

Best Practices for Educator Workforce Well-Being and Belonging

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Executive Summary

“I wish that it was clear to everyone in the US that when it comes to schools, working conditions are learning conditions.”

-AFT Educator¹

Interdependence within a school building catalyzes an ecosystem like no other. Educators bring their whole selves into classrooms where students arrive with various social, emotional, and academic needs. This ecosystem offers a framework for understanding the systemic, collective, and individual elements of workforce well-being and belonging work. To help create conditions that foster a culture of belonging and well-being for Oregon’s public K-12 education workforce, there needs to be a coordinated collaborative set of efforts to address high levels of stress, fatigue, and burnout. These are conditions that impact well-being and the long-term sustainability of Oregon’s educator workforce. An educator’s well-being cannot depend on self-care and resilience alone; it must be prioritized and woven into the systems that support teaching and learning.

This paper outlines the current landscape and needs within Oregon’s K-12 educator workforce, and the steps needed to ensure that the K-12 educator workforce can experience a thriving and supportive workplace that centers improved well-being and belonging. The data helps to tell a story about current efforts that create a reliance on individual self-care when collective and systematic shifts to catalyze the changes needed to improve conditions for Oregon’s K-12 educator workforce. Creating a culture of belonging and well-being for educators leads to professional satisfaction and employee retention. Improved workplace culture generates a ripple effect that enhances students’ learning and strengthens school communities.

¹ American Federations of Teachers, Educators Thriving (2023) [Beyond Burnout, A Roadmap to Improve Educator Well-Being](#) pg.1

Introduction

Across Oregon, promising efforts to support education workforce wellness are emerging, yet these initiatives remain fragmented and vary in reach and focus. These efforts are not compelled by legislation, do not attend to systemic needs, and are limited by available funding and bandwidth. For example, the [Oregon Well-Being Trust](#) (OWBT) provides tools, resources, and mini-grants to districts who express interest in developing wellness initiatives that range from paying for yoga instructors, keynote speakers, or bringing in a licensed massage therapist to a work event, professional development opportunities; or funding to create a staff wellness space within the school. In 2025, more than forty Oregon school districts and nearly half of the state's Education Service Districts (ESDs) applied and received grant funding through the OWBT to support wellness activities. [The Educator Advancement Council](#) (EAC) continues to invest in [Regional Educator Networks](#) (RENs) that center teacher and community voices in designing and supporting open access to high quality, culturally responsive, regional professional development opportunities which includes educator workforce well-being content, tools and resources. The [Coalition of Oregon School Administrators](#) (COSA) has begun to integrate wellness activities into their professional development offerings, partnering with the Oregon Well-Being Trust to provide wellness spaces for administrators during COSA conferences. These wellness stations offer individuals opportunities for relaxation, reflection, and a quiet place to just sit and think. A promising effort toward policy lies within Oregon's [Local School Wellness policies](#). The context for these policies comes from the Center for Disease Control's [Whole School, Whole, Whole Child \(WSCC\)](#) model. The model includes employee wellness through a comprehensive school employee wellness approach that is coordinated through a set of programs, policies, benefits and environmental support. Presently, the Oregon Department of Education does not require that schools include employee well-being in their local policies; such language remains optional. However, districts participating in the USDA's National School Lunch Program are Required to maintain a Local School Wellness Policy, which focuses on student nutrition, physical activity and overall student wellness. As a result, most existing wellness policies and workforce initiatives emphasize student health outcomes, with limited systemic investment in staff wellness. While almost all of Oregon's 197 districts have cafeterias and participate in the national lunch programs, some of Oregon's smaller districts do not. However, the infrastructure and existence of the local school wellness policies should be regarded as an excellent building block in developing systemic and coordinated efforts in support of educator workforce well-being. Most efforts rely on local initiatives, short-term grant funding, or the commitment of individual leaders which results in low impact, small scale efforts with inequitable access and inconsistent implementation across the state.

