



Making Teachers Whole: Elevating Teacher Self-Care During Challenging Times

Principal Name: Justin Holmquest

School Name: New Prairie Middle School

Team Members' Names: Kristina Pentelow and Maria Sobecki

Principal's Email Contact: justinholmquest@npusc.k12.in.us

Background Leading to Our Inquiry (Slide 2)

2020 was a difficult year for many, including educators. As my team started to look at our options for the year two project, I couldn't help but notice the idea of adding "one more thing" onto their plates seemed to be affecting my team. After doing some informal checks with staff, it was obvious that stress and anxiety had taken root, more so than in years past and much sooner. The dilemma was adding our project to the plates of my staff when so much uncertainty still remained. Student achievement is affected by teachers who carry too much stress, and teachers are not always fully engaged in their work when they are stressed (Boogren, 2020). Knowing this, we decided to pivot.

Student achievement was still our goal, but I wanted to shift my focus to the wellbeing of my staff, with the goal of getting our teachers to a place each day where they felt good about being at school and in control of their environment, even with so much uncertainty still lingering.

The Purpose of Our Inquiry (Slide 3)

Therefore, the purpose of our action inquiry was to find way to help teachers cope with burnout. We noticed the signs and effects of burnout were showing much earlier than in previous years, and with all of the uncertainty involving Covid, we decided to be proactive in our approach to address this very real concern.

Our Wondering (Slide 4)

With this purpose, we wondered how the uncertainty of Covid and the plethora of instructional changes and initiatives were affecting the teachers in our building. We wanted to consider what teachers could control and what was out of their control, then provide teachers with meaningful methods and outlets for dealing with stress, which could become part of their everyday tool kit, even after we get through the pandemic.

Our Actions (Slides 5-9)

Action 1 - “Research shows that 93 percent of teachers report ‘high levels of job-related stress’” (Boogren, 2020).

One of the first actions we took was to alleviate the work loads of our teachers. This was something I could do immediately and was within my control. This included:

- Pausing new building level initiatives for 2020-2021
- Turning after school PLNs into monthly targeted meetings based on teacher needs (circled back to last year’s initiative to work with teachers struggling with the concept of CFAs, and enriching those who understood and going further). These also took place during the contractual school day.
- Encouraging staff to leave at contract time

Action 2 - Staff Survey

- As a team, we decided it would be a good idea to survey the staff to see how factors inside of school and outside of school were affecting our staff. The survey was given in December prior to winter break with the plan to implement some strategies in January after winter break.

Action 3 - Making time for exercise

I received a copy of *Educational Leadership*, and the timing could not have been better. We used one of the articles as a guide for a few of these ideas. What we wanted to get away from were “band-aid” fixes, and focus in real solutions for teachers to care for themselves. As the article I read stated, we needed to elevate teacher self-care and help our staff develop recovery zones, specifically focusing on their physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and professional selves (Rodman, Farias, & Szymczak, 2020/2021). Beginning in January, and with limited resources, I began scheduling zoom workout classes with staff using my Peloton subscription. Since I did not have a bike for everyone to use, I offered a variety of exercises multiple days a week during teacher plan times and immediately after school. I would log in with my computer and share my screen through Zoom so teachers could participate from the comfort of their own classrooms. The exercises were 10-15 minutes in length and included:

- Yoga
- Bodyweight Workouts
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- Stretching

Action 4 - Making time for meditation

Still using my Peloton subscription, I also offered daily 5-minute meditations before the school day started. This is more popular on late start Friday, but I do have regular attendees for the daily offering Monday through Thursday. The meditations focus on a variety of challenges including finding inner peace, mindfulness, courage, empathy, and gratitude.

Action 5 - Final Staff Survey

We conducted a final staff survey to gather feedback on the effectiveness of some of the changes we made this school year. We also wanted to gauge the interest of some new ideas for next year to help teachers deal with stress.

Data Collection (Slide 10)

In order to collect data, we sent two surveys to the teaching staff. The first survey focused on their stress, the factors contributing to their stress, and methods they have used in the past to manage stress. The second survey was to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the changes, and an opportunity for suggestions or feedback as we head into next school year. For both surveys, I used Google Forms. There was a combination of questions, including rating scales and short answer.

