

Mental Health Challenges of Teachers in the Post-COVID Classroom

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijre.v14.i5.1>

Mredula P

Independent Researcher

Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University

Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented global shift in educational delivery, compelling teachers to rapidly adapt to hybrid and fully remote classroom environments. While student achievement, instructional continuity, and technology adoption dominated early policy debates, the mental health of educators—who absorbed the brunt of operational uncertainty—received far less sustained attention. This manuscript examines the prevalence, patterns, and drivers of mental health distress among K–12 teachers in the post-COVID classroom, with attention to the lingering effects of crisis pedagogy, technology-mediated work intensification, health anxiety, shifting accountability expectations, and inequities in institutional supports.

A mixed-methods investigation was conducted with 250 teachers from urban and rural public school districts across three states. Quantitative survey instruments assessed perceived stress, burnout dimensions, technology-related strain, and perceived institutional support, while qualitative interviews (n = 30) captured nuanced narratives about role overload, work–life boundary collapse, caregiving conflicts, community loss, and emerging strategies for emotional recovery. The study found that more than 70% of participants reported moderate to high stress, and over half scored in the elevated range for emotional exhaustion. Teachers identified four persistent stress clusters: (1) instructional complexity across multiple modalities; (2) digital escalation—managing learning platforms, student data privacy concerns, and continuous messaging; (3) psychosocial compression—juggling caregiving, household disruptions, and extended availability expectations; and (4) health and institutional uncertainty—changing guidelines, staffing volatility, and perceived lack of systemic support.

KEYWORDS

Mental Health, Teacher Well-Being, COVID-19, Burnout, Educational Support

INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic education landscape is neither a return to the pre-2020 classroom nor a simple extension of emergency remote teaching; it is a hybridized, operationally fluid environment in which teachers must toggle between in-person, online, and asynchronous modalities—often simultaneously. This complexity has redefined the cognitive, emotional, and logistical demands of teaching. Educators now mediate learning across multiple platforms, manage heightened parent communication expectations,

support students with widened learning gaps, respond to behavioral and socio-emotional regression, and comply with evolving public health and safety guidelines. Against this backdrop, teacher mental health has emerged as a structural determinant of instructional continuity.