Background and Literature Review

Recent data from across Oregon's educator workforce illuminates both the promise and the urgency of addressing educator well-being in more systemic ways. Educators consistently describe their work as deeply meaningful yet increasingly demanding—with conditions for success often misaligned with the expectations placed upon them.

The Quality Education Commission's Best Practice Series featured a presentation on [Employee Belonging and Well-Being](#) which outlines high impact and best practices for improving working conditions, with a focus on survey results completed by administrators and teachers. Practices include: competitive compensation for school staff; class size/case load that allows for individual attention; on-site student support including student mental health; and access to a family liaison, social worker or attendance monitor. Best practices include fostering a workplace where open communication is honored, work-life balance is promoted, mental health supports are available to educators and professional development includes opportunities to learn about emotional resilience, stress management, co-regulation and trauma informed strategies.

The antidote is clear: increase salaries, decrease class size, hire more behavioral health providers (for students and staff) and case managers to meet students' non-academic needs, freeing educators to focus more on academics.

Educator Data

The [Elevating Voices in Education Workforce Survey](#) (EVE) is administered by the Oregon Department of Education and is required by Senate Bill 283 from the 2023 legislative session. The purpose of EVE is to elevate and understand the voices and experiences of Oregon educators to help schools, districts and state leaders identify and prioritize needs and allocate resources most effectively. At the time of the presentation, the survey had only been administered once and 13,726 or 15.5 % of Oregon's educator workforce participated in the survey (teachers, administrators, admin support staff, specialized support services, athletic directors, bus drivers, librarians and other student facing roles). These data should be used cautiously to tell the fullest story of Oregon's educator workforce. The results offer some insight into the unique experiences of administrators compared to that of teachers, staff, and those who did not opt to identify their role. Comparatively, administrators reported a stronger sense of belonging and well-being compared to the three other roles. Those that took the survey reported that they found their work to be meaningful, and many expressed fulfillment in their role and a sense of belonging within their school communities. However, a majority also reported experiencing high levels of stress, limited time for collaboration, and challenges balancing workload and personal well-being. For more information on the results please review the [2025 EVE Legislative Report](#).

Longitudinal analyses from the [Oregon Longitudinal Data Collaborative \(OLDC\) Teacher Study](#) reinforce this finding. Teachers prepared in Oregon-based educator preparation programs, where coursework and field experiences are closely tied to relational practice and local context tend to remain in the field longer than those prepared outside of the state. Similarly, the [Oregon Educator Equity Report](#) (2024) highlights the importance of school and program culture in retaining diverse educators. It notes that teachers of color and linguistically diverse educators are more likely to stay in the field if they feel respected, included, and supported by leadership. This report also points to the critical role of mentoring and culturally responsive professional development in creating these conditions.

Together, these findings affirm that retention is not simply a workforce management issue. It reflects the environment in which educators teach and learn. When educators experience relational trust, professional belonging, and emotional safety, they are more likely to experience higher job satisfaction. When these conditions are absent, attrition rises, morale declines, and system-wide well-being erodes. This continues to underscore the need for intentional aligned strategies that center educator workforce voice and experience.

Support Frameworks

[The U.S Surgeon Generals Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-being](#) identifies five essential elements of a healthy workplace: protection from harm, connection and community, work-life harmony, mattering at work, and opportunity for growth. The framework emphasizes worker voice and equity, underscoring that well-being cannot depend on independent resilience alone. Organizations must cultivate environments that enable people to thrive. Oregon's educator workforce well-being work mirrors this approach by recognizing that a strong workforce depends on systemic conditions of belonging, respect, and purpose.