Our Data (Slides 11-25)

Based on the staff survey, we realized our teachers were stressed about both school and outside factors. One of the methods several teachers stated as a way to cope with stress was exercise. With this information, the exercise offerings were offered. According to the article "When Netflix Isn't Enough" from *Educational Leadership*, when we look at trying to help staff with the physical aspect of their wellbeing, we should ask ourselves if we are providing them with access to healthy foods, encouraging physical activity, and supporting teachers when they need days off for illness or mental wellbeing (Rodman, Farias, & Szymczak, 2020/2021). As a result, the following changes were made:

- Flexible exercise offerings
- Acknowledgement of teachers needing days off and not pressing the issue in terms of sub coverage - this included myself and my AP covering classes as needed when teachers were out
- Being more deliberate in offering healthy options for staff when we buy them snacks (for PLN meeting days)
- Number of participants range from as many as 15, to as few as 1. Time was still a factor for many when it came to participating in these offerings.

When looking at some of the professional aspects of this situation, we acknowledged that we should ask ourselves if we could pause some of the building level initiatives we had set out for this year, and focus on keeping out staff afloat. We decided to set limits and boundaries while allowing teachers to communicate needs specifically to us (Rodman, Farias, & Szymczak, 2020/2021). With that, the following adjustments were made for this school year:

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When looking at some of the psychological aspects of this situation, we looked at giving teachers chances to meet more directly, and providing ways to offer mindful ways to focus (Rodman, Farias, & Szymczak, 2020/2021). As a result, the following changes were made:

- Daily meditation offerings
- Targeted PLN check-ins with staff to discuss their specific professional needs
- Checking in with staff just to see how they were doing

Our Discoveries (Slide 26-31)

Learning Statement One: Teachers are human and stress is real. Be willing to listen and adapt to help them through it.

- At the time of the first survey, 73% of my teachers reported that stress was having an impact on them. 52% said factors outside of school were contributing to their stress, while 89% said school related changes and adjustments due to Covid were contributing factors. At this point, 93% of the teachers said they would be willing to participate in some sort of activity to reduce stress.

The post survey has revealed the following about the effectiveness of the changes we made:

- 89% of the teachers who participated in the exercise/meditation offerings stated that it had a positive impact on their mood and stress levels.
- 92% of the teachers stated that making the PLN check-ins more targeted to their needs had a positive impact on their work-related stress levels.
- 89% of teachers stated that pausing new initiatives and circling back to last year's initiatives has a positive impact on their work-related stress levels.

Learning Statement Two: If you want teachers to be the best teachers they can be for their students, find ways to help them get there. They will appreciate the effort and respond in the classroom.

- The overwhelming feedback this year has been positive. Even teachers who were unable or unwilling to participate in the exercise options stated that some of the other adjustments we made to alleviate their workload helped them navigate this school year and lessen their work-related stress.

Here are some of the post-survey comments from teachers about the changes that were made:

- “The activities offered for us really helped me focus on self-care. Bringing the Super Nintendo in helped relieve some stress, too. I think that having a variety of activities for all interests was super helpful. Thank you for helping us discover/realize the importance of self-care. I appreciate your efforts in increasing the overall health and well-being of our NPMS family.”
- “I appreciate you taking the time to look out for us as people outside of this building.”
- “I genuinely appreciate your willingness to try new things to help us ALL out. It shows that you care about us as a whole person, not just a teacher in your building, and that means more than you realize. Thank you.”
- “I appreciated having the targeted PLN's during the school day with my teaching partner. These meetings were much more valuable to me.”
- “The changes were a blessing during a challenging time. Thank you.”
- “I appreciate that all year you have looked for ways to help improve the mental health of teachers. Not trying to add more to our plates or making unrealistic expectations is greatly appreciated. The snacks and drinks are appreciated and put a little pep in your step when you go to pick them up.”
- “It was definitely less stressful which was appreciated in a year when everyone is/was worried about COVID.”

Learning Statement Three: Avoid “Band-Aids” and come up with real solutions that yield long term benefits for reducing stress.

- As a team, we want to continue to look how to reach more staff on a more consistent basis with activities and tools to lessen their own personal stress. We were able to reach about 40% of the staff with the exercise offerings; our goal going forward is to brainstorm ideas with the staff to come up with more options and put them in control of finding ways to alleviate work related and personal stress. We still want to offer the one-time incentives like snacks, jeans weeks, and leaving with the kids on Friday, but we also want to add other options that can be utilized regularly.
- In our post survey, 93% of teachers stated that they would be willing to continue to participate in or take up different offerings to help them manage their stress each year. Some of the suggestions include a book club for teachers (pre-survey showed 30% enjoy

reading to alleviate stress) and some step counting challenges to get teachers up and moving around.

