

NO EASY SOLUTION: educators face unparalleled challenges

By Violet Calkin

It's 2:05 p.m. The fourth period tardy bell rings as Josh Campbell, English department, turns from writing on the whiteboard to face his class. Per usual, one out of four students are present, and Campbell questions if he should start class now or waste instructional time waiting for students to trickle in. He sighs — he'll wait.

Across the hall, a dozen loitering students crowd the staircase, skipping class. Science teacher Randy Priest, unable to climb upstairs to retrieve his copies, returns to his room with an exasperated shake of his head. He sits down to send yet another follow-up inquiry about the issue. Why not, he thinks, add a note about the smell of marijuana slipping in from the hallway? Like Campbell's, his class is mostly empty. He has time to type one more line.

For many in the profession, teaching has become synonymous with martyrdom. The United States faces a looming educator shortage and rampant burnout has gained the national media's attention for plaguing both rookie and veteran of the classroom. At Cedar Shoals, educators are navigating the onerous multitask of instructing weary students, diffusing a myriad of challenges and persevering through their own subsequent struggles amid the ongoing pandemic.

Attendance and discipline

In his classes of 15-20 students, Campbell estimates just three or four in each are passing. He draws parallels between the corresponding trends of behavioral issues — chiefly skipping class — and lack of productivity.

"We spend all of our days rehabilitating kids

instead of teaching. You can't do your job as a teacher," Campbell said.

According to the Georgia Department of Education, 48% of Cedar students were chronically absent — meaning they missed 10% or more enrolled days — in the 2020-21 school year. A major uptick from the 2018-19 school year's chronic absence rate of 29%, this data warrants a grain of salt because of last year's virtual setting. Attendance has improved since students returned to the building, says Principal Antonio Derricotte, but it continues to cause him headaches.

"We seemingly have three schools in one," Derricotte said. "We have what I call the National School of Excellence: those students go to class, do their work and they're rocking it. We have a school out here in the hallways where we have students that still have not come to the realization that 'Hall Walking 1101' is not a course we offer. And we have those students that truly are habitual violators and don't do anything truancy wise — they aren't here, we can't find them, we don't really know anything about them."

BluePrints Magazine conducted a survey of 62 classroom teachers at Cedar Shoals from Feb. 14-25 through Google Forms. 74% of respondents reported that student behavioral issues this school year required more of their time or energy than previous years. 50% said that student behavior this year has a significantly more negative impact on their ability to teach than in years previous, and 31% report a somewhat more negative impact.

Hannah Doolittle, a second year teacher in the English department, says managing behavior in her classroom isn't an issue. Rather, disorderly conduct in the hallways frequently disrupts

Art by Eva Lucero

Design by Ellie Crane

instruction.

"I can't count the number of times where I've had to stop teaching to step out into the hallway to make sure that there's not a fight happening or to tell some kids to go to class because they're being loud," Doolittle said.

A recent anatomy test in Priest's class displayed the ramifications of chronic skipping explicitly. Students who consistently attend scored an average of 90, whereas those frequently absent earned an average of 12.

"At this point, it's not worth it for me to put in an effort to catch up the people who are deciding to miss my class," Priest said. "If you're here, you're going to get the notes and you're going to do well in my class. If you're not, you will fail."

Learning loss and low productivity

Despite being in-person, the 2021-22 school year has not escaped COVID-19's fracturing grasp. Teachers are picking up the pieces of rampant learning loss associated with virtual learning. An analysis by McKinsey & Company of their international teacher survey indicated that by March of 2021, ninth through 12th graders lost 1.7 months of learning. Minority and low-income students suffered the greatest academic deficit — an alarming harbinger for the majority of Cedar's students.

Priest, a second year teacher, feels the continuing impact of last year's virtual model acutely. He says some of his physics students passed algebra but came to him with no knowledge of the subject.

"They don't know how to work a calculator. They don't know the simple functions of multiply and divide. $F=MA$, three variables — they don't

know how to solve for A,” Priest said. “I don’t have a degree in math education, I’m not an algebra teacher.”

McKinsey anticipates that learning losses due to the pandemic will be broad and overwhelming. Without ‘immediate and sustained interventions,’ unfinished learning could decrease the lifetime earnings of K-12 students from \$110,000 to \$61,000 on average.