Oregon's Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (TSEL) Framework, led by the Oregon Department of Education, provides the state's unifying vision for fostering well-being, belonging, and culturally sustaining relationships across the education system. Oregon's [Transformative Social and Emotional Learning Framework and Standards](#) have been developed to help adults and students navigate life's complex pathways and transform systems to be more humanizing. The same mechanisms that support student well-being and learning also support adult well-being and continued learning. Focusing on the social and emotional development of adults can improve adult well-being, create positive work environments, increase feelings of professionalism, and support adults in embodying, modeling, coaching, and nurturing Transformative SEL for students. Just like students, adults benefit from intentional relationship building, a deep sense of community, and a strength-based approach that honors and affirms their identity, abilities, backgrounds, and cultural assets. These can be seen as universal human needs which are at the center of how humans learn and thrive. Educational systems that

intentionally create and nurture conditions for adult connection and self and community care support Adult Transformative SEL. Collectively and as individuals, it is vital that educators and students reflect on social and emotional needs and interests. Honoring identity and lived experience and advocating for needs and interests fosters empowerment and well-being.

In many ways, Oregon's Transformative SEL Framework embodies the principles outlined in the [U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#). Both frameworks recognize that well-being is a collective, organizational responsibility, and emphasize the conditions that allow people to flourish. The Transformative SEL Framework translates these national priorities into the educational context, centering relational trust, belonging, and reflection as integral to healthy school systems characterized by care and justice. Oregon's Transformative SEL Framework and Standards support educational systems in developing equitable policies and systems and embedding Transformative SEL practices to create a culture of collaboration, authentic professional learning, and well-being for all adults in the school community. By grounding adult TSEL in the everyday experiences of educators, it advances a vision of workplace well-being that is both systemic and equity driven.

Within this broader vision, the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC) plays a complementary role through the *Standards for Educator Preparation*. These standards define relational, cultural, and social-emotional competencies as foundational dimensions of effective teaching and leadership. In collaboration with educator preparation programs, TSPC is helping to redefine what it means to partner with districts, ensuring that the districts supporting field experiences or hosting provisionally licensed emerging educators have the knowledge, skills, and capacity to engage meaningfully with educator candidates. Through shared calibration, co-constructed field experiences, and cross-agency dialogue, these partnerships strengthen the bridge between preparation and practice.

Problem Analysis

The health and stability of the educator workforce are inseparable from students' academic and social emotional success. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated this interconnection, revealing the extent to which [teacher well-being and student outcomes rise and fall together](#). As educators adapted to remote learning, shifting expectations, and the emotional weight of the pandemic, many faced significant personal and professional stress. They reported increases in student dysregulation and mental health needs, along with limited access to behavioral health support needed to allow students to engage fully in social and academic spaces. When educators and students experience chronic stress, anxiety, and fatigue, burnout rises and system-wide well-being declines. National research reflects that this pattern of staff shortages, alarming before the pandemic began, are now at significant levels. The behavioral health

workforce is also experiencing a shortage, resulting in far fewer mental health providers in Oregon. For Oregon's more [rural and frontier communities](#) the lack of workforce is even more dire. Intentions to leave the profession have continued to climb for both teachers and principals, and schools remain understaffed across all positions (AFT, 2022). Leaders, families, and educators themselves are calling for us to attend to the well-being of Oregon's educator workforce, but no consensus exists about what this means. Many of the solutions suggested are inadequate to meet the challenge. While some districts are acting, too few solutions address the systemic factors contributing to our current challenges.

These structural challenges are especially visible in Oregon's educator preparation pipeline. The [Oregon Educator Equity Report](#) (2024) documents innovative pathways, including university and community college partnerships, that expand access to continuing education for paraeducators and working adults. Yet it also shows that racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse candidates continue to complete their preparation at declining rates, with many trainings outside of Oregon. Cost, limited geographic access, and scheduling flexibility remain persistent barriers. Even as Oregon programs are nationally recognized for their relational and contextually-grounded preparation—linked to higher in-state retention—systemic inequities in affordability and accessibility push candidates to out-of-state or alternative programs that better fit their economic or logistical realities.

These patterns suggest a misalignment between Oregon's policy vision and the lived realities of the workforce. Preparation programs cultivate relational and reflective educators but districts and schools often lack the resources or structures to sustain those same practices once candidates enter the field. The state's strong frameworks, including the Transformative SEL Framework and Accountability Framework, are still in the early stages of development and implementation.

