

Teacher Well-being with Dana Fulwiler

Audio Transcript

Elizabeth Tingle (ET): The Podclass is in session! I'm your host, Elizabeth Tingle, and welcome to our series *Conversations on School Health* - a holistic look at maximizing the health and well-being of students and teachers. This series is a collaboration between the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary and Ever Active Schools. Each episode, we speak with a different leader in their field about topics that impact student and teacher well-being. Today, we're joined by Dana Fulwiler, a teacher and expert on positive well-being and an instructor at the University of Calgary and an assistant instructor at the University of Pennsylvania in the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program, to talk about teacher wellbeing.

We hope that this podcast format will allow you to pursue some form of wellness, or restful hobby while you are listening to this conversation. I always like to start out by asking the guests on the podcast, what their favorite strategies are for taking care of themselves, whether it's exercise or some other habit that has helped you stay well. Dana, welcome. And would you mind sharing the strategies that you have found work for you?

Dana Fulwiler (DF): Yeah, for sure. Thank you so much for having me. I have found that I really need to be intentional with building well-being routines or they don't happen. So one thing is just focusing on kind of tiny tweaks and small actions, and then those become habits. So sometimes I get overwhelmed with the big goals, and forget that it can be in the simple actions and tweaks to our day-to-day that make a difference. The 10 minute walk that happens is better than the 45 minute run, that doesn't happen. So focusing on that, and just reminding myself that just it's in those small, small things.

And then, I've also found daily nudges to be really helpful. A particular set of questions have been really impactful for me. I keep them posted and strive to hit one or two each day. Some of them include: Who am I checking in on or connecting with today? What am I grateful for today? How can I use my creativity? How am I moving my body and getting outside today? How can I help someone? And if I'm feeling kind of tired or low-energy, another way I check in is asking myself, have I moved, have I eaten, have I slept? And then act accordingly. I've been really focused on sleep hygiene lately.

And then, finally, building opportunities for fun, just laughter and connection in particular. I'm my best self when I'm taking things less seriously, and finding moments, you know, to laugh and just enjoy things I love. And recognizing that especially during heavier times in life, we need to intentionally cultivate and savor lighter moments, you know. I'm not about ignoring the hard things, but just capitalizing on the good and joyful moments when we can. And I think in teaching, there's lots of opportunities for this. And when a student says or does something funny, share it with your colleagues. My friends and I have been circulating a daily joke or funny meme. Those are kind of some of the things that I try to do every day.

ET: Those are all great suggestions and such varied ideas for improving our physical but also mental, emotional, social well-being. I really like how interconnected they are. Do you keep those questions posted somewhere in your house? Those ones that you're trying to do every day?

DF: Yeah, just like a sticky on your fridge, or in your classroom. Something that just reminds you. And again, it's not about doing all of them every day and shaming yourself if you don't, but even just picking one, especially that, "Who am I checking in on and connecting with today?" That covers a lot of ground for a well-being boost.

ET: Yeah, good point. Tell us about your experience as a teacher and what your role is today. And why you have become such an expert and champion of school health promotion and specifically teacher wellbeing. Why is that so important to you?

DF: Yeah, so I've been an educator for 17 years. I taught Grades 7 to 12 and also served in guidance roles, and then worked in nonprofit with Ever Active supporting positive mental health and teacher wellbeing initiatives. So, it's kind of been a part of my whole entire journey as a teacher. But, way back in the beginning, I completed my teaching internship on exchange in a community school in Australia. It was a challenging and rewarding experience that kick-started my career, and honestly was the first glimpse into how impactful a school environment was on students' learning and well-being and also on teachers. So a lot of our students had experienced trauma and sometimes that manifested in violent behaviors or withdrawal. The school had built a culture of inclusion and activity.

So for example, every day during break the entire year, seven and eight classes and the teachers played Aussie rules football on the field. Like everybody, um, you know, the most athletic students were cheering on the least athletic and it was amazing to watch. And to be a part of, as someone who's not athletic. There were intentional opportunities during class time for students to connect with each other on a personal level, and similarly with staff in their collaboration and work together as teams. So I didn't have the language for it at the time, but it was a school culture of well-being that also honored trauma-informed practice and held strong and high expectations for students, which they rose to.

So when I returned to Canada, and started a new job in a junior high school with similar demographics, I really wanted to bring those lessons and learn more about how we could build that foundation. Because honestly, from the very beginning, I just really saw well-being as the foundation to everything else, and giving staff and students the best chance to learn and thrive. So it was early on in my teaching career in Canada that I experienced and observed the toll that the pace of this profession can have on our well-being, and public pressure, and just a lot of different things that can be heavy. But at the same time, I noticed the lightness and joy of moments of connection with colleagues and students and parents.