“Kids are really dependent right now,” Priest said. “The past two years we’ve been saying make sure you give grace, have patience. I agree, but it comes to a point where we’re doing detrimental things to these students.”

Additionally, quarantining has inhibited many students and left teachers scrambling, particularly at the beginning of semesters. Priest tries to keep classwork organized, but he finds that lack of motivation has plagued quarantined students.

“There’s no Zoom link anymore, so students don’t say, ‘I’m at least going to show up to this class.’ It’s, ‘I’ll catch up when I come back.’ But they come back, and they do not catch up,” Priest said.

In the BluePrints survey, 60% of respondents reported that student quarantining has been either substantially or very disruptive to their work. Respondents reported that their own quarantines or coworkers’ were less burdensome.

Dr. Maureen Warner, a Spanish teacher in her first semester at Cedar, estimates that her Spanish II students who took Spanish I virtually last year retained about half of the curriculum. Subsequently, Warner dedicates significant class time to making up for learning loss — though she considers COVID-19 a convenient justification for lack of participation rather than a cause.

“They were online; they were doing whatever they wanted. The teacher was there, but the students didn’t interact,” Warner said. “COVID was the perfect excuse not to participate.”

Burnout and mental health issues

Warner’s brief experience at Cedar has come at the detriment of her well-being. She plans to relocate to Putnam County High School next year, and says the commute is well worth it if it means feeling supported as an educator.

“Who wants to be not taken seriously when you’re giving students the best that you can? It gets you really stressed out and it burns you out,” Warner said. “There comes a moment where you say, ‘Well, I guess I need to go.’”

79% of respondents to BluePrints’ survey reported that they have experienced burnout in the last year. 74% say they feel either substantially or much more frustrated with their jobs compared to before the pandemic, and 58% report that they lack or severely lack mental health support at work.

As a result of burnout, Doolittle finds herself reusing old lesson plans rather than generating new ones.

“When you’re burned out, it can be very difficult to access that creative piece of your brain,” Doolittle said. “Decision fatigue is so real for teachers — sometimes by the end of the day I can’t make a decision to save my life.”

COVID-19 itself is a significant cause of anxiety. In the BluePrints survey, 84% of respondents said they found the pandemic either substantially

or extremely challenging, frustrating or stressful. Priest, who takes care of his immunocompromised grandmother, has experienced significant angst around COVID-19, particularly recently with CCSD’s decision to make masks optional.

“I worry about COVID maybe 20 times an hour,” Priest said. “Most people are kind of getting lax on COVID, which I understand, but I teach science. If I get COVID I will probably be fine, but I could give it to somebody in my life that will most likely die if they get it.”

However, teachers’ opinions on mask policies and COVID-19 precautions are not standardized. Campbell was pleased at the mask policy reversal.

“Masks are overkill, optional should have always happened. If you’re vaccinated, why do you have to act like everyone else?” Campbell said. “I think a lot of people have started to realize that.”

Greg Huberty, a math teacher in his 33rd year at Cedar, associates burnout less with recent pressures surrounding COVID-19 and more with the teaching profession in general. He’s learned that flexibility and humility are crucial to make teaching a career.

“I did a lot of mentor teaching to student teachers, and I would tell them the same thing: ‘Don’t take yourself too seriously, because the kids don’t. You burn yourself out that way,’” Huberty said.

Though she still suffers from burnout, Doolittle’s mental health has improved considerably since in-person instruction resumed.

“Last year I felt very powerless. But now that I am able to actually see and work alongside kids I’m like, ‘Oh, I am actually helping students learn,’” Doolittle said.

“Coming back to the building reminded me why I am a teacher: to work with students.”

Cedar’s administration found themselves responsible for the transition back to in-person instruction and its subsequent challenges. They are certainly not exempt from burnout, Derricotte says, and it’s difficult not to internalize the struggles of his students and staff.

“You see how students are struggling to deal with day-to-day interactions when all they want to do is be a student. You hear the heart of our teachers and how all they want to do is teach and not have to worry about students running in the hallway banging on their door,” Derricotte said.

“It does weigh on you. How do you keep everyone safe when some people don’t even realize the greater dynamic of what we’re dealing with? You can’t leave this here (at work), believe me.”

