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Wellness in the Classroom: A Look at Teacher Stress and the Policies as it Pertains to the Classroom

Franchesca Uribe-Rheinbolt, Brown University '22
Mary Olive Gosselink, Brown University '23
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Abstract: Teachers are critical members of the classroom, and their well-being is important not for their own health, but also for the well-being of the other members of the school community. The stress of teachers has been on the rise in the last few years, but there have been few efforts to address it. The goal of this paper is to highlight the current research pertaining to teacher stress and the policies that are currently in place to address this issue. There are many factors that contribute to teacher stress which have only been made more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers need support from their administrations and students' parents to reach adequate levels of wellness. The policies that have been put in place over the last decades have increased the pressure placed on teachers to perform, only contributing to their stress. There has been an increase in funding for wellness policies, but there are still many gaps in addressing the wellness of teachers. If this issue is not addressed, it will add to the problem of teacher burnout and shortages. We are at an important time where we can put many of these policies in place to guard the health and safety of teachers.

Introduction

Wellness in schools has been an increasing topic of conversation, most of the focus has been on students, but in this paper, we will be highlighting the importance of teacher wellness. Wellness is defined by Kruger and Jacobs as:

“Wellness is considered a subjective experience of life satisfaction and emotional reactions and transcends the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity” (World Health Organization, 1946, par 1). Persons with high levels of wellness are able to fulfill their family and community roles, reach their maximum, but realistically feasible, potential through good relationships, self-development, personal improvement, and experiencing meaning in life.”¹

This definition describes how wellness affects every area of someone’s life and how important it is to nurture a culture of wellness in a job setting. If a person is not able to have adequate levels of wellness, they can experience burnout and demoralization. Walker² describes burnout as the

¹ Kruger and Jacobs, "Teachers' Workplace and Personal Wellness", 186-187

² Walker, "Getting serious about teacher Burnout"

EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

temporary exhaustion due to personal or professional circumstances, but demoralization happens when a teacher no longer feels able to meet the standards of the profession, which can lead to them leaving their jobs. Unfortunately, the educational system in the United States today has not supported the teachers enough to maintain their wellness. This has been more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent teacher shortage. According to the US Department of Education, in the 2021-2022 school year, the District of Columbia and Rhode Island experienced shortages in Art and Music education, Elementary school core education, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, English as a Second Language, Special Education, and World Languages. Many of these shortages are still ongoing into the 2022-2023 school year. The response to the burnout of teachers and the current shortages needs to go beyond self-care. It requires structural changes that makes teachers feel more supported². There are increasing pressures that teachers feel to do their job and don't have the time to take care of themselves.

Here we will give an overview of the literature on teacher wellness and burnout as well as evaluate the current policies that are in place supporting the wellness of teachers. Using Washington, DC and Providence, RI as case studies, we will compare the literature and current policies to highlight the current gaps in policy to support teacher wellness. These gaps will also serve to show where schools and districts can collaborate with outside groups to close this gap. Our goal is to demonstrate what policies can be instated to disrupt "business as usual" and facilitate cross-sector collaboration.

Teacher Stress: A Literature Review

Teachers are seen as a cornerstone of our society and this responsibility leads to high levels of stress that doesn't only affect the health of the individual, but can have effects on the school, students, and future of teachers. They are often wearing multiple hats that may include but are not limited to therapists, social workers, translators, and public health servants. Therefore, undealt with teacher stress does not only affect the individuals, but also affects the whole educational system. To address this important issue, it is important to know what are the main sources of stress, so that there can be appropriate measures to address them.

Outside forces such as performance focused education, a large workload, and with inadequate support and resources can all lead to increased levels of stress in teachers. First, one consequence of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which was instituted in 2001, is that

there was now a focus on student performance. This did not only reflect on the students, but also on the teachers and their ability to teach. These efforts put increased pressure on teachers to increase the quality of their material without the appropriate support structures and resources in place. Fujishiro et al.³ found that state financing of professional development, approval and required use of curricular materials, and teachers in states that received RTTT funding were more correlated with inadequate sleep (measure of stress). This has led to another source of stress which is having too many responsibilities and not enough time to give them the appropriate attention⁴. Having a large amount of responsibilities usually means that one area will receive less attention and this is usually the teacher's well-being. Not feeling that they can do their job well and feelings of inadequacy also lead to even higher levels of stress in teachers. Lastly, another highly cited source of stress for teachers is feeling the lack of support from the school administration and parents⁴. Teachers from schools in low-socioeconomic areas were more likely to rate sources of stress higher than those from middle and high socioeconomic areas. They also were more likely to have manifestations of stress⁴. In an effort to improve the educational quality for students, much of the pressure has been placed on teachers, resulting in high levels of stress and effects to their well-being.