But what really got me on the track of school health promotion was realizing that the school community is hugely impactful on so many different people: students, teachers, admin, parents,

the local community. The school's kind of that connector. And I learned about Comprehensive School Health at the very first shaping the future hosted by Ever Active. And I just really wanted to learn more about how we could build a sustainable, supportive school environment. So my friend and I who went to that, we came back and started a wellness action team, with our school health nurse, a few other passionate colleagues, and student leaders. And we set out to build upon strengths that, honestly, our school already had in terms of connection. But we decided to start with the teachers. From our view, we thought, how could we possibly talk about driving school well-being without exploring how best to support the adults in the building as well? So, we conducted action research and asked staff what was working well, and what could be improved to support their well-being. So we were also grateful to have the support of our administration, but some of the ideas that came from that were implemented immediately. So like a fun Friday, where afternoons were spent just connecting on more of a personal level as a staff. People wanted plants in their classrooms, so we were able to do that. And they reported just, honestly, how impactful it was to have their voices heard.

And then our wellness team doubled in numbers. And we pivoted to student needs and asked them through surveys, we learned that over half our student population was coming to school without breakfast, which we didn't realize before that. So that was priority number one. And we worked hard to build a sustainable grab and go breakfast club. It hit a lot of different features of well-being: obviously establishing breakfast, but it was a social opportunity, too, because it was in the front foyer. So it was open to everyone to eliminate that stigma piece. And we just felt the energy shift.

So at that point, I pursued a Master of Education to research sustainable Comprehensive School Health and teacher stress and well-being. After that, seven years kind of applying some of that work discovered positive psychology, which is the science of well being in human strengths, just to explore more tools to be proactive about mental health, because that's, that's essentially my journey in a nutshell. Over the 15 years, I've just always seen how we could do a better job and it's almost our responsibility to do that to be proactive.

ET: Yeah. And in your research, did it become clear the interconnectedness of teacher and student well-being?

DF: So in the Master of Education research that I did, what emerged from that research was the importance of relationships and trust among staff as well and having voice and choice. Now the research worldwide is really bubbling up showing us the interconnection between staff and student wellbeing and staff wellbeing and student learning. These are things I think as educators we know intuitively. You know, like the energy of the room and what you bring into the space impacts your students. But to the level it does, you know, the science is offering that additional support. For example, emotions are contagious, and we can catch positive ones as easily as we can negative ones. So that says a lot about any kind of workspace really. But in a school, it's such a social ecosystem, if you have a lot of those down emotions that people are catching that can make a big impact.

ET: Absolutely. And there is this common story out there that teaching is incredibly difficult and a never ending stress-fest. One of my pet peeves is when people refer to teaching in the classroom as being in the trenches. I'm not sure who the enemy is in that metaphor, if it's the students, or maybe, maybe you could say, like ignorance is the enemy there, I don't know, but I don't like it, because I just think it's so inherently negative and combative. But it's a really common narrative out there. So, I obviously disagree with this. And I think we need a more balanced view. From your perspective, how does this negative burnout-focused view of teaching impact teachers and their own well-being?

DF: The key feature in the narrative is that it doesn't serve anybody. It's not actionable. And as you know, we see in the research and in casual conversations, that educators are craving a new narrative. And it really generates an unfair, like priming for new teachers to expect the worst. And I know research you've been involved in has uncovered this, you know, concerns from teacher candidates that they were stressed about stress, before even getting into the profession. And in the case of one particular teacher candidate she shared, "It wasn't that bad, and I didn't need to be that stressed, and that changing the narrative would be helpful." So I think it kind of contributes to a cycle of almost guilt and shame in the profession. And it can feel like you're always fighting this uphill battle to see the narrative in a different way.

And the current one can also contribute to workplace busy cultures where we kind of accept not coming up for air as normal and expected, or like a badge of honor. And that said, I also think it's important to acknowledge that it is an incredibly challenging career, and that it's not solely up to individual teachers to tackle the problem of burnout. So we need to explore both individual and organizational-level strategies to support well-being in school communities, which is where I think whole school approaches like CSH, Comprehensive School Health, come into play.

Michael Unger is at Dalhousie University, and he talks in his research about 'resilience is not a DIY endeavor,' like not just do it yourself. Their research has shown how impactful community is in navigating challenge and having accessible resources and support. My hope is that that's the direction we're headed. And I think recent events and the pandemic and different ways that learning has had to shift and teachers have had to respond, I think, hopefully has given parents and communities in the public a different look at what the profession is like beyond just them having experienced school themselves. And we can just come together as school communities and as a public to support teachers as well.