Dr. Melissa Pérez Rhym, Associate Principal of Instruction, says one of her primary responsibilities is bearing the burdens of teachers so they can focus on their classrooms. But with so many external forces — personal and economic stress, tragedies surrounding COVID-19, the loss of staff members — this role is overwhelming, if not impossible.

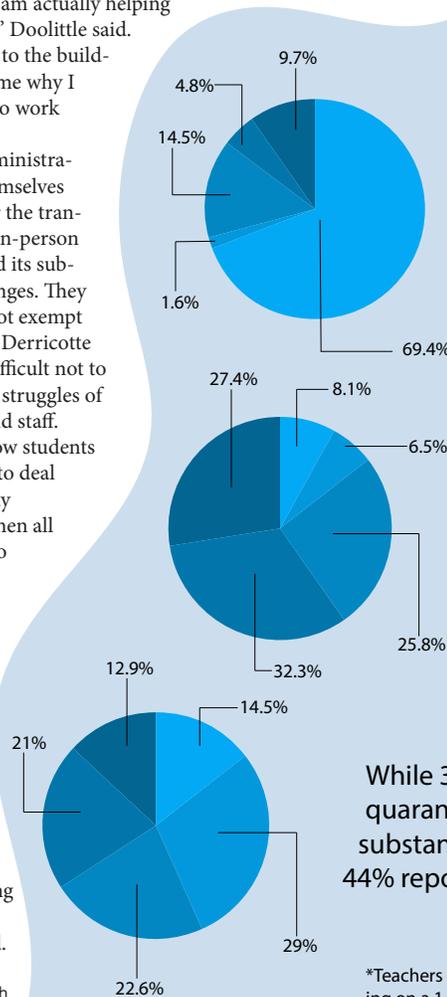
“That’s where it’s difficult as an administrator: the things that are beyond the building,” Pérez said. “I see myself as a fixer, and I can’t fix those things. That’s sometimes difficult to accept.”

Support and communication

BluePrints’ survey yielded mixed results on the issue of support from school level administration. While 46% of respondents said they did not or did not at all feel supported by Cedar administration, 41% reported the opposite — they felt substantially or extremely supported. Conversely, 86% of respondents reported they did not or did not at all feel supported by CCSD administrators.

Doolittle recognizes how the ample responsibilities and the chaotic nature of the building keep administration busy.

“They are constantly putting out fires. They’re



When asked to rate the impact that self quarantining had on teachers’ ability to do their jobs, 69% of polled teachers said it had no impact on their work.

Unlike teacher quarantining, 92% of polled teachers said that student quarantining disrupted their work. 27% said it was extremely disruptive.

While 34% of teachers say coworker quarantining has been extremely or substantially disruptive of their work, 44% report it has been minimally or not at all disruptive.

*Teachers were asked to rate the disruptiveness of quarantining on a 1-5 scale with one being no impact and five being very disruptive.

“There already is a shortage. I’m already overworked. What happens when I have to teach three classes at once or whatever crazy solution they come up with to face the fact that we don’t have enough teachers?”

- Randy Priest, science department

just being dragged in five million different directions,” Doolittle said.

Similarly, Campbell knows his administration has teachers’ best interests at heart. He feels his biggest concern, discipline, is being made a priority, and says that administration does an excellent job of letting students know they’re cared for in the event of a behavioral issue. Still, he thinks the necessary changes aren’t being prioritized.

“They (administration) are always willing to listen, but teachers are getting frustrated because it seems that not much is being done about behavior that’s effective. It’s wrong to say there’s nothing being done about it, but it’s clear that what is being done is not effective,” Campbell said.

Cedar’s administration has faced the tribulations of COVID-19 while still in its youth — Derricotte began his role in March 2020, just days before the COVID-19 lockdown ensued. His associate and assistant principals joined Cedar’s administration in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.

“Because there’s not a lot of experience, that’s always going to have some growing pains,” Huberty said. “The conversations that I’ve had with the administrators have been fruitful for the most part. You’re never going to please everybody all the time.”

Derricotte says administrators provide their personal cell phone numbers to teachers and attempt to be as approachable as possible.