Where We Are Headed Next (Slide 32-35)

I have learned quite a bit this year about what my teachers were dealing with, both personally and professionally. Despite that, they come to school every day ready to go. I am seven years removed from the classroom, and this crazy year and this project helped get me back into the perspective of being a teacher. My position is certainly stressful, but it is also structured very differently than a classroom teacher's. Being able to get this type of meaningful feedback and listen to what my teachers were dealing with gave me a new appreciation for that they do, and for how I operate as the principal. It has made me more mindful and cognizant of what I need to focus on when it comes to being a school leader.

From the teacher perspective, Maria stated that she saw the adjustments and how we went about the changes reminded her of how we have gone about implementing the PLC process in our building. Maria stated, "You could make an analogy to how like the PLC process with need to know and nice to know, you really focused this year on only asking us to do the 'we need you to do' not the 'we'd like for you to do' to avoid adding one more task to tip us over. You asked us to evaluate ourselves (like a check for understanding) instead of assuming you knew how we were feeling or how you could help us to make the process more meaningful." Our plan is to be more purposeful in our approach when meeting the needs of our teachers.

The following are tangible changes and adjustments we plan to make as a result of this year's project:

- With a grant provided by the LaPorte Healthcare Foundation, we plan to have exercise equipment purchased for the staff to utilize and begin the creation of a staff exercise room. To start, we will be offering two state of the art treadmills, and some dumbbells. Our goal is to have a full use exercise area for staff over the course of the next few years. This will give teachers the chance to exercise at their leisure versus during a specific time allotted by my schedule.
 - 77% of teachers in the post survey stated they would utilize a school exercise room to reduce stress and work out.
- Adjusting our after-school PLN meeting with teachers to create more targeted check-ins with teachers during the instructional day in a continued effort to be considerate of their time outside of school.
- Coming up with other methods for coping with the rigors of teaching including some additional staff activities for the coming years.

As an administrator, I have taken a hard look at myself and how I approach the well-being of my staff. I think that all administrators should consider what can be removed from the plates of their staff as they go into each school year. I have found that the targeted meetings have been more meaningful and a better use of time versus full staff gatherings. I feel like it is no different than the expectations we set for our teachers in meeting the needs of our students. I also

believe that being mindful in this way has created more buy in with my staff and trust. It sounds cliché, but through this I think that I have made a stronger connection with them and we will be able to move forward and achieve our goals as a school more so now than before.

Bibliography (Slide 36)

Boogren, T. H. (2020). *180 days of self-care for busy educators*. Bloomington, Indiana: Solution Tree Press.

Rodman, A., Farias, A., & Szymczak, S. (2020/2021, December/January). When Netflix Isn't Enough: Fostering True Recovery for Educators. *Educational Leadership*, 78(4), 55-60.

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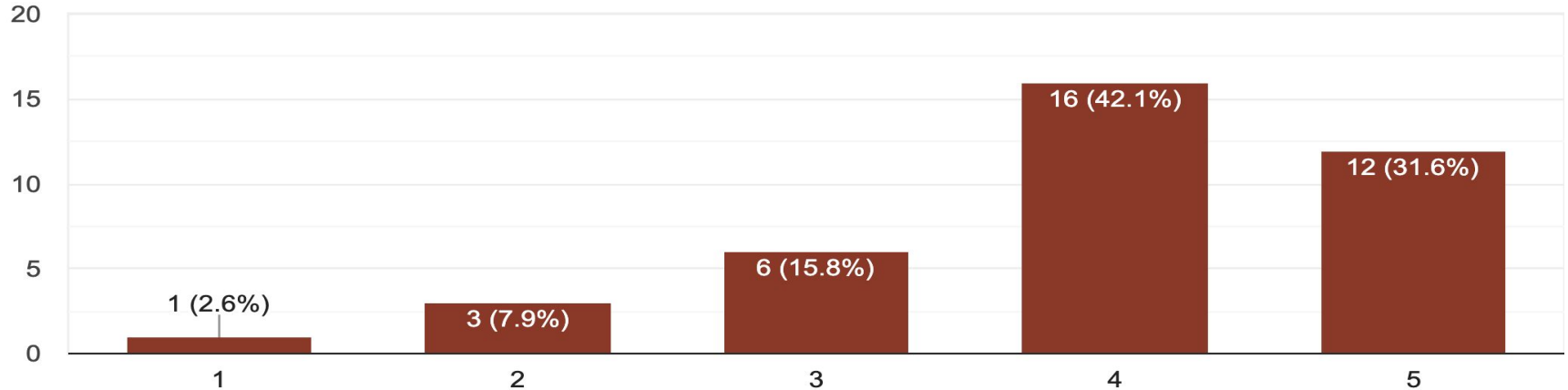
Pre-Survey Results