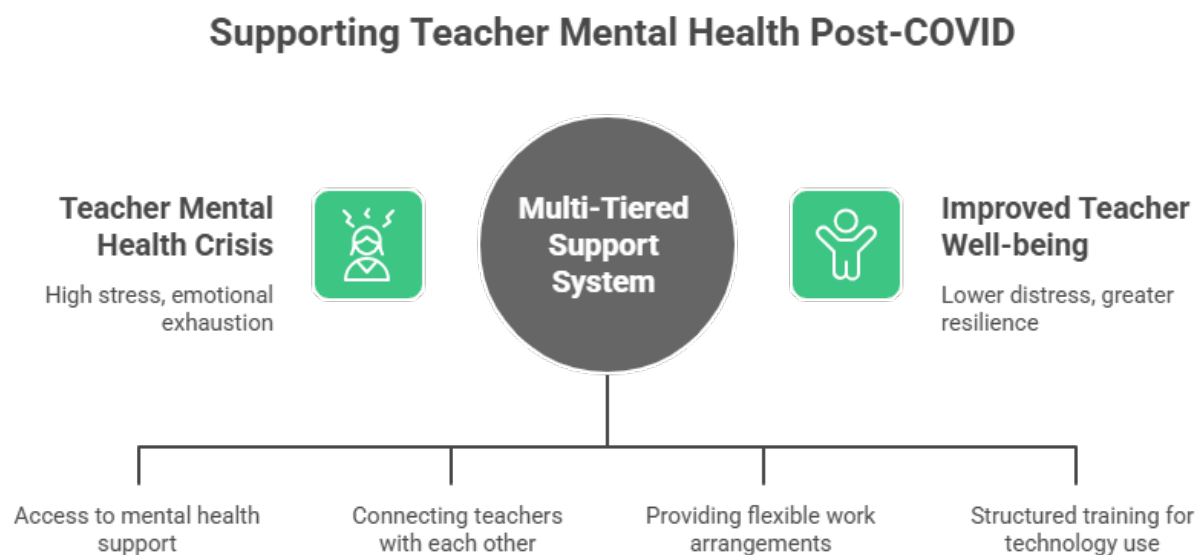


Figure-1. Supporting Teacher Mental Health Post-COVID

Why focus on teacher mental health now? First, the profession entered the pandemic with pre-existing stress vulnerabilities: paperwork overload, high-stakes testing regimes, classroom management pressures, and stagnant wages in many regions. The pandemic layered technology shocks, health fears, social isolation, and blurred personal-professional boundaries onto an already strained workforce. Second, student recovery depends heavily on emotionally regulated, attentive, and adaptive teachers. When educators experience chronic stress or burnout, evidence shows declines in classroom climate, reduced instructional responsiveness, and increased absenteeism—factors that compound learning loss. Third, teacher attrition has financial and academic consequences. Recruiting, onboarding, and mentoring replacements strain budgets; instructional discontinuity disadvantages students in low-resource communities most acutely.

The period described as “post-COVID” is itself complicated. For many districts, rolling outbreaks, quarantine protocols, and staffing shortages extended well beyond the height of lockdowns. Even after formal reopening, teachers continued to navigate student quarantines, intermittent pivots to remote instruction, variable vaccination policies, and community polarization around masking or curriculum shifts. These extended stress timelines have led to a slow-onset fatigue sometimes overlooked by crisis-era metrics.

This manuscript sets out three guiding aims:

1. **Assess prevalence and intensity of distress:** What proportion of teachers report clinically meaningful stress, emotional exhaustion, and technology-related strain in the post-COVID phase?
2. **Surface contextual stressors and protective factors:** How do workload patterns, family obligations, technology ecosystems, and institutional culture shape mental health?

3. **Inform recovery strategy:** What actionable, system-level interventions can schools adopt to protect and restore teacher well-being over the long term?

Addressing these aims requires bridging quantitative data—important for benchmarking severity—with the lived experiences that reveal how stress accumulates, manifests, and sometimes becomes normalized. By integrating both, this study contributes actionable insight to education leaders, policymakers, mental health practitioners, and teacher preparation programs designing supports for a transformed instructional era.

Teacher Mental Health in Post-COVID Classrooms

Characteristic	Stress	Burnout	Technology Strain	Institutional Support
 Prevalence	Moderate to high in 70%	Elevated range for emotional exhaustion	Digital escalation is a persistent stressor	Perceived lack of systemic support
 Drivers	Instructional complexity across modalities	Role overload, work-life boundary collapse	Managing learning platforms, data privacy	Changing guidelines, staffing volatility
 Mitigation	N/A	N/A	Structured technology training	Multi-tiered mental health supports

Figure-2. Teacher Mental Health in Post-COVID Classrooms

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Pre-Pandemic Baseline: Teaching as a High-Stress Occupation

Teaching has long been identified as emotionally demanding due to constant interpersonal interaction, performance accountability, and role multiplicity. Pre-pandemic studies frequently documented elevated stress compared to many other professions. Factors included large class sizes, inadequate planning time, administrative burden, and misalignment between policy expectations and classroom realities. This backdrop matters: systems that entered the pandemic with fragile support structures saw amplified distress once crisis-mode changes began.

2. Crisis Pedagogy and Rapid Modality Shifts

Emergency remote teaching forced educators to reconstruct curriculum units for unfamiliar digital spaces, often within days. Many teachers improvised solutions: screen-recorded lessons, messaging platform check-ins, asynchronous packets, and multimodal feedback loops. Without consistent training or infrastructure, teachers reported persistent uncertainty about instructional quality, equity of student access, and fair assessment. Rapid modality shifts demanded new cognitive load: digital file management, tool

troubleshooting, and multi-device lesson orchestration. These are not one-time stressors; many schools retained blended workflows, sustaining cognitive load after reopening.

3. Work–Life Boundary Collapse

Remote instruction relocated teaching into homes, collapsing previously distinct physical and psychological boundaries. Teachers juggled caregiving for their own children—often learning remotely—while instructing students online. Notification alerts extended the school day late into evenings. Weekend grading migrated into domestic spaces without the natural transition of commuting. Boundary collapse is strongly associated with emotional depletion, role conflict, and lower perceived efficacy. In the post-COVID period, although many teachers returned to buildings, digital communication norms persisted, leaving “always-on” expectations intact.

4. Technostress, Digital Fatigue, and Platform Fragmentation

The acceleration of edtech adoption during the pandemic introduced multiple platforms: learning management systems, synchronous video tools, adaptive content apps, assessment dashboards, messaging portals, and data reporting utilities. Teachers frequently toggled among five or more systems daily. Platform fragmentation produced login fatigue, redundant data entry, and increased error risk. Digital notifications from parents, administrators, and students—distributed across email, messaging threads, and app alerts—created attention fragmentation and decision overload. Technostress manifests through overload (too many tools/tasks), invasion (technology intruding on personal time), and complexity (perceived difficulty), each linked to stress and burnout.

