



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

For Educators, Being 'Always-On' During COVID-19 Can Lead to Burnout

By Emily Tate

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This article is part of the guide [Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope With Coronavirus](#).

Chrissy Romano Arrabito teaches second grade at an elementary school in Hackensack, N.J., a community that has been devastated by COVID-19 in recent weeks.

The school is located just a few miles outside New York City, the epicenter of the crisis in the U.S., in Bergen County, where nearly 11,000 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed.

“In talking to my students and their families, we’re finding that just about everybody’s been touched in some way by COVID-19, my family included,” Romano Arrabito said during a recent [EdSurge webinar](#) on social-emotional learning. As such, she’s “really trying to put the emotional well-being of these kids first,” she added.

What that looks like for Romano Arrabito, at a time when schools across the country are shuttered indefinitely, is being available, flexible and frequently online. She sends a “morning message” to her students via video every day, so that they can see her and hear her voice, and answers calls from parents at 10 o’clock in the evenings, in special circumstances where she knows the family members are considered “essential workers” and are working odd hours.

“We’re really in crisis mode here in Bergen County, so [I’m] just trying to keep in touch with kids, make sure that they’re O.K. and that their basic needs are being met,” she said. “It’s a tough time for everybody.”

Providing round-the-clock support to students is certainly valuable and admirable, said Christina Cipriano, another panelist during the webinar. But the director of research at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence also wants to make sure that teachers like Romano Arrabito, who are going to great lengths to support their students during these closures, are also making time to care for themselves.

“Your students are lucky to have you,” Cipriano said to Romano Arrabito. “I’m just thinking about, you know, when do you turn the screen off, or turn the text messages off? On the one hand, it’s tremendously important that you’re so available and so flexible to the needs of your students.

But at the same time, this could be going on for a while,” Cipriano added. “We need to make sure we’re attending to our own emotional health and well-being, too, because it’s not good for any of us to be ‘on’ in that way all the time.”

Romano Arrabito was quick to clarify that she is still making time to care for herself. “I am not ‘work, work, work’ 24/7,” she said, emphasizing that she doesn’t want to condone that pace of work for other educators either. “You do have to go out for walks, [or] if you’re tired, take a nap. I’m doing all those things. I’m making time for my hobbies.”

But the exchange raised an interesting question about the expectations placed on educators during the pandemic. Confined to their homes, and often plugged in to their work via the internet, it’s difficult to find a reason not to make yourself available to your students and their families, Romano Arrabito noted. So where does one draw the line?

Amy Mason, principal of Madison County Elementary School in Gurley, Ala., and the third panelist during the webinar, shared her perspective as a school leader.

“We can fall into that trap very easily. I find that, in my role, to have a good work-life balance, I kind of have to compartmentalize different areas,” Mason said. “But when I’m doing it all in the home setting, it’s hard to compartmentalize. I’m still managing that.”

Mason, who has a 3- and 11-year-old, shared that in the first few weeks of closures, she was trying to find ways to step away from work and connect with her children.

“We’ve been trying to get outside every day, doing spontaneous dance parties in the kitchen, things like that,” she said. “We’re really taking the time to take care of ourselves. I feel like I’ve been able to sleep maybe more than I have in years with young kids. So that part has been really helpful, too.”

She lauded the leadership in her district for being flexible and practical about what teachers and students will be able to achieve during a school day that functions very differently than it did a month ago.

“They asked us to not put instructional demands beyond two hours per day for each student, and I feel like that’s a little more realistic,” Mason said. “Students can always read and do their own research if they want to expand their learning. But I think that, with parents working from home and kids trying to learn online ... it’s just very difficult. We want to educate students on the essential standards that they will need to progress to the next grade level, and that can be accomplished.”

Cipriano, too, said she was impressed with Mason's district, especially compared to another school district she'd heard about that was asking its teachers to "clock in" for six-and-a-half hours each day. That district, which Cipriano didn't name, is "trying to create work-life balance for the educators" with its time-counting policy, she said, "but what that's doing instead is putting an immense amount of demand on the teacher ... and creating [unrealistic] expectations."

To wrap up the conversation, Cipriano offered a message to educators who are juggling their responsibilities to their students with that of their own children.

"For all of the working parents that are out there right now, and educators who are working now, nothing about this is usual. So we should not be expected to do business as usual," Cipriano said. "Our children deserve our full attention, just like our students do. We're all learning how to navigate this together."

This is a brief recap of the conversation. To hear the rest, [listen to the episode](#) in the player on this page. You can also find the EdSurge Podcast on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Overcast](#), [Spotify](#), [Stitcher](#), [Google Play Music](#), or wherever you listen to podcasts.

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