ET: Yes, absolutely. I hope that is one of the things that happens. What are some of the proactive in-the-background ways that teachers can take care of themselves? What strategies helped you as a teacher to show up at school feeling ready to enjoy your day?

DF: As I mentioned earlier, during moments for me of overwhelm, or like frustration, just checking in with yourself like have especially those three core have I eaten, have I slept, have I moved? For me, I've realized that sometimes and sometimes the hard way, I've realized that nourishing myself is up to me and nobody else. And some days you know, the most impactful proactive strategy, sometimes the simplest, like hydration, food, nourishment, movement, sleep,

and connection. Those are kind of the core in my view. I used to minimize the importance of these, I think almost viewing them as like nuisances, rather than what they are like basic human needs. We don't expect our cars to run on empty. I was definitely one of those teachers surviving on coffee, and then I got real about my own energy levels and why I wasn't giving myself even a chance to enjoy the day. My best breakfast routine started when I discovered the magical power of smoothies because even when you're busy, you know, as school day goes on, that's something you can take in. It's now just become a habit like I don't have to spend any additional cognitive energy thinking about it, or deciding what I'm going to have for breakfast. It just is, and it fuels me.

So I think about these as those downhill-coasting well-being habits we can create. Think about that feeling when you're riding a bike, and you're heading down a hill, and you can like relax a bit, it doesn't take so much effort, you might even look around, notice new things. I think of habits in that way, as well. They kind of release the cognitive load of decision making. And teachers, as we know, make thousands of decisions a day. Decision fatigue is a real thing. Really any habit you can create helps relieve that. Similar to students, we know that routine really helps them-- routine really helps us as well.

ET: And looking for ways to embed it in your day. There was a time-- this is a long story, Dana, this was back in 2008, I was on maternity leave with my daughter, I had two children, and my husband lost his job. And we tried to make it work. Because I really wanted to enjoy that time with her. And we got rid of our cars. And we were really trying to cut costs and rely on our savings. And it just was not enough. And so I had to come back early. Luckily, my school could find a position for me early. So I was back teaching. My husband would try and do his piecemeal kind of work and looking for work, when I would come home in the evenings. And so I was really stretched for time, I just did not have a lot of extra. I would teach, come home and work a second shift essentially with my children and taking care of them and meals and, and then also just a lot of uncertainty and pressure on our family in general.

I knew that I needed to find time to move and exercise. But there just was not an obvious window in that day. And, I decided that I would make my lunch more of a break than I had ever really done. It was habit for me to mark and chat with my colleagues, like it was a good time and it was different than teaching but it was not going outside. And so that's when I started listening to podcasts, this was in the olden days when you had to sync them on your iPod, and I would get outside. And I would be by myself. I'm a bit of an introvert, and that was really the only time that I had for solitude in the whole day. And at first it felt really uncomfortable, almost selfish, and a little bit anti-social, as people would say, "Oh, you're going out for a walk again". And I'd just say, "Yeah, I am" and then leave. It was really hard to not think "Oh, I should maybe be working on marking or something else that would benefit the school," because that had been my habit. But that saved me that year, my mental well-being and my physical well-being and just taking a break and it affected my sleep. All these things really hinged on that half hour or so of just getting outside and it became a habit. And I got more and more comfortable with it over time. And that's really where I learned sometimes you have to build it in our day. And we don't

know if our colleagues are going through something like that. And I think we can support them if it does look like maybe they're looking for ways to build it in.

DF: That is such a good point. And I'm really proud of you for doing that and pushing through that feeling of selfishness and guilt. Because I think that is also super common in this profession. And it's false guilt. You know, it's not, you didn't do anything wrong.

ET: Yeah, I'm allowed to have a break.

DF: As you're saying, that's also modeling that for maybe someone else who's looking for that permission, and to give yourself that permission to recharge your batteries in ways that make sense for you. And as an introvert, I can totally relate to that. Finding those opportunities of solitude in a teaching day, is seemingly sometimes impossible, but it's like how can I make it happen and build it in as a habit that's maybe a walk or maybe connecting with somebody. One of our teachers he just - in the thought of bringing in things that are meaningful to you - he is an artist and the art teacher and started art club, where he invited students and staff where he got to share his passion which was fueling his well-being and invited people to learn something new along with him. And I know lots of people have started a run club or a walking club or a lunch club where it fosters that connection and also encourages other people to relieve that guilt, I guess and invest in their own well-being in different ways.

ET: And teaching can be this weird mix of never being alone, because your students are around, but also kind of lonely because you're not necessarily with your peers. I'm wondering if you could talk about how social connections can help teachers. I know this is something that you feel strongly about, and what strategies would you recommend to someone who wants to improve their peer relationships with colleagues at school?