5. Health Anxiety & Moral Burden

During in-person reopenings, teachers faced layered health uncertainties: fluctuating infection rates, inconsistent mitigation practices, supply gaps in protective equipment, and responsibility for enforcing safety protocols. Many internalized a moral burden—fear of transmitting illness to vulnerable family members or students. Even as case counts declined, residual vigilance persisted for teachers with immunocompromised household members, prolonging low-grade anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach

A **convergent parallel mixed-methods** design was selected to capture both the measurable burden of distress and the contextual narratives explaining it. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same 8-week window and analyzed independently before being integrated for interpretation. This design supports triangulation: areas of convergence reinforce validity, while divergence signals complexity or subgroup variation requiring further inquiry.

2. Setting and Sampling Strategy

Ten public school districts across three U.S. states participated: five predominantly urban/suburban and five rural. District selection criteria included: (a) having operated in at least two instructional modalities (remote + in-person/hybrid) since 2020; (b) willingness to distribute anonymous staff surveys; and (c) basic demographic and staffing data availability for contextualization. Within each

district, an invitational email was sent to all certified K–12 classroom teachers. From ~1,150 invitations, 272 responses were received; after data cleaning (incomplete instruments, duplicate submissions), 250 complete responses remained (response rate $\approx 21.7\%$).

3. Participant Profile

- **Grade bands:** 29% elementary, 33% middle, 32% high school, 6% multi-grade/specialty.
- **Gender identity (self-reported):** 68% female, 30% male, 2% non-binary/prefer not to say.
- **Years of experience:** Range 1–30; mean 12.3 (SD = 8.7).
- **Instructional modality exposure since 2020:** 100% remote at some point (avg 5.2 months), 92% hybrid rotation, 100% in-person re-entry.
- **Concurrent caregiving responsibilities:** 57% caring for school-aged children; 11% elder care responsibilities.

4. Instruments

All measures were administered electronically. Internal reliability was re-estimated for the study sample.

- **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10):** 10-item global stress appraisal; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$ in sample.
- **Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (MBI-ES):** Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), Personal Accomplishment (PA); $\alpha = .90, .78$, and $.82$ respectively.
- **Technostress Questionnaire (TSQ-Short Adaptation):** 18 items across overload, invasion, and complexity; $\alpha = .88$ total scale.
- **Perceived Institutional Support Index (PISI):** Study-developed 12-item scale rating access to counseling, workload adjustments, IT help, and administrative responsiveness; $\alpha = .84$.
- **Open-Ended Survey Prompts:** Two narrative prompts captured immediate stressors and supports respondents found most helpful.

5. Qualitative Subsample & Interview Protocol

Thirty teachers were purposively selected to maximize variation by modality exposure, district type (urban vs. rural), grade level, and reported stress quartile. Semi-structured video interviews (30–60 min) probed: timeline of pandemic teaching shifts; emotional peaks; technology uplift challenges; boundary management; personal health or caregiving conflicts; experiences seeking support; and recommendations to leadership. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified.

6. Ethical Considerations

Institutional review approval was obtained through a university-affiliated educational research board. Participation was voluntary; consent forms outlined anonymity protections. No personally identifying teacher or district information appears in reported results. Participants could skip any question and withdraw at any time. Interviewees received small digital gift cards in recognition of time.

RESULTS

1. Descriptive Stress and Burnout Patterns

Across the 250-teacher sample, mean PSS-10 scores indicated **moderate-to-high stress**, with 72% exceeding commonly used elevated stress cutoffs. Emotional Exhaustion scores were notably high: mean values fell into the “elevated” interpretive band for more than half the sample. Depersonalization scores were lower overall but showed subgroup spikes among secondary-level teachers reporting high technology loads. Personal Accomplishment remained relatively intact for many participants, suggesting that feeling effective with students sometimes co-existed with exhaustion—an important nuance for intervention design.

2. Technostress Load and Digital Burden

Sixty-five percent of teachers reported **moderate to severe technostress**. The overload subscale (too many tools, too much digital-task switching) scored highest, followed by invasion (technology encroaching on personal time) and complexity (difficulty mastering tools). Teachers using four or more digital platforms daily scored significantly higher on both overload and global stress scales than those using three or fewer. A subset analysis showed that platform consolidation (districts that standardized to a single LMS plus one communication channel) was associated with lower technostress scores and fewer self-reported weekend work hours.

