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Are We In a Burnout Crisis

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Farber, Barry A. *Crisis in Education: Stress and Burnout in the American Teacher*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991).

What are the reasons that teacher burnout is such a hot topic? Is there anything that can be done about it by administrators and others who are concerned about maintaining a quality teaching force?

Are We In a Burnout Crisis

Donovan Cook

Crisis and education are two terms frequently found together in recent book titles, journal articles, and newsprint. Barry Farber has provided us with a well-researched, comprehensive and very readable book which examines a crisis in an essential element of our educational system: the American teacher. The Japanese do not have a precise word for crisis in their vocabulary, the nearest translation being "perilous opportunity." the Japanese definition seems more fitting in describing this book, as Farber relates an educational system struggling to adjust to more and greater demands. Perhaps the opportunity to meet those demands exists in our current attempts at the restructuring of education, while the peril may lie in our failure to recognize and understand the needs of teachers. It is within this context that Farber apprises us of one of the most insidious afflictions affecting our nation's teachers: burnout.

Although the term has been used often by educators to explain the lack of effectiveness in certain teachers, Farber reveals burnout as a complex, often misunderstood phenomenon, with widespread implications. "Teacher burnout is not an excuse that poor teachers invoke," he says. "It is a work-related disorder to which even the best educators sometimes succumb when faced with the nature and circumstances of teaching . . ." In the book he analyzes the

problem of teacher burnout systematically and holistically, in both a social and historical context over the past three decades. We hear the perspectives of educators, sociologists, and psychologists; we're taken through the periods of teacher strikes, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, in an attempt to understand the problem more fully.

He also describes burnout as it affects the individual, providing numerous vignettes of teachers in their classrooms. We hear of teachers in a variety of situations, meeting their daily challenges and reflecting on them. Through this technique, the causes of burnout becomes apparent; too many students, too much paperwork, too little payback, not enough control of one's circumstances, and increasingly, the threat of violence. Although it is disquieting to read of unfulfilled, disenchanting teachers, this unfortunate trend within the profession is real and becomes tragically apparent through the personal, individual dialogues. It is necessary to understand how teachers feel about their work in order to find solutions to problems and eventually improve the state of education.

Farber recognizes that there are no panaceas in dealing with teacher burnout (" . . . as long as half the students in this country are in the lower half of their class, teachers will continue to be criticized and continue to be vulnerable to stress and burnout"), but he does provide potential solutions in the form of change strategies designed to relieve stress and burnout at both the individual (time management, use of support groups) and school levels (restructuring schools to provide teachers with more autonomy within the system, and opportunities for intrinsic rewards by working with students in more personal ways).

Crisis in Education is an informative book regarding not only the etiology of a disturbing pattern of blame and media distortion leading to disillusionment and low morale of the American teacher, but as a manual which will provide educational leaders with needed tools to understand and deal with the problem. The book is based on empirical data, much of it collected over the last five years in the New York City schools by Farber, Leonard Weschler, and others. The author is director of the Clinical Psychology Program and associate professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. This book updates an earlier work *Stress and Burnout in the Human Service Professions* (1983) by the author, and is intended for teacher education courses, professional educators, and members of the general public who are interested in education. According to Farber, the book is a " . . . rarity in the literature of either education or psychology—it is supportive of teachers."

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Book Review