Rate Overall Stress at the End of Semester 1

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

Please rate your overall stress level as it stands right now.

38 responses

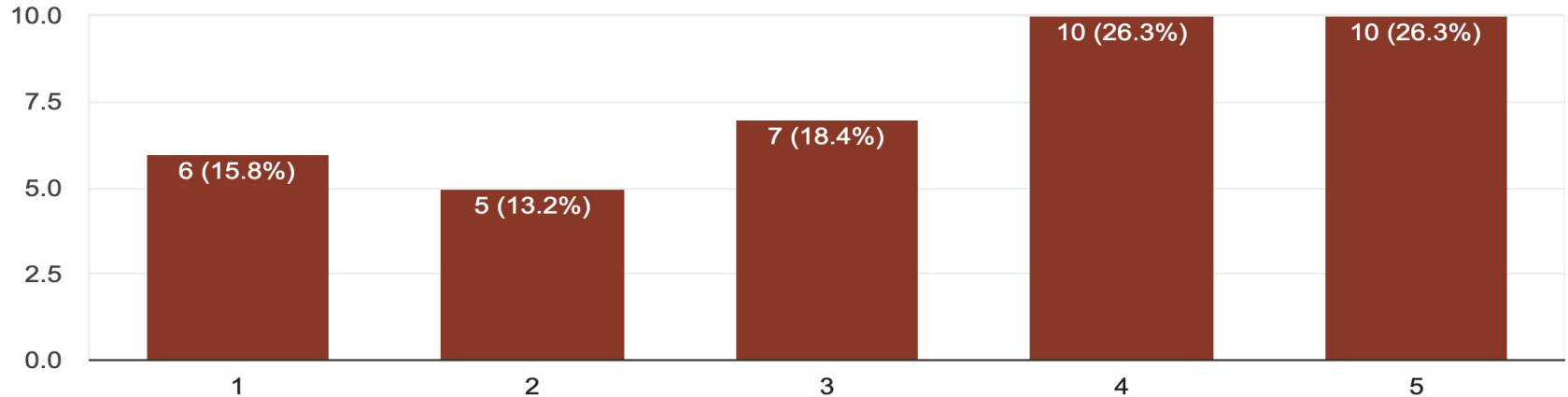


Rate if Factors Outside of School Contributed to Stress

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

Please rate if factors outside of school have contributed to your personal stress this school year.