The sources of stress in teachers have been discussed for a long time, but the COVID-19 pandemic made evident the lack of support for teachers and resulted in increased stress. The pandemic caused the whole world to change, but school employees were twice as likely as other government employees to report having difficulty with the changes to their jobs⁵. During this time there was also increased reporting of feeling anxious (34%), stressed (52%), and burned out/fatigued (52%). One of the largest sources of stress were the changes to the delivery of instruction and learning to teach in a virtual environment. Because of this, 90% of teachers reported being concerned about their students falling behind, compared to 65% before the pandemic. This increased level of stress made even more evident the gaps in structural supports for teachers. Even though the pandemic also made teachers feel like the public recognized the importance of their jobs, more work fell on the teachers without them having a way to cope with it. . The COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the importance of caring for our teachers'

³ Fujishiro, et al. "Exploring associations between state education initiatives and teachers' sleep"

⁴ Richards, "Teacher Stress and Coping Strategies"

⁵ MissionSquare Research Institute, "K-12 public school employee views on finances, employment outlook, and safety concerns due to COVID-19"

wellness and those significant changes were needed to address the long-term well-being of the teachers.

There is a clearly documented connection between stress and health. For teachers, it results in low job satisfaction, enthusiasm, and eventually burnout. For the teacher workforce, this also means low teacher retention and a negative narrative surrounding the profession. Highest rated manifestations of stress in teachers were feeling physically exhausted most of the time, losing idealism and enthusiasm about teaching, and feeling overwhelmed about the expectations placed on them and doubting their ability to help students⁶. Stress can also result in low job satisfaction and a negative outlook and attitude towards teaching⁷. Unaddressed high levels of stress levels in teachers also results in burnout⁸. Because of the stress that accompanies teaching, there is a widespread issue with teacher retention, especially among teachers of color. Educators of color are more likely to leave their jobs than their white colleagues, mostly because of the additional pressure they experience to work in unsupportive school environments⁹. There have been several studies showing that students with teachers of their same race improves their achievement¹⁰. This further decreases the diversity of the teacher workforce, affecting the well-being and success of the students. More broadly, there is a negative narrative that accompanies teaching which affects the teaching workforce¹¹. There are less students entering teacher preparation programs, which will continue to create a teacher shortage, increasing the stress of current teachers. Addressing the stress and well-being of the teachers is an urgent matter, because it does not only affect the health of the individual but will also affect students, other teachers, and schools.

The state of teacher stress is evident and needs to be addressed. There are many factors that affect teachers in and out of the classroom that make them feel burdened, overworked, and unsupported. The COVID-19 pandemic made this reality more relevant as everyone was trying to understand how to make remote schooling functional and a large part of the burden was placed on teachers. Ignoring this stress has a huge impact on the well-being of teachers, but also

⁶ Richards, "Teacher Stress and Coping Strategies"

⁷ Collie, Shapka, and Perry, "School Climate and Social-Emotional Learning"

⁸ Montgomery and Rupp "A Meta-Analysis for Exploring the Diverse Causes and Effects of Stress in Teachers."

⁹ Walker, "Getting serious about teacher Burnout"

¹⁰ Triplett and Ford, *E(RACE)ING INEQUALITIES*

¹¹ Farley and Chamberlain, "The Teachers are Not Alright"

affects the school community. If things do not change, the future of our current teachers and prospective teachers could be at risk.

Research In Practice

While research and literature tell one side of the story about teacher and student wellness and mental health; the literature and research also support the idea that the well-being of both student and teacher are key to not just academic success and excellence but to healthier, more engaging learning environments. Knowing this, the question then must be asked; are federal, state, and local education agencies showing that they agree? Are they using taxes and other dollars given to make equitable wellness education policies? If money is being spent, how is it being spent at the federal, state, and local level? If it is not being spent; why is this not happening? One way to see this is by looking at the reports all school districts are required to make and give each year for transparency; they are required to report their spending and how it impacts learning outcomes.

This is crucial to understanding how the system as a whole as well as the individual parts to see how policy makers at the top and bottom view the importance of student and teacher wellness. So, with much research about the state of teacher wellness and mental health, what does federal policy look like? How does collective bargaining play into the role of teacher wellness? How are Federal dollars spent to help teachers with burnout for better wellness outcomes?