DF: Yeah, I think it's incredibly important because we are hardwired for connection. It's built into us; it's not just a nice-to-have, it's a need-to-have. There's lots of different strategies for strengthening connection. A few that have worked well for me is finding out mutual interests and common ground with your colleagues. For example, I'm from Saskatchewan, as many people are living in Calgary, so just the Riders and Saskatchewan roots have been my connection in every school I've taught in. And we've talked about strategies like "big talk" versus "small talk," and thinking of new ways to communicate with each other that help get beneath the surface. So, "How are you?" is a very common question in passing. It's not necessarily a bad question. But it doesn't always get at anything authentic. We've all had those experiences, you're like walking down the street, oh, "How are you?", "Good, how are you?" But being able to kind of stop and ask someone, "What are you excited about this week?" and just the energy shift, I guess that can come from that.

So, connecting can be built into a routine for your school. So I know in a school I was at every Friday morning: coffee and conversation. And people can even rotate bringing in morning snacks. And that makes such an impact on the way you're starting your day. And I think being intentional, seeking out connection with people who are maybe teaching something totally

different to help build an understanding of what they're going through as well. And you can be a role model in your school; you can be that person. You know, sometimes that can feel scary, but I guarantee you that there's others on staff who are craving that.

In one of my schools, we had these "Way to go, Scorpion!" postcards. So on one side, they said "Way to go, Scorpion!" which was our mascot, and then the other was lines for a message. So these were accessible to anyone, and when you had gratitude to express or a kinder encouraging note, you could just pick up a card in the office, write your note, and put it in someone's mailbox. And these messages would mean the world to receive. I still have a box full of them and look at them for pick-me-ups. And then students started using them as well. And kind of build a culture of connection, normalizing expressions of gratitude. There's lots of different ways, honestly, to connect with people. But I would say finding impromptu, informal ways to connect with people on a personal level is important.

ET: Yeah, and sometimes that helps to remind myself that I will be happier for those efforts. You know, historically, I would feel like, 'oh, I should be friendly, I should be outgoing. It'll be good for that person. 'But I wouldn't think, I'm going to feel so much better. And every time I have a conversation, especially with you know, you find the people that you feel good around, I want to go seek that out, because it's going to give me a boost too. It's not just about being nice.

DF: Exactly, yes! And that's in the science as well, that mutually beneficial well-being boost that we get from also sharing our good news with each other, which is another thing that I definitely want to talk about around savoring those good moments that you have in your classroom or with a colleague, but actually sharing them we tend to shy away from those moments, because we maybe don't want to come across as braggy or make someone feel bad if they didn't get a "Way to go, Scorpion!" But the science shows, and again, I think we know intuitively when you share good news with someone and they actively engage back with you - that's called active constructive responding, they help you re-live the good news - it's mutually beneficial, both people see a boost in their own well-being. So it's something to really think about and to talk about the fact that we don't do that very often, and how we can get better at that. And again, around intentionality, building in those opportunities, even at staff meetings, for example, even if it's just with people at your table. Like, "Share something good that happened this week."

ET: I have to ask you then to brag about a teaching moment that impacted you that was positive that you'd want to share and relive.

DF: One that really stands out for me, I was teaching psychology 30. And I would always have the Schizophrenia Society come in to present to the class, they do such a phenomenal job. This particular year, I was teaching a double class in the theater, so it was about 50 students. A gentleman living with schizophrenia presented to this theater filled with high school students, and so vulnerably shared his story, just real and raw and emotional, about what it was like to live with this mental illness and how he was able to navigate it and the things he's able to do living with it. And it gives me chills still thinking about what happened after. So my students, without any prompting, gave this man a standing ovation and started to line up to walk down to

where he was at the bottom of the theater and shake his hand to say thank you. But I was so proud of this incredible group of teenagers who, out of their own, you know, humanity and gratitude, showed such respect and honored this man's courage and story. It brings me so much joy and pride thinking about that, thank you for asking. And I remember sharing that story with my family. And I wish I would have had more courage to share it with more of my colleagues. I just think, as teachers, we need to reflect on what went right too, rather than just focusing on what could have been better.

ET: Yeah, we often, you know, are encouraged to reflect on our practice, and what could make that lesson better. But I think we need to take time at the end of the day and reflect on what went well, what do we want to make sure happens again, if possible. And sometimes it's those unexpected unplanned moments that are the best parts of teaching, like the story that you just shared. But other little things, conversations or funny moments, I think we can spend a little bit of time remembering those or even writing them down so that on those hard days, we can remember them.