38 responses

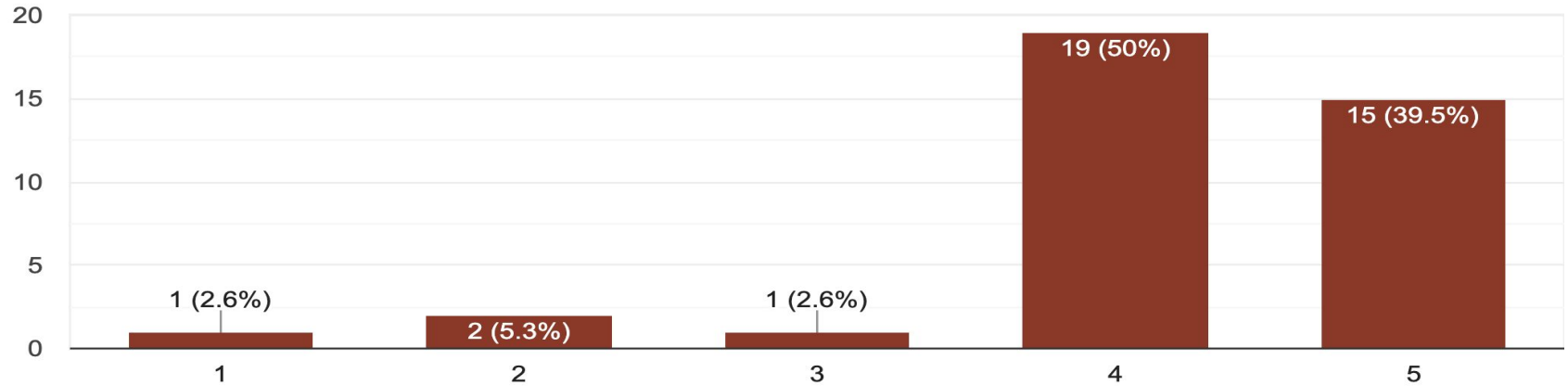


Rate if Factors at School have Contributed to Stress

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

Please rate if factors at school have contributed to your personal stress this year.

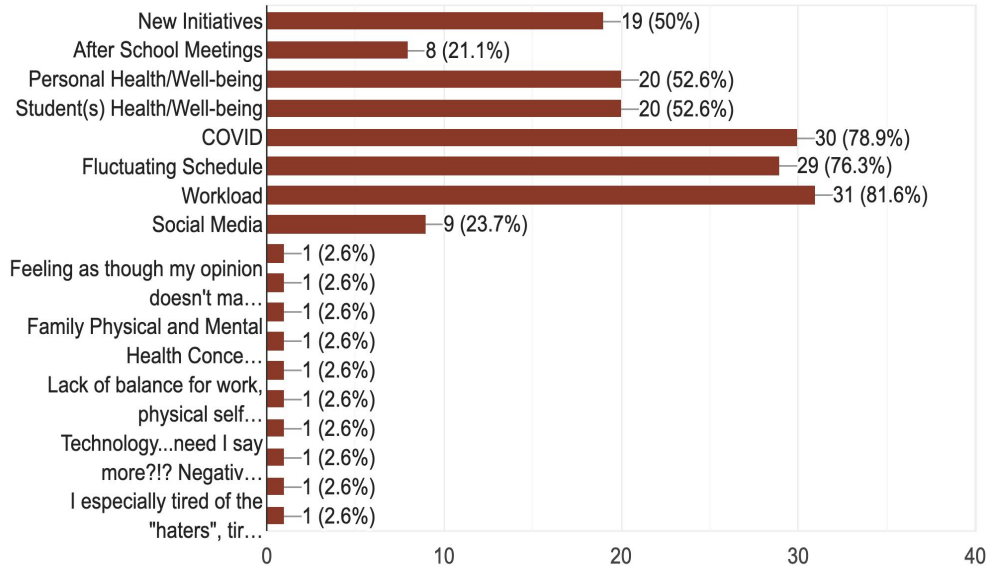
38 responses



Which factors have contributed to your stress?

Which factors have contributed to your personal stress? Please check all that apply.

38 responses



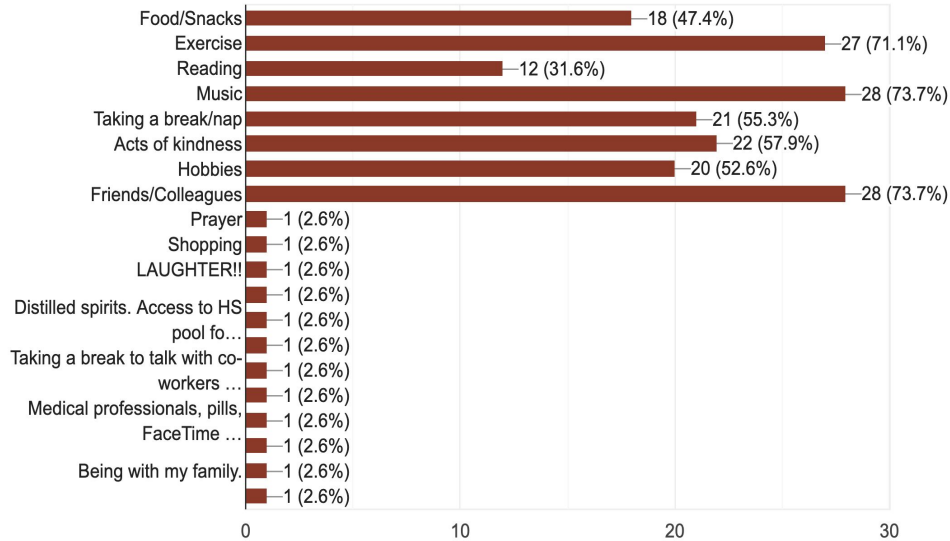
Write in responses include:

- Health of family members
- Feeling unheard
- Coaching duties
- Lack of balance between work/physical well-being
- Tired of “the haters”
- Technology

Which of the following help/have helped reduce stress?