Proposed Solutions & Implementation Strategies

The opportunity ahead lies in aligning Oregon's existing strengths and efforts into a coherent, sustained system that meaningfully impacts Oregon's K-12 workforce. The current efforts to support educator workforce well-being and belonging are not organized in a strategic and coordinate manner. Oregon's 197 district policies are not connected to any one state agency/entity and do not have mandates that ensure policy and practice align statewide.

The goal is to move from isolated activities to aligned vision and action, which starts with operationalizing commitments through shared structure, accountability, and sustainable funding. Most solutions fall into two categories: addressing educator well-being for individuals

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and systemic changes to the K-12 workforce that decreases classroom sizes, increases salaries, and provides funding and training for more school social workers. These social workers can liaise with families and caregivers and monitor student attendance and support for students.

To this end, the heart of the proposed solution is creating an **Educator Workforce Well-Being Task Force**. The goal of the task force will be to develop resources and initiatives that directly impact educators and would consist of the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), the Educator Advancement Council (EAC), the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC), the Oregon Education Association (OEA), the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA), Oregon Well-Being Trust, and current and retired educators. These members can help shape and guide the coordination of statewide initiatives for educator workforce well-being and belonging across the continuum from recruitment to retirement. The task force would:

1. Strengthen Cross-Agency Coordination,
2. Embed Well-Being in Accountability and Operations, and
3. Expand Local Implementation Capacity.

With statewide coordination, funding, and support, districts will then be tasked with revising their *Local Wellness Policies* to include educator well-being and belonging. The local wellness policies will weave together elements of individual, collective, and systemic wellness strategies.

Some of the solutions for addressing individual wellness can be through [Trauma Informed Oregon](#) where administrators could be trained on how to lead with a trauma informed lens. This means that policies, processes and, in turn, schools, operate under the premise that most people have experienced trauma—leading to operating with an understanding of the impacts of trauma and a commitment to not retraumatizing students and staff. Alternately, the University of Oregon’s [Ballmer Institute](#) offers a micro-credentialing program that offers courses on developing and maintaining health relationships, teaching self-regulation and trauma-informed supports for children. It also provides some resources and education that can support educators who do not have access to on-site mental health services, which was one of the four strategies named in the Employee Belonging and Well-being presentation to the QEC.

To support the **Educator Workforce Well-being Task Force**, additional resources and metrics will be designed through ODE’s [Renewed Vision for Accountability](#) with levers that focus on recruitment, support, retention, collaborative partnerships, and system health measurements that include:

- Staff feel supported and valued beginning with the recruitment process.
- Staff participation in consistent job-embedded professional learning and coaching.

- State and regional partnerships between Pre-K-12, higher education, and the workforce create inclusive working conditions for all staff.
- Leaders set measurable goals and provide pathways and support to all staff to reach goals.

While the accountability framework formalizes and provides foundational elements in support of educator workforce well-being, it will not address the entirety of what is currently needed to support Oregon’s educator workforce needs. The hope is to have the same goals and frameworks operationalized across all levels of the educator continuum, with the goal of moving Oregon from isolated wellness initiatives toward an integrated, equity-centered approach that allows every educator to experience the belonging, reflection, and care necessary for long and fulfilling careers.

Together, these strategies will support and advance educator workforce well-being in unprecedented ways. By aligning policy, preparation, and practice through shared accountability, the state can ensure that every educator, regardless of role, geography, or background, experiences the conditions necessary to thrive.