DF: Yeah, absolutely. And again, the science reflects that too. And how impactful that is, to savor with other people. And also just to spend some time on your own, just savoring that, writing it down: How did it feel? Who was there? And again, that's not to say that we don't also need to talk about challenge and those are very real things too. But we tend to bypass these good moments, they're so important to savor.

ET: And you've taught me that that is just the way our minds are wired, this negativity bias that will naturally look for threats, and things that represent something to work on, instead of the successes and the things that are going great, because that's not a threat to our survival. And so we don't dwell on those. So it requires, again, you started this conversation off with intentionality; it requires intention to really pay attention to the good things.

DF: Absolutely! It really does. And that's something in the positive psychology world, people think of it as, like happy-ology, which it's definitely not, I think toxic positivity is a real thing. And we need to honor the full spectrum of our emotional experiences, it's not just about being happy. And our negative emotions are helpful, actually, they give us messages that we need. But because we tend toward the negative already, and again, just like you said, that's a survival trait. Our ancestors survived because they were hyper-attuned to what is threatening. So because sometimes the bad can be stronger than the good, we need to be intentional with cultivating the good. And I think as school staff and through Comprehensive School Health, that can be an avenue for that. We can help each other with it, by asking people to share their good news and inviting those conversations.

ET: Mm hmm. And your point that we can't just gloss over the difficulties of life, or of being a teacher is important. We may deal with students who have complex issues, learning difficulties, trauma at home, all sorts of things that they come to school with. How can teachers develop the skills to remain calm with those difficult situations? And then, after the fact, how do we emotionally deal with the impact that they've had, and grow from those experiences?

DF: This is a really important thing to talk about as well, staying calm in those difficult situations... no strategy has worked better for me than first taking a deep breath and then checking in to make sure I'm responding to the situation rather than reacting in the moment. And then removing yourself a little bit from it. We're human beings. And so sometimes a difficult situation, especially if it involves challenging behavior, to recognize that it's not about you. And to take yourself out of that personally, but remind yourself that there's a lot of things at play right now. And they rarely have anything to do with you specifically on a personal level.

But I've found, and the research backs this up, a powerful skill and developing resilience in those moments and then also the ability to learn from the experience afterwards, is to reframe and challenge some of our own expectations, and thought patterns. So I think that can take practice. But we can learn how to tackle our unproductive thoughts of like, "Oh, that really went off the rails. That was awful." Like, "I'm a terrible teacher," or, you know, that kind of all or nothing thinking or guilt feelings with more balanced and empowering thoughts, thinking, "What's a more productive way to look at this? What's one thing within my control? And how can I act on it?" or, "How can I use my own strengths? Or, connect to my why in this situation?" So in a situation where a lesson or a response to a problem, like went off the rails considering: "What's one thing within my control?"

You know, in one situation in a class, where a student kind of had a blowout, the one prompt, "What's a more productive way to look at this?" what resulted in was a really meaningful conversation in class about respect and collective responsibility. Thinking to yourself like, "That could have been worse, nobody got hurt." And a more productive way to look at this is the growth that I experienced as a teacher as a result, of the growth the student experienced as a result, and being, again, intentional with your own self-talk, because man, sometimes the things we say to ourselves, we would never even think to say to somebody else. You know, and especially when things don't go as you had planned, which they often don't as teachers.

ET: Yeah, and I think you have to get comfortable with that. But if you push through it, those are often the better teaching moments than the ones that are completely scripted. But, in order to get comfortable with that, you have to forgive yourself for the times before when it didn't work out, and it was okay. If you practice that reframing, you can get better and better at teaching in the moment because you've survived the moments where it happened before.

DF: Yeah, absolutely. It takes practice to be able to do that in the moment. And retired teachers say that they continually were challenged and grew throughout their career. I have a friend who recently retired and that's what she said. But even that's -- even that habit of just expecting the unexpected, and that you're going to be continually challenged, is something that kept her feeling alive and energized throughout her career, even as a skill moving into retirement. That's something for life in general, to be like, "I don't have this all figured out. And that's okay."

ET: Yeah. And it makes perfect sense that in a profession that's about learning that we need to be willing to learn ourselves.

DF: Yeah, even though it's uncomfortable sometimes, because we also are planners, and we like to just have it all set out and have it go to plan but life doesn't work like that.

ET: What advice would you give to a teacher who wants to enjoy their work more? Or feels like they haven't been having as many of those moments connecting with their students? How can teachers not just be healthy but happy in their work?