Which of the following help or have helped you relieve/reduce stress? Please check all that apply.

38 responses

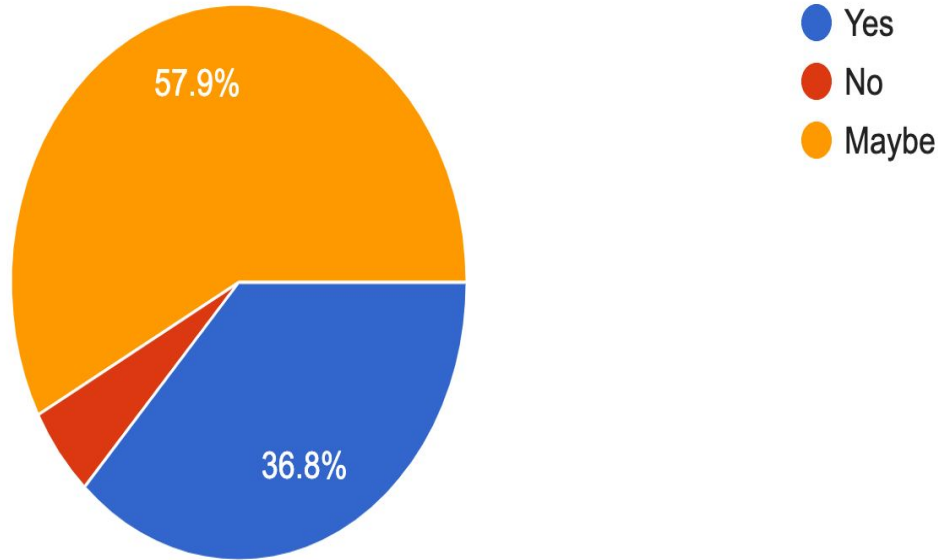


Write in responses include:

- Prayer
- Shopping
- Distilled spirits
- Breaks to talk with co-workers during the day
- Facetime
- Family

If there were some opportunities to do stress relieving activities during the school day or immediately after school, would you take advantage of these opportunities?

38 responses



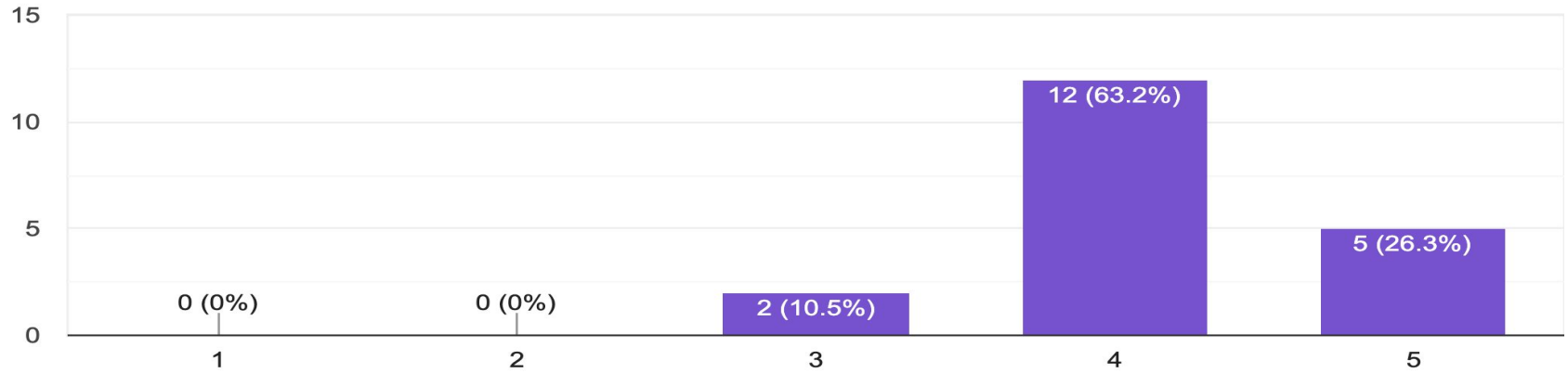
Post-Survey Results

Rate Impact of Exercise on Stress Levels

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

If you participated in some of the workouts and meditations, how would you rate the positive impact it had on your overall mood/health at the time of the workout.