Evaluation and Impact Assessment

The EVE Survey is a key data source that can reflect the impact of the proposed committee's work. A comprehensive evaluation approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative indicators to understand how changes in policy and practice translate into improved educator and student outcomes. Quantitative measures might include educator retention and mobility data (OLDC), completion and placement data from educator preparation programs (TSPC), and participation in professional learning aligned to adult TSEL (ODE). Qualitative methods such as focus groups, listening sessions, and “stop, start, continue” reflections could capture the nuances of workplace culture, trust, and belonging across Oregon’s districts and educator roles. Key indicators of progress could include:

- A decrease in educator burn-out /Increased Educator retention
- Growth in reported feelings of belonging, safety, and professional fulfillment as captured through the EVE survey
- Development and Expansion of district and ESD wellness committees and/or Local Wellness Policies that include educator workforce wellness and belonging

Ultimately, the measure of success will be visible in the classrooms, schools, and institutions that feel different—when they are places where collaboration, adult wellness, self-care and inclusion are practice and the conditions for teaching, learning, and thriving are sustaining. A

culture of belonging is not an end point, but an ongoing process of reflection, collaboration, and accountability shared across agencies, institutions, and communities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

When Oregon's educators thrive, students thrive. When the system models care for its people, it teaches care to its children. Adults, children, and the education system itself are bound by shared needs for belonging, safety, and growth. To advance this goal, the following actions are recommended: Leverage data from the EVE survey, retention data, and qualitative feedback to inform a Workforce Well-being Taskforce to develop and address collective accountability for educator well-being. The task force should include regular communication, coordinated reporting, and alignment of initiatives under a unifying framework that functions hand-in-hand with the Oregon Accountability Framework and work to center and elevate adult TSEL practices.

Oregon's educators are the foundation of the public education system, yet too often they are asked to sustain others while their own needs remain unmet. The wellness of adults in the K-12 system is not peripheral; it is the north star that guides transformational and equity-centered change. Oregon deserves this.