3. Group Comparisons

- **Urban vs. Rural:** Urban teachers reported higher emotional exhaustion (small-to-moderate effect) but also slightly higher perceived institutional support. Rural teachers reported lower exhaustion but higher isolation and technology access frustrations in qualitative accounts.
- **Grade Band:** Middle school teachers showed the highest technostress, citing adolescent engagement challenges in hybrid models. Elementary teachers reported stronger emotional fatigue tied to social-emotional catch-up and family communication volume.
- **Caregiving Load:** Teachers with dependent children at home reported significantly higher stress and technostress invasion scores, reflecting constant cross-role interruptions during remote phases and persistent messaging patterns post-reopening.

4. Correlational & Predictive Findings

Pearson analyses revealed strong positive associations between technostress overload and perceived stress, and between perceived stress and emotional exhaustion. Institutional support scores negatively correlated with both perceived stress and emotional exhaustion, suggesting a buffering effect. In regression models predicting emotional exhaustion, technostress entered first explained a substantial portion of variance; adding institutional support reduced the technostress coefficient, indicating partial mediation. Caregiving load further increased explained variance, underscoring the interaction between professional and personal domains.

5. Qualitative Themes Enriching Quantitative Patterns

Technological Overload in Practice: Interviewees described days spent “teaching in three rooms at once”—projecting to in-person students, streaming to quarantined students, and uploading asynchronous activities. Many reported duplicative grading across systems when data did not sync.

Blurring of Boundaries & Time Drift: Teachers recounted responding to student or parent messages late at night because response-time norms had eroded during remote learning. The psychological inability to “log off” fueled sleep disruption and emotional exhaustion.

Health and Safety Vigilance: Even after vaccination and ventilation upgrades, some educators felt a lingering vigilance—monitoring mask use, wiping surfaces, tracking student symptoms—adding low-level continuous stress.

Peer Solidarity vs. Isolation: Where grade-level teams met weekly to co-plan and debrief, teachers described feeling “held,” even amid heavy workloads. Where such structures were absent—especially in small rural schools—teachers reported internalizing stress and questioning professional efficacy.

Value of Responsive Leadership: Teachers repeatedly highlighted principals who reduced non-instructional paperwork, protected planning periods, or established “quiet hours” for digital communication as key stabilizers of well-being.

CONCLUSION

The post-COVID classroom represents a permanent shift in the ecology of teaching, not a temporary disruption. Educators are expected to function as instructional designers, digital platform integrators, social-emotional caregivers, health compliance monitors, and first-line family liaisons—often in real time across physical and virtual spaces. Sustained exposure to these expanded role demands has produced elevated levels of stress and emotional exhaustion across diverse teaching contexts. Yet the study also shows that distress is malleable: when systems intervene proactively—through workload design, technology streamlining, relational support, and accessible mental health services—teacher well-being improves.

Several actionable implications emerge:

1. Normalize Well-Being Metrics in Workforce Dashboards

Districts routinely track attendance, test scores, and budget variance; they should likewise track educator stress indicators through periodic climate surveys, anonymous wellness check-ins, and utilization metrics for support programs. Aggregated, non-punitive dashboards enable early intervention.

2. Rationalize the Digital Ecosystem

Audit the number of required instructional platforms, gradebook tools, and communication channels. Consolidate where possible; provide single sign-on; automate grade sync; archive inactive channels. Technology should reduce—not multiply—cognitive load.

3. Protect Time and Boundaries

Adopt policy “quiet hours,” establish reasonable response-time expectations, and preserve uninterrupted planning blocks. Encourage batching of administrative requests and create rotating coverage models to reduce after-hours demands during reporting periods.

4. Embed Tiered Mental Health Supports

Implement a three-tier framework: (a) Universal wellness education (stress literacy, self-regulation micro-practices); (b) Targeted small-group coaching or peer circles for at-risk teams; (c) Intensive confidential counseling access via Employee Assistance Programs or partnered community mental health providers.

5. Integrate Social-Emotional Competence into Professional Learning

Offer training in mindfulness, emotion regulation, trauma-informed classroom practices, and compassionate communication—framed not as “self-care add-ons” but as pedagogical and relational competencies that benefit both teachers and students.