DF: For me, gratitude is huge. And the science really suggests that a gratitude practice is most impactful if it's through, kind of, a method that works for you. So that might not be a journal. They say that it's most impactful when we express it directly to a person. So for example, I remember a really challenging student I taught who had a lot going on and struggled to manage his emotions in class. I remember the wellbeing boost it gave me as well to call his parents to share a win. He had practiced breathing through a moment and advocated for himself to have a break. I was so proud of him. You know, that was in his IPP that's goals we were working towards; I wanted to acknowledge his progress toward that goal. And it meant the world to his parents say, you and I have talked about this. Especially for a student who struggles, most of the time they're not getting other types of calls.

ET: Exactly. I can relate to this because I have received hard phone calls. And there was a time when a teacher made it a point of talking to me, I think it was on the playground. And she said, "I just want to let you know that your son is so kind to a student in the class that had a disability and all of the other students in the class are kind of following his lead. And I'm so grateful for the role that he's playing." And that meant the world to me. That had so much impact, to hear that he was being kind-- on his own, without my prompting-- and that others are following his lead. And it allowed me to later share with him, "Your teacher told me today that you have been so kind to so-and-so." And then that made him feel good, and me feel good again, I think it probably improved his relationship with the teacher the next day he saw her. It's just a small thing that has multiple benefits when you can make the time to do that.

DF: Yeah, absolutely! And honestly, it takes like less than five minutes. And it can be transformative, I would say, I agree, for all sides, you know, that is well-being and resilience in action. And then it also helps you to intentionally see those positives in the progress your students are making. Because, again, not even really our fault, we tend to focus on problems to be solved, rather than those moments to really be capitalized on. So just being intentional. Every week, you make one of those positive phone calls: you pick somebody and you make one of those phone calls. And the boost it gives for you as well is significant. And then in the higher grades, expressing those accolades too to students directly. Like "I'm so glad you're here today. So happy to see you!" is a better way to greet a student struggling with attendance, then, like, "Where were you?" And it also built a bridge where, I have found more often than not, that students will feel invited to walk across and let you in and connect with you on that deeper level.

I remember noticing a student in my grade 12 psych class, her energy was lower than normal. It was kind of written all over her face and her mannerisms, though she was physically there. I

remember walking up and just quickly asking her during class if she was okay, and offered my support and open door if she ever needed it. She did take me up on the offer. At the end of that semester, she wrote me a long and thoughtful note about how that simple question that day that I had asked, “Are you okay?” opened the door for her to connect with me. She wrote about how significant that was for her. And for me, it seemed like a simple, you know, as a teacher, you would ask that question, when you notice something, invite them to connect with you.

ET: Oh, that's such a good story. I'm crying.

DF: I'm not even sure I've shared that with anyone. Because again, those things I am, for whatever reason, we keep to ourselves. The truth is lots of people have those stories, and what a beautiful thing to share them with each other. On that note, I received great advice my first year teaching that anytime a former student comes by to visit or makes contact with you, stop everything and engage. Never be too busy to chat with a student if they've taken the time to reconnect and express gratitude. Even if it's report card time, and you've got all these things going on. Those are the moments that just are so full of joy and remind you of your why in real time.

ET: Yeah, it's never time wasted to spend with former students and just to reconnect. Absolutely.

DF: I brought it up earlier, that big talk piece. But it can also help build psychological safety and strengthen those connections for you, with your students and you with your colleagues too. Again, that “How are you?” can get at emotions rather than stories and big talk can help us connect on those deeper levels and even just launch the week in a positive and energizing way. And I know one of the questions we've talked about, like “What's your biggest blooper this week?” It doesn't have to always be like, “What are you proud of? What went well?” it could be like, “What didn't go well?” And let's, like, laugh about it.

ET: Like the time teacher I talked to shared that she had accidentally wrote the “pubic sector” instead of the public sector on the blackboard. That was a hard moment to recover from.

DF: Oh my gosh, that's great! Like, I remember a friend sharing the story. And it always sticks with me because it's also a commentary on how students think we, like, live at the school. She was talking something about her work. And the student put up his hand and said, “Oh, where do you work?” I was like, “She's our teacher. She works here!”

ET: Oh, that's good.

DF: Those kinds of like humorous moments that just also help you, help fuel you through the days that can be challenging.

ET: Yeah. And when we have this narrative that teaching is this stressful, busy thing, it makes people feel like they can't slow down and tell stories. You know, it doesn't give us permission to just take a little time.

DF: Yeah, absolutely.

ET: As you think back on your times when you were thriving the most as a teacher, what do you think you were doing to create that for yourself? Sometimes it's hard to go back and figure out the magic, but what do you think was working for you on those days when you really enjoy teaching?