19 responses

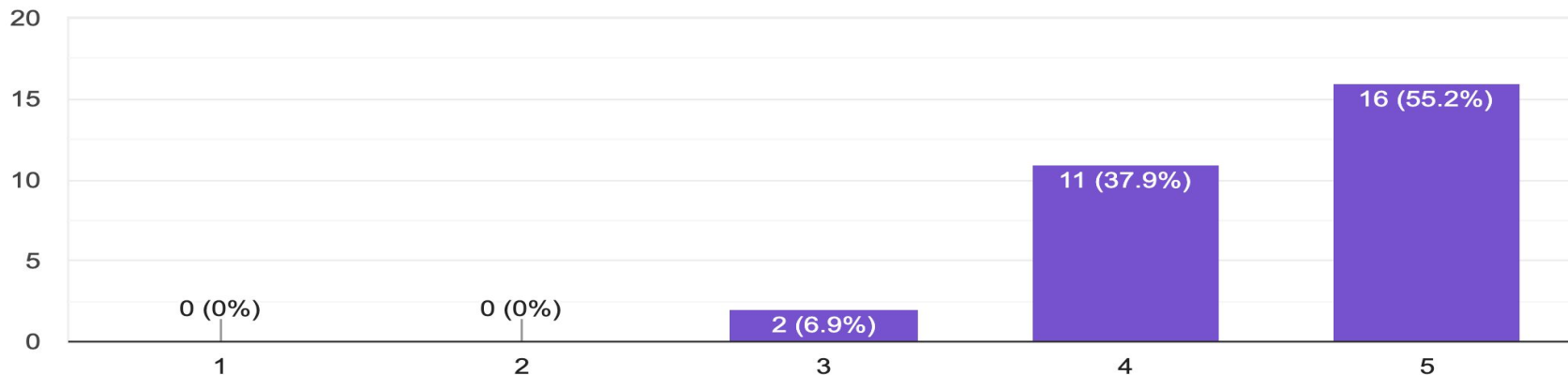


Rate Impact of Targeted Check-ins versus Group Meetings

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

Please rate if doing targeted PLN check-ins versus whole group, monthly PLN check-ins after school had a positive impact on your mood and professional health.

29 responses

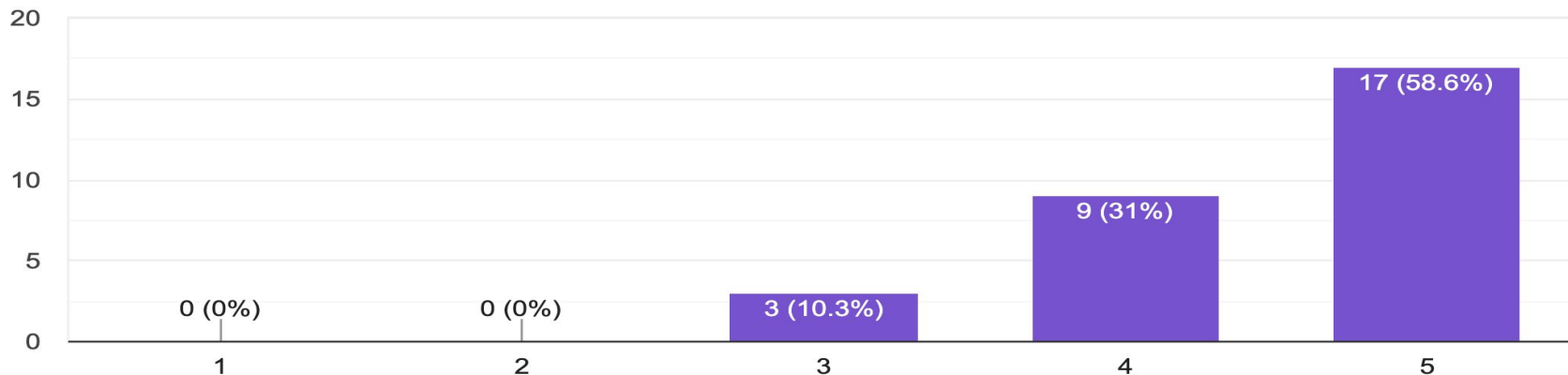


Rate Impact of Pausing Building Initiatives and Circling Back

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

Please rate if pausing new initiatives related to the PLC process this year, and circling back to last year's objectives, had a positive impact on your mood and professional health.