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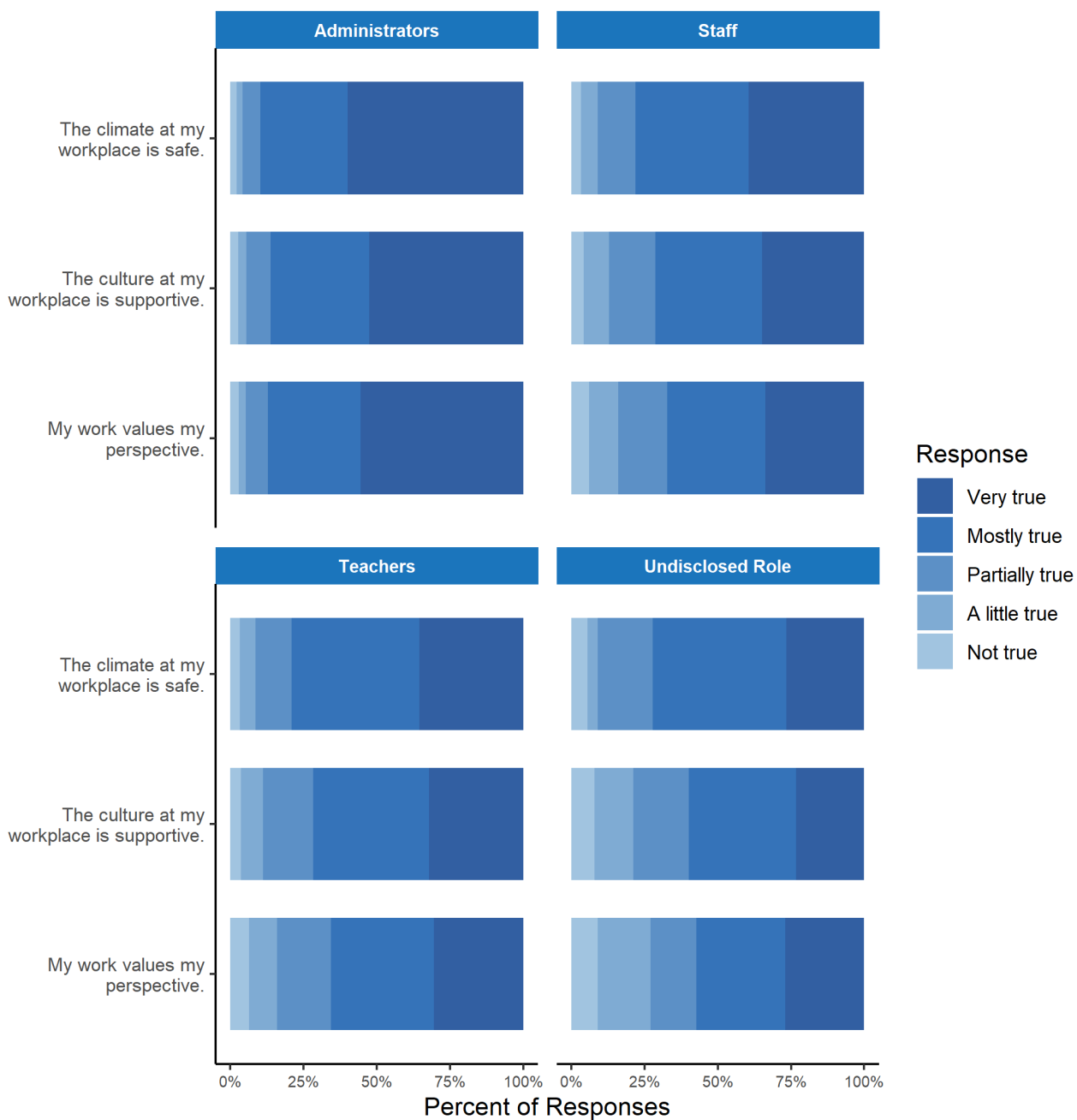
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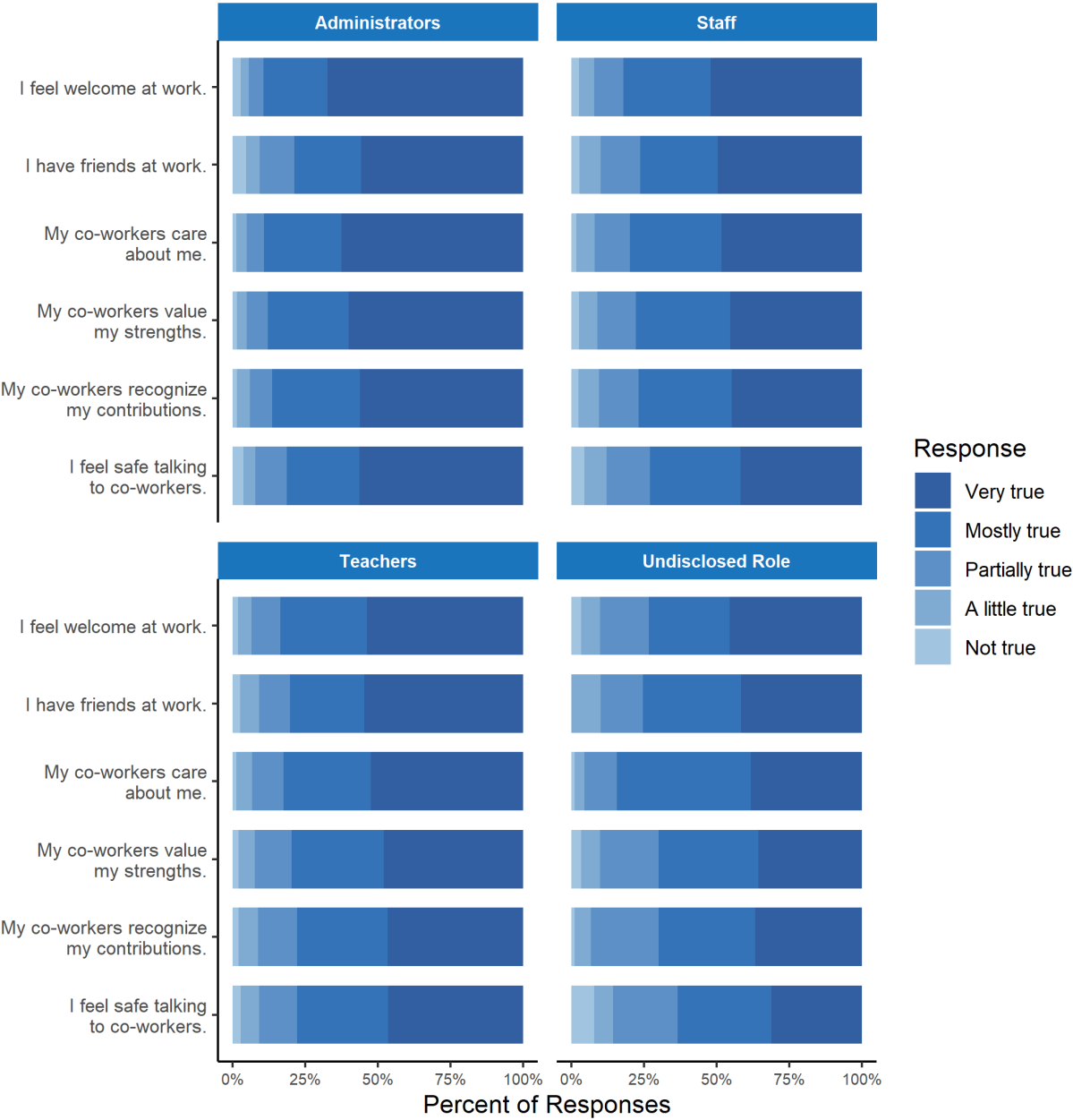
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Appendix: Educator Data