DF: I think I was pushing the boundaries of my comfort zone, honestly. As an introvert, you know, the safest thing I could do is stay in my classroom and isolate myself. I had a lot of stress about meeting new people and worried about being judged. But, ultimately, my harshest critic was always myself. The times I think when I was thriving as a teacher when I was intentionally forming connections with others, and having fun doing it. My second year of teaching, I was given the lead teacher role for student leadership and the health and life skills program at the school. I always had this underlying guilt about how much time I was spending on the student leadership work in particular, telling myself, "I shouldn't be spending so much time on these events."

I remember one year in particular, the kids had this idea to create a haunted hallway for Halloween. I said, "Let's go for it!" But it was a lot of time that was invested into putting this together. But honestly, it was the most incredible thing. It was hours of school time spent on this one event for a few hours for the school. But wow, like the hours were filled with laughter, and problem-solving, and creativity, and connection. And kids who weren't in leadership showed up to help. And it just kind of like, you know, word of mouth spread. And honestly, the haunted hallway itself blew students and staff away, it was so well done. And to this day, it's one of the most, one of my most favorite memories.

A lot of teachers with more experience than me at the time said I was working too hard or cared too much. It was out of a place of care, and them just wanting me to manage my time. But the energy boost I was getting from working on that project with those kids, and the several other projects we did like Adopt-a-family at Christmas, and this cupid cafe that they had a Valentine's, it was so worth it and fueled me all the way up. So, that's when I started to think differently about time management versus energy management. What gives you energy from your work? What's your why? And for me, it's always been the kids and my colleagues that building opportunities for meaningful connection and fun. And I just started to prioritize those over other things that didn't fill my cup in the same way.

You know, we spend so much time really noodling on perfecting a slide deck. It's kind of a balance, you need to figure out what works for you. Yeah, my best and most thriving times happen when I let go of perfectionism, and practice satisficing over maximizing, and I think

those two go hand in hand, the energy management, and then also what are you spending a lot of time and energy on that might not be worth it?

ET: You taught me the term satisficing. Can you explain what that means for those who haven't heard it before?

DF: Yeah, for sure. It's about really setting a standard of good enough. So it's not about like sacrificing quality and doing a crappy job or making a bad decision. It's about acknowledging that there's multiple pathways that could work and be good, and accepting something as meeting a standard. And then being done with it. Whereas maximizing we're so focused on making something optimal, making an optimal decision or creating the perfect lesson or again, choosing the perfect font or whatever. And the list goes on. It's exhausting, because there will never be a good enough. And I am like that. So it's a constant practice. It's not like poof, one day, I'm no longer maximizing. But what I found helpful is to, in those moments, pause and ask myself, "Is this how you want to be spending your time and energy right now?" Yeah, I don't have data to support this but I think a lot of teachers are maximizers.

ET: I think so too. I think we have high standards. It's getting more and more competitive to get into as a program, and so we've got some keen people in education, often they liked school when they were younger. So it is a little bit of a shift to say, good enough is good enough.

DF: Yeah! And again, not feeling like you've somehow sacrificed something, you know, or like you're doing a poor job. Exactly. But the data we do have suggests that maximizing approaches to work and life have a negative impact on our well-being. We know that through the research, so it's in your best interest to work on satisficing and in different areas of your life. You know, letting yourself off the hook.

ET: Yeah. Not just teaching.

DF: Yeah, exactly.

ET: So what would you tell yourself, Dana, starting out on your career as a teacher knowing what you know, now?

DF: I would tell myself, you know, that you might feel some frustration that you could have somehow been better prepared for the realities of teaching. But then you actually need to accept that it's a doing profession, and you're constantly, constantly going to be learning and failing and growing through it, to accept that and expect that. You won't ever have all the answers and that's part of the fun of this profession. It's the challenge, but it's also what makes it worth doing. The world we live in is constantly changing, and teaching should change along with it. And you get to be a part of that. A pretty huge part of that, you get to make an impact on the future.

Really no training can replace experience. It can prepare you, of course, but experience is our best teacher, even if that makes us uncomfortable, and to be okay that you don't have the answers, you won't have the answers-- all of them. And that's okay. You're the only one putting that pressure on yourself to know everything already. Don't be afraid to lean in and ask for help. Those interactions with more experienced teachers, in my experience have been beneficial going both ways. You know, as a new teacher asking someone for help, they love that too and they're very happy to support you. Like a lot of things in our conversation today, like it's mutually beneficial. So to not be embarrassed or feel any kind of shame that you need to ask for help. Like that-- that's an expected thing in the profession all the way through to the end.

ET: And teachers are a generous group in general, they're happy to share and happy to help and just listen, if you ask. What do you wish all teachers knew about making health and well-being a priority?