29 responses

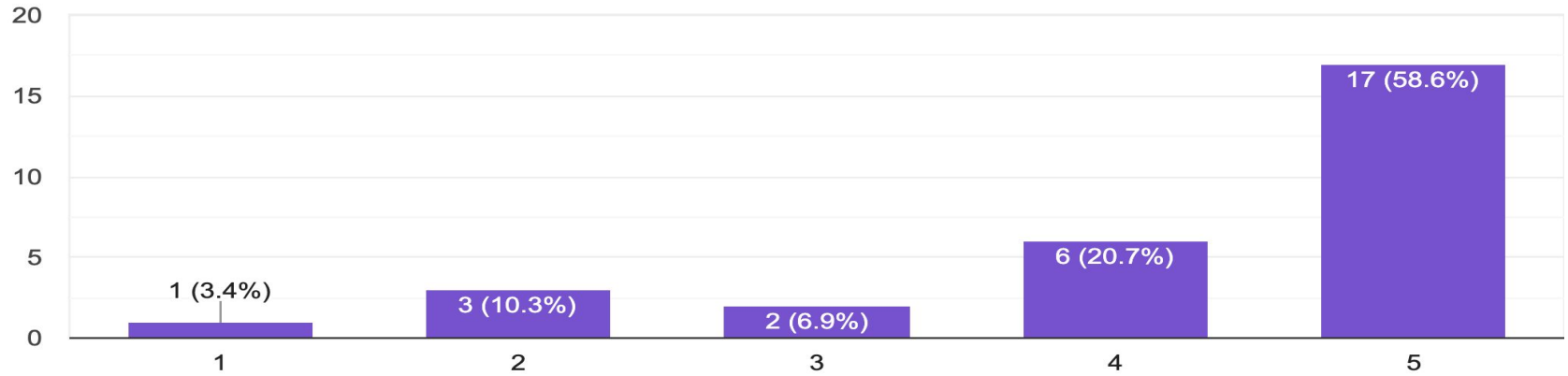


Middle School Developed a Workout Room Interest

1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High

If the middle school began development of a dedicated exercise room for staff, with equipment, how likely are you to use it?

29 responses



Our Data - Responding to Physical Needs

Based on the staff survey, we realized our teachers were stressed about both school and outside factors. One of the methods several teachers stated as a way to cope with stress was exercise. With this information, the exercise offerings were offered. According to the article “When Netflix Isn’t Enough” from *Educational Leadership*, when we look at trying to help staff with the physical aspect of their wellbeing, we should ask ourselves if we are providing them with access to healthy foods, encouraging physical activity, and supporting teachers when they need days off for illness or mental wellbeing (Rodman, Farias, & Szymczak, 2020/2021). As a result, the following changes were made:

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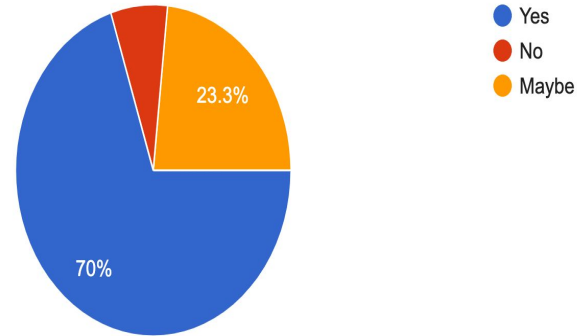
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If we offered additional activities, like a book club for teachers, or walking groups and step counter challenges, would you consider participating?

30 responses



Where We Are Headed Next

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- Coming up with other methods for coping with the rigors of teaching including some additional staff activities for the coming years.

Where We Are Headed Next - Advice for Admin

As an administrator, I have taken a hard look at myself and how I approach the well-being of my staff. I think that all administrators should consider what can be removed from the plates of their staff as they go into each school year. I have found that the targeted meetings have been more meaningful and a better use of time versus full staff gatherings. I feel like it is no different than the expectations we set for our teachers in meeting the needs of our students. I also believe that being mindful in this way has created more buy in with my staff and trust. It sounds cliché, but through this I think that I have made a stronger connection with them and we will be able to move forward and achieve our goals as a school more so now than before.

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