The Federal Government and Education Policy around Social Emotional Learning

The federal policy on education goes all the way back to both the 10th and 14th amendment. According to Scott F. Johnson, “The Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment provides that a state may not ‘deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.’ It applies to public elementary and secondary schools, as they are considered to be state actors.”¹² For many years the Federal government did not interfere with a state’s right to decide how public school would be handled. When the *Brown vs Board of Education* landmark case was brought before the Supreme Court in 1954, the 14th amendment was used by the Justices as the reason to strike down the “separate but equal” public school policy and lead to the

¹² Johnson, *The 14th Amendment Protects the Right to a Public Education*

EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

government having a federal policy saying schools were not allowed to be racially segregated; Johnson also state “Those court decisions led to a federal statute that imposed similar requirements on all public schools that accepted certain federal funds. That law turned into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which today applies to all public schools. The law requires public schools to provide all students with disabilities with a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)”¹². In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law a set of Federal standards each state had to adhere to; known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) became a tool in his “war on poverty.” Through ESEA IDEA and FAPE have been able to have an extraordinary impact on the students that these standards serve. While they have not ever been perfect standards they have evolved and changed with different presidential administrations, being reauthorized every five years. The two most famous reauthorizations include the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act signed into law by Republican President George W Bush and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed into law in 2015 by Democrat President Barack Obama.

Each iteration has had both its supporters and its critics. NCLB is often criticized by policy makers and educators as being too focused on testing and school accountability through the test results. Considered punitive in nature to failing schools, the metrics were not celebrated by many as it was viewed as financially penalizing schools and was seen as unhelpful in turning around “failing schools.” However, it cannot be missed that NCLB helped give more supportive measures for inclusion for students who have disabilities and are English Language Learners (ELLs)¹³. NCLB was also hailed for the amount of spending put in the bill¹⁴. NCLB can be attributed to much stress in teachers' lives as it took accountability to a whole new level, stressed assessment as a means of measuring teacher’s abilities in the classroom and had heavy penalties for schools who did not meet their state's metrics. NCLB did not make much if any provisions for teacher wellness or focus on ways to support teachers.

ESSA on the other hand has often been hailed as fixing many of the punitive measures found in NCLB. It also continued on as NCLB before it, giving more rights to students with disabilities and to ELLs. In the case of ELLs, it made the performance of each student be a part of the overall grade of the school. NCLB has ELL students' progress or lack of progress in a

¹³ Peterson and West, *No Child Left Behind?*

¹⁴ “H.R.1 - No Child Left Behind Act of 2001”

separate category which did not go into the final report of the school's academic success as a whole. It changed the structure of what it meant to be a "failing" school and how schools might go about turning around this status. It also began a program; Race to the Top incentivizing, "...states willing to spur systemic reform to improve teaching and learning in America's schools. Race to the Top has ushered in significant change in our education system, particularly in raising standards and aligning policies and structures to the goal of college and career readiness." ESSA even took on funding in a new way giving more money to mental health services, which while for students could also be used to help educators through funding for professional development as a way to invest in teacher wellness and mental health¹⁵. Edweek in an article reiterated this idea saying, "...states can include them in the portions of their plans that deal with support for low-performing schools, educator professional development, and Title IV of ESSA, a flexible block grant that districts can use for school safety, school counselors, and more."¹⁶

Federal Dollars Pre-Covid

Before Covid turned the world on its head, there had already begun a push to look at teacher wellness as the statistics around the profession were not headed in a positive direction. It has been acknowledged for many years that teacher burnout was high and enrollment in teacher preparation programs was at an all time low. The Teacher Facts and Statistics by Seed Scientific, says that according to the University of Pennsylvania, after having done research concluded that 44% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. They also report that according to the Learning Policy Institute that, "Between 2009 and 2014, the teacher education enrollment dropped by 35%, the teaching trends show a continued decline in college teacher employment. Between 2009 and 2014, teacher education enrollments declined from 691,000 to 451,000, which is a decrease of 35%"¹⁷. There is also the fact that only about 30% of teachers make it to retirement¹⁷. There is nothing explicitly written about the funding stream for teachers and their wellness however writers such as Kate Springer are of the opinion that through ESSA. So why with so much teacher burnout and attrition has no one decided to invest

¹⁵ Saultz, Fusarelli, and McEachin, "The Every