DF: I wish, and this is something that I am continually coming to terms with, that we have choice, they have choice and making their well being a priority, and setting meaningful boundaries, and also that it's a collective effort and it's not just a DIY endeavor. A lot of teacher well being resources out there just talk about the individual, rather than the school environment, and the external forces that are impacting teacher stress and burnout. Knowing that it's also up to your school community, your school board to help make health and well-being a priority, you can control your own choices and actions, yes. But we also know that the environment plays a massive role. So workplaces that prioritize well-being have more productive, happier employees. And they save costs and sick leaves and turnover. And teaching is no different.

Also, knowing that there can be a grassroots swell for that, I know that there is a school board that has helped create those boundaries for its staff by having an expectation that emails don't get sent past 6pm on weekdays or on weekends. Creating that as kind of a system priority that stemmed from more grassroots conversations of, "This is too much, I need to be able to also value and prioritize my family time." And that that's okay. To set those boundaries, you are, you know, within your rights to, to do that, they're a form of self care. I wish they knew that they could be agents of change themselves as well. It just takes one or two people to kind of have that courage to bring up a problem or a new idea or initiative. And you can be that person in your school. Sometimes it can be hard, like I told the story at the beginning about my first school and starting Comprehensive School Health initiatives there. And it was just me and one other person, we're like "This matters!" You know, but you just think about the small ways you could bring your passions to work, whether that's well being or art or whatever, you know, how can you bring your personality and share that with others? And then that also, like you said, gives them permission to do the same.

ET: Mm hmm. And encouraging others when you see them doing that, you know, if someone says, "I'm sorry, I can't I've got a commitment with my family", you know, like saying, "Oh, of course, that's wonderful". You know, if someone had said to me, as I was taking my lunch hour walks, "Enjoy!", I think it would have helped with that guilt. And so there are small ways that we can create that cultural shift of, we want to create a school where people can take care of

themselves. In addition to being good teachers, and good students, we want to make sure that people feel well when they're here.

DF: Oh, I love that! And that collective responsibility to encourage each other. I think that is such a good point. Because, as you said, in your experience that could have made the world of difference, or like “Oh, hey, I love that you're doing that. Could I join you?” Normalizing those behaviors.

ET: What could a teacher do tomorrow to improve their well-being and enjoyment of teaching? What's a good baby step to take?

DF: I think one of the most important first steps is to give yourself permission to be well, and I know that that's not like a specific strategy, but I think it's an ongoing practice that's super important. There aren't these magic fixes. But as I said in the beginning, some of the most impactful shifts are in those small tweaks and the simple habits but giving yourself permission for that. You deserve to fuel yourself and give yourself the best chance you can to have a good day. And I would say pick one new tiny tweak that you could make to your day to build a well-being routine. And then why is it important to you to do that?

Honoring, I would say the full spectrum of your emotions, but keeping a loose attachment to the ones that don't serve you. Emotional agility -- Susan David, if anyone's interested in learning more about emotional agility, you can look up Susan David's work. That's something that we could all start doing tomorrow is just being a bit more gentle with ourselves, and the emotions that we're experiencing and normalizing them, and staying connected to your why. What are your values? How are you walking them each day and teaching and what brought you here? What's important to you? And then how can you build in more of those things into your day?

ET: Mm hmm. All great advice. So lastly, do you have any recommended resources for teachers that want to learn a little bit more about the things we've talked about today?

DF: Some as a start that SleepWell.ca has personally been informative. To me, there's an app called Day One. And it's a gratitude kind of in real time app, you can document things through photo or voice memos, and things like that. But also recommend Kristin Neff's work on self compassion, which is really about talking to yourself as you would a friend and other strategies. So I think it's SelfCompassion.org. We talk a lot about strength based teaching and practices. But what does that mean? So you can do a strengths survey on the website via Character.org, there's a lot of resources to show how using our top five strengths in new ways boosts our well-being. So this is a fun thing also to involve kids in. There's one for high school age students and the lower grades. There's a whole host of resources out there.

ET: Thank you so much, Dana, for coming on and sharing your stories and the research that you've done on this important topic of teacher well-being. We really appreciate it.

DF: Thank you so much for having me, Elizabeth.

ET: Thanks for joining us for another *Conversation on School Health* - a series collaboration between the Werklund School of Education and Ever Active Schools. Thanks to Matthew Wood for composing and performing the theme music and a special thank you to Steven Hurley from VoicEd Radio for production assistance and sound editing. You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter at Ever Active AB, on Facebook at Ever Active Schools, or visit our website EverActive.org for more great content and resources. Until next time, the Podclass is dismissed.