“When I first started teaching years ago, it seemed like the administrator gave me keys to the door and said ‘See you in 180 days.’ I’ve never wanted anyone else to feel that way, so we try to make sure that we do our due diligence to check on people,” Derricotte said.

The teachers who feel most supported, he says, are probably those who are comfortable expressing their concerns by calling an administrator or stopping by the front office. Conversely, teachers who rely on email communication or are more shy about voicing their opinions are likely those who feel unsupported. Still, administrators’ inability to be completely transparent in the event of a disciplinary complaint can breed frustration.

“We can’t just divulge all information about any student in the building to teachers. That becomes hard sometimes because teachers just want to see the situation dealt with, while we’re having to go through all the steps to exhaust all opportunities to support the student before we move on,” Derricotte said. “On the outside looking in, it seems like we just allow students to do whatever

they want. That’s just not the case.”

As a new teacher, Priest feels as though he hardly knows his administrators. He says he has not received a response to his repeated inquiries about safety concerns but continues to receive emails about when his lesson plans will be turned in.

“I understand why the priorities are where they are: because my boss has a boss and that boss isn’t in the school. It’s hard for these administrators to say, ‘I’m going to focus on this thing that teachers really care about right now,’ because they don’t want to lose their job,” Priest said.

Derricotte is unsurprised by the surveyed teachers’ feelings about support from district leadership. Some teachers, he says, are habitually wary of the district.

“A lot of people, no matter what’s said or done, they just don’t trust our district. When we try to explain how things are done, we’ll have somebody say, ‘That’s a district policy, isn’t it? Your hands are just as tied as ours, aren’t they?’ They are,” Derricotte said. “It’s not about the blame game, but people have to understand: we don’t create policies at the school. We’re just here to execute the policies, but that’s when a lot of people get upset.”

Debbie Flaherty, math department, recalls a

disruptive lapse of communication from January when Cedar shifted to a virtual model for a few days. Teachers were given one day to prepare for a Zoom class 40 minutes shorter than normal classes. Similarly, belated notice of schedule changes for events such as assemblies or tests grates on Huberty. The sanctity of instructional time is not always kept, he says.

Nevertheless, 78% of respondents to BluePrints’ survey reported that they feel substantially or extremely supported by their co-workers.

“I have felt so supported in my first year at Cedar by Cedar teachers,” Priest said. “There’s a community if I ever have an issue. It’s not just my neighbors, I can go to pretty much anybody and say ‘Hey, I’m having this issue, can you help?’ and every time they’ll say absolutely.”

Potential policy changes

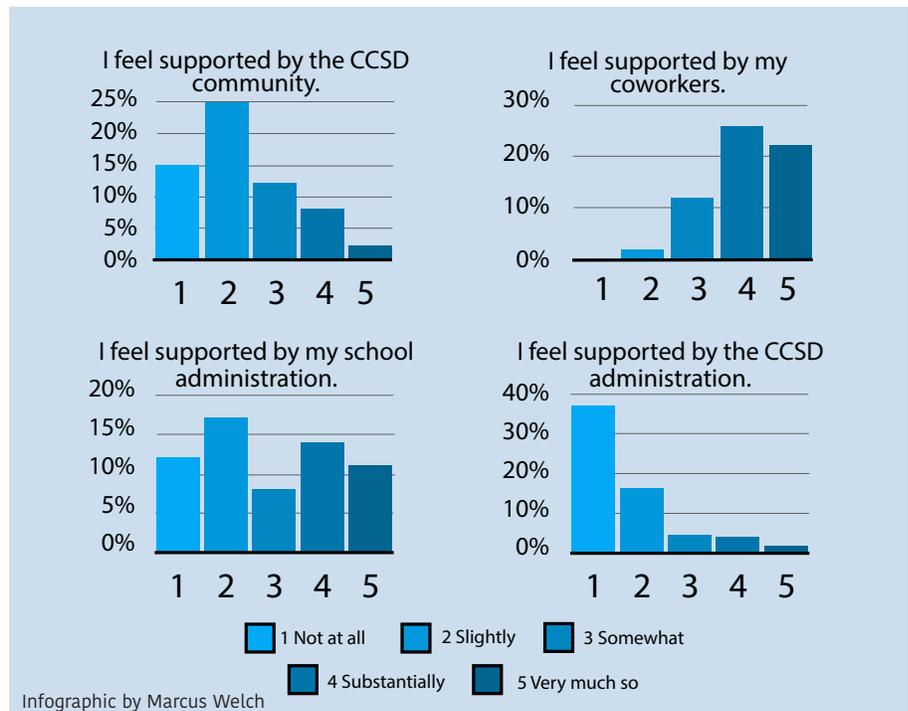
Attendance related disruptions — and seemingly lax ramifications for them — are paramount among teachers’ complaints. A sense of dissatisfaction with current policy is pervasive.

