated that managing your time will reduce long hours and lead to a better work-life balance.

Motivation and **support** are key factors in reducing burnout in education. Hainline and Smalley (2023) revealed that teachers who were supported by parents, administration, and community members were motivated to continue teaching future generations and advising FFA. Increased support from administration is desired by teachers in the workforce to increase job satisfaction and retention (King et al., 2013a; King et al., 2013b; Kitchel et al., 2012). Increased **job satisfaction** can decrease teacher burnout. A teacher satisfied with their job leads to career longevity and a more effective worker (Kitchel et al., 2012).

There are numerous opportunities to recognize student accomplishments through SBAE and FFA. It is also important to **recognize** the teachers who prepare students and the time spent outside of their contracted hours for their program. **Acknowledging** teachers' achievements can also decrease burnout. Teacher recognition serves as a factor in increasing job satisfaction (Solomonson & Retallick, 2018). The National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE, n.d.-b) offers multiple forms of recognition for all career stages in agricultural education, such as outstanding post-secondary agriculture program; outstanding middle/secondary agriculture program;

outstanding agriculture teacher; outstanding early-career agriculture teacher; outstanding service award; and lifetime achievement award.

Awareness of teacher burnout and factors leading to teacher burnout can help prevent it. According to Smith and Smalley (2018), administrators, teachers, and state leaders should be aware of and concerned with factors that lead to more stress in the workplace, burnout, and job satisfaction. Awareness is not only realizing you have too much on your plate, but also when you, your coworkers, students, or employees need to recharge (Pierce, 2023).

Research has also identified **professional development** (PD) opportunities as a way to decrease teacher burnout and target areas of challenges and needs (Doss et al., 2023). Professional development based on career status (i.e., alternative licensure, early-career, mid-career, experienced) needs is an example of types of PD that could be provided to teachers (Doss et al., 2023; Smith & Smalley, 2018). The PD needs of teachers were identified by Coleman et al. (2023) and included ways to teach students with special needs, ways to motivate students, and curriculum design. King et al. (2013b) indicated that PD on time management and stress reduction would benefit teachers. Doss et al. (2023) indicated that PD opportunities positively influence teachers' satisfaction and ability. Professional development can also contribute to resources in a teacher's toolbox.

Early-career, mid-career, and experienced teachers can all benefit from free **resources** that take some of the course preparation off their plates (Smith & Smalley, 2018). Providing teachers with developed curricula or access to curriculum websites could assist in decreasing teacher burnout. Offering coaching resources could benefit early-career teachers or teachers who have no experience with competitive events as well. Preservice programs are working at bridging the gap and offering early-career teachers the resources to be successful in the classroom (Breeding et al., 2018). With preservice teachers being offered resources that prepare them for the classroom, there could be a decrease in agricultural teachers' burnout.

NAAE (n.d.-a.) is making efforts to reduce teacher burnout and increase agriculture teacher recruitment, retention, and recognition. The purpose of this effort is to "provide insight and recommendations on topics and initiatives related to attracting, engaging, supporting, and celebrating agricultural education professionals" (NAAE, n.d.-a.). Committees in place at the local, state, and national levels can benefit the teacher network, help reduce burnout, and provide ways to continue support in and outside of the classroom. NAAE has many programs and resources that support agricultural educators, such as checklists, assessment management tools, information on marketing your FFA chapter, job search information, and more (Agriculture Teacher's Resource, n.d.).

Additionally, it is important to clarify your purpose for educating youth, identify priorities for your program, set monthly or biweekly goals that assist in accomplishing your purpose for each school year, identify your motivations, learn to delegate tasks for your student officers and FFA members, provide outside learning opportunities for your students (e.g., bringing in industry professionals for contest training or classroom guest speakers), set a plan for self-reflection, and plan for PD opportunities.

Conclusion

Burnout decreases the retention rates and the rate of new teachers entering the profession (King et al., 2013a). Efforts are in place to retain teachers in the classroom. As teachers become more experienced, they find ways to develop coping skills and decrease stress levels (Croom & Moore, 2003). Understanding and identifying barriers can lead to a better work-life balance for teachers and allow them to maintain better relationships with family and friends (Pierce, 2023). Teachers in less stressful work environments have more productivity, creativity, and commitment, according to Maslow and Hertzberg (King et al., 2013a).

Teacher support should be widely discussed and implemented. Awareness on all levels of the educational realm should be implemented to ensure we are preventing educators from becoming burned out. State stakeholders, agricultural educator associations, and preservice teacher preparation programs should continue to make efforts to provide resources for those in the classroom (Breeding et al., 2018). Continued development of resources that support the components of the three-circle models should occur to assist teachers with presenting content, coaching contests, and doing other required tasks. Further study is needed to understand burnout and ways to prevent it in the teacher workforce.

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