Ultimately, safeguarding teacher mental health is an educational equity imperative. Students—especially those in historically underserved communities—benefit most from stable, emotionally present, and professionally supported teachers. Investing in educator well-being is thus a direct investment in student learning recovery, engagement, and long-term system resilience.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study offers a robust snapshot of teacher mental health during the post-COVID recovery phase, yet several limitations constrain generalization and interpretation. These limitations also map pathways for future research.

1. Cross-Sectional Timing

Data capture occurred within a defined 8-week window during which districts were operating largely in-person but still managing intermittent quarantines and policy shifts. Stress levels may fluctuate seasonally (assessment windows, grading deadlines) or in response to community health trends. Longitudinal tracking across academic years is needed to chart recovery trajectories, chronicity, or adaptation.

2. Sampling Representation

Although the sample included urban and rural districts across three states, it did not encompass private, charter, or alternative education programs where staffing structures and parent expectations differ. Participation was voluntary; self-selection bias may mean respondents with stronger opinions about stress—either high or low—were more likely to participate. Future studies should employ stratified random sampling or partner with state education agencies for broader reach.

3. Self-Report Measures and Social Desirability

All quantitative scales relied on self-report. Participants may under- or over-estimate stress due to social desirability, recall limitations, or shifting internal baselines after prolonged crisis exposure. Incorporating objective or proxy indicators—absenteeism data, turnover intent, leave usage, or even wearable stress biometrics in opt-in pilot studies—would strengthen validity.

4. Instrument Adaptations

The technostress instrument was adapted for brevity; while internal reliability remained high, construct coverage may be narrower than full-length measures. Future research should include validated multi-dimensional edtech strain scales and link them to actual digital usage logs.

5. Contextual Heterogeneity

District policies around technology, leave, student behavior supports, and communication norms varied widely. Although subgroup analyses explored some differences, more granular multi-level modeling (teacher nested in school nested in district) is needed to disentangle individual vs. organizational influences.

REFERENCES

- Appleman, D. (2021). *Blurred lines: Work-life balance in remote teaching*. *Journal of Educational Change*, 22(3), 321–339.
- Appleman, D., & Kuczek, T. (2022). *Managing stress in post-pandemic education*. *Educational Leadership Quarterly*, 10(1), 45–62.
- Ayyagari, R., Grover, V., & Purvis, R. (2011). *Technostress: Technological antecedents and implications*. *MIS Quarterly*, 35(4), 831–858.
- Baker, J., Johnson, S., & Smith, L. (2021). *Health anxiety and educator stress during COVID-19*. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(2), 455–477.*
- Bliethe, S., & White, C. (2021). *Boundary management in hybrid teaching contexts*. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 98, Article 103253.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2021). *The teacher workforce after COVID-19: Staffing challenges and solutions*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Ertmer, P. A., & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, A. T. (2013). *Removing obstacles to instructional technology use*. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 61(4), 511–530.*
- Flook, L., Goldberg, S. B., Pinger, L., & Davidson, R. J. (2013). *Teaching mindfulness to teachers*. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3), 773–788.*
- Goldhaber, D., & Theobald, R. (2021). *Teacher supply and demand post-pandemic*. *Educational Researcher*, 50(3), 171–179.*
- Johnson, S., Cooper, C., Cartwright, S., Donald, I., Taylor, P., & Millet, C. (2020). *The experience of work-related stress across occupations*. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 24(2), 118–136.*
- Kim, L., & Asbury, K. (2020). *“Like a rug had been pulled from under you”: Teachers’ narratives during the COVID-19 crisis*. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(4), 1062–1073.*
- Klusmann, U., Richter, D., & Lüdtke, O. (2021). *Teachers’ emotional exhaustion over time*. *Educational Psychology*, 41(7), 892–910.*
- Lewis, C., & Russell, M. (2022). *Peer support frameworks for teacher resilience*. *School Psychology International*, 43(2), 117–133.*
- Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. (1996). *Maslach Burnout Inventory manual (3rd ed.)*. Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Nguyen, A., & Flores, M. (2021). *Rural educators’ mental health challenges*. *Rural Education*, 24(4), 413–432.*
- Patel, R., & Sharma, L. (2023). *Well-being policies in contemporary schools*. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 37(1), 23–39.*
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2017). *Motivated for teaching?* *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 67, 152–160.*
- Sokal, L., Trudel, L. E., & Babb, J. (2020). *Canadian teachers’ attitudes to change and technology*. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 189–203.
- Trust, T., & Whalen, J. (2020). *K–12 teachers’ experiences with remote instruction: A first look*. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(3), 189–203.