“If I’m a student and I can skip every day and not have a thing happen to me, why would I not continue?” Priest said. “Lack of consequences escalates problems.”

As for solutions, Priest would appreciate more adults with authority in the building.

“I don’t think hiring more security is the answer, but a bigger presence of adults that can actually do something would help,” Priest said. “If I go out in the hall, and I see a person smoking a vape pen right in front of me, and I say no and they don’t care, what do I do?”

To Campbell, fixing attendance is simple. He calls for a strict attendance policy with standardized penalties regardless of extenuating circumstances. Decreasing the number of absences



it takes to get a disciplinary response, automatically removing absentee students from the building and increasing the time they're made to stay home would be ideal, he says.

"If the disciplinary policy was more strict, every teacher in this building would feel supported," Campbell said. "If they're not going to do the work here, what's the difference if they sit at home?"

Campbell's logic is far from unique. Administrators are familiar with his suggestion and many others, and acknowledging teachers' complaints and suggestions within the bounds of their jobs creates a challenging dichotomy. Ultimately, they have no control over disciplinary policy, attendance related or otherwise.

Cedar follows the CCSD Student Code of Conduct for all disciplinary actions. Attendance related infractions are considered the lowest severity level and follow a progressive disciplinary model.

Essentially, Pérez explains, the process begins at three unexcused absences, when a teacher calls the student's guardian. At five, a letter is sent home. If the issue continues, teachers can refer the absentee to a student review team made up of counselors, administrators and Cedar's social worker. The group looks into potential reasons for truancy and interventions to help. A multitude of options, such as referral to Saturday School, can be utilized.

In the fall semester, an intervention took place in which a group of absentee students was moved to a virtual instruction model. Discipline rates dropped dramatically, Derricotte says, but spiked again when the students returned to the building in January. Such a response has not been implemented thus far in the second semester.

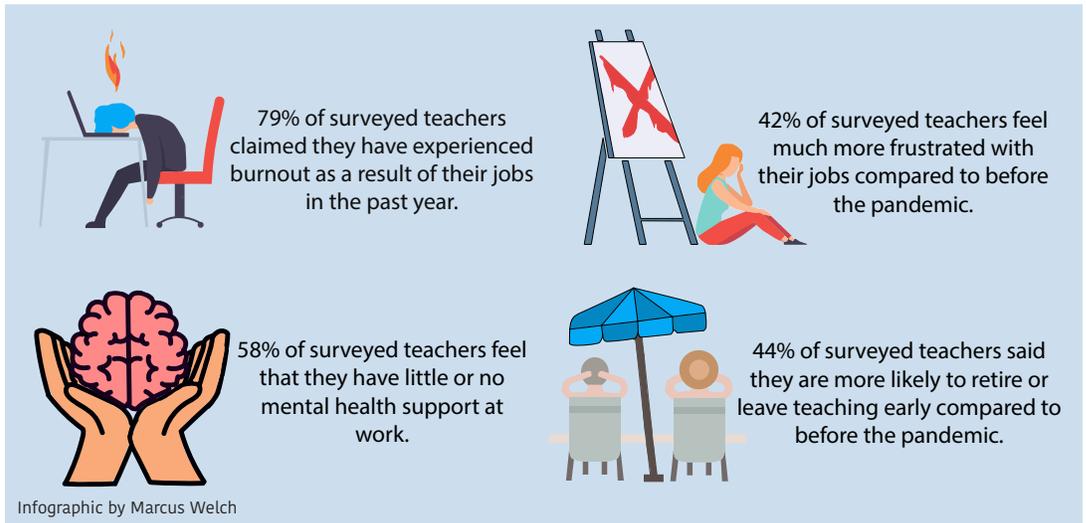
"In a perfect world, people would want us to just say, 'Hey, you're out of here.' But you can't just kick students out of school. That's not a viable solution," Derricotte said. "You have to give grace and try to support students."