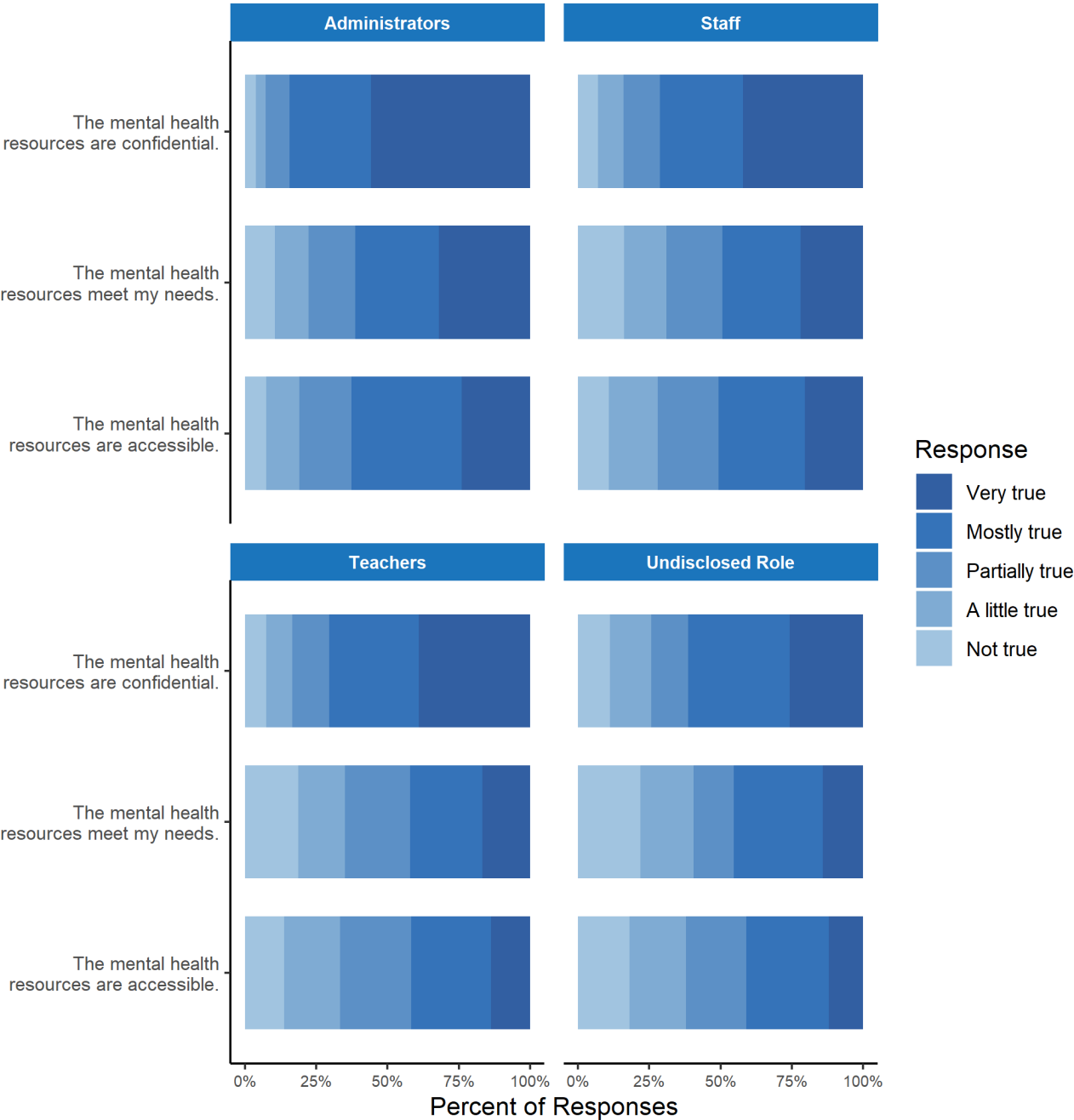
EVE Climate Responses:



Educator Workforce Well-Being and Belonging



Educator Workforce Well-Being and Belonging



COSA Pre-Conference Workshop on *Educator Workforce Belong and Well-Being* Participant Responses:

Personal/Individual:

- Take walking breaks
- Take lunch breaks everyday
- Spend time outside each day
- Use sick leave/personal time off
- Work life balance
- Limit social media/news intake to specific times during the day
- Painting, Drawing, thinking
- Breathwork
- Well-rounded snacks throughout the day
- Meditation and yoga staff meetings
- Offer access to mental health resources and wellness stipends.
- Specific practices/processes for handling conflict that honor our humanity - normalize conflict

Interpersonal Collective

- Team emotional well-being check-ins
- Inclusive welcomes before meetings
- Create safe spaces for questioning and sharing
- Ask for help
- Holding listening circles to support vulnerability connecting, speaking our truth
- Be an active listener and take time to think before answering
- Inclusive team environment
- Give us time together to talk, learn and play
- Educators learning to relate to each other in ways that activate one another's best
- Affinity spaces for educators
- Knowledge and attention to cultural differences/strengths in well being
- Meetings between similar staff to collaborate (in district/out of district)
- Family/caregiver engagement

Structural Systems

- Reconfiguring education systems to better fit with the lives of the humans that are working in them (e.g. better pay, pay for all hours worked, time for mentorship/supervision, time for collaboration and breaking down silos)
- Insisted time for lunch/bathroom breaks!
- Reducing in workload/class sizes, IEP caseload numbers
- Workload for all in systems– teaching load, time for planning and creative work, etc. (professors, district, teachers, etc.)
- Well-being needs to be a priority in education leadership and structures with accountability
- Promoting PTO and a system where people can take time off without being overwhelmed
- Respite for caregivers / easy access to time off
- Staff safety & well-being committee and policy
- Integration of well-being across our systems and classrooms
- Adult wellness built into schedule
- Infusing self care practices, grounding practices in our PD development
- Staff sensory quiet space
- Morning wellness time for all staff
- Recognition of cultural differences related to well-being
- Affinity groups where individuals for similar racial/ethnic groups discuss generational trauma and ways to address them when dealing with cultural conflicts between institutional barriers.
- A workspace where all emotions are welcomed and can be talked though
- Timely and transparent communications about current events/changes
- Sabbaticals for teachers
- Expanding paid mentorship opportunities for new educators
- Paid internships (student teachers start their careers under financial strain)