According to Pérez, analysis by the review team is an individualized and in-depth process. She says the underlying hardships are sometimes staggering.

"The range of things that we find out when we're talking to these students sometimes breaks your heart," Pérez said. "I understand the frustration that it's disruptive to your school environment, but it's also not in the best interest of most students to have a blanket policy of 'You haven't been here, you're out.'"

One issue with such a policy is that Georgia's Compulsory Attendance Law prohibits schools from unenrolling students under 16 for attendance infractions. In addition, Pérez points to the multitude of services at Cedar that students rely on, including the social worker, mental health counselor and graduation coach.

"There's so many reasons why students miss school. It's a balance of accountability, empathy, understanding and grace. It's hard to get that right



all the time," Pérez said.

While the code of conduct is not entirely effective, Derricotte and Pérez recognize its necessity. It allows for due process regardless of personal feelings and ensures fairness, they say. If an administrator is addressing a situation not clearly defined in the Code, they reach out to district leadership for assistance.

Still, inability to control policy can be taxing. But conversations with district administrators about potential changes recently began, Derricotte says. Cedar administrators' main goal is to emphasize the importance of implementing avenues for students who might find success in an alternative environment.

"The challenge is: how do we motivate students or how do we find options that are appealing or meaningful to them? We need to explore those options," Pérez said.

Sustainability of the teaching profession

Priest plans to leave teaching after this year to get a master's degree in natural resources with emphasis on environmental education.

"Teaching kids is a great joy of mine, but the teaching profession is kind of on fire," Priest said. "I like my job a lot, but teaching right now — it's not sustainable."

44% of respondents to BluePrints' survey reported that they are more likely to retire or leave teaching early than they were before the pandemic. Similarly, 40% said that stress or adverse circumstances related to the pandemic have led them to question their abilities as a teacher.

The threat of a teacher shortage in the U.S. — which was looming even before the COVID-19 pandemic — is potentially devastating, experts say. At Cedar, 78% of survey respondents said that they find increased demands due to staff shortages substantially or extremely challenging, frustrating or stressful.

"There already is a shortage. I'm already overworked," Priest said. "What happens when I have to teach three classes at once or whatever crazy solution they come up with to face the fact that we don't have enough teachers?"

Warner's upcoming departure saddens her, but the tumult of her job is too much to bear. The frequent cold calls she receives from schools with

vacancies indicate the rampancy of resignations like hers.

"I like teaching in lower income schools because you can impact lives. But at this rate, it's a lost cause. I cannot see the future here," Warner said. "I need support. The administration needs support as well"

Huberty has a robust career behind him but worries for the future. Being a teacher has changed considerably — and detrimentally — in his time in education.

"You can do a lot of different things with a lot less headaches for a lot more money. You think, 'I break my back for this and I'm not getting any respect and I'm not making money. Why do I keep doing this?'" Huberty said. "There's a lot more eyes on you than ever before. There's politicians or board members or district personnel that don't understand what it is to be a teacher telling you what you're supposed to be doing, and that can get really frustrating."

Derricotte recalls troubling conversations with friends about colleges near them who have closed their education departments because of lack of interest. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education reports that between 2008-09 and 2018-19, the number of graduates from teacher preparation programs dropped by nearly one third. And while national data isn't yet available for pandemic years, alarm bells are sounding. AACTE has found that 20% of their member institutions experienced a decline in new undergraduate enrollment of 11% or more in both fall 2020 and 2021.

This phenomenon begs the question: what will happen, at Cedar and nationwide, when the number of students filling classrooms overwhelms the dwindling few educators willing to instruct them?

"It makes sense when you turn on national news and you see people hurling chairs across a classroom and blood pouring out of teachers' faces — why would anyone want to do that? When you see students fight because they don't know how to channel their emotions or mental health situations, why would anyone want to deal with that?" Derricotte said. "You have to be honest with yourself — education is in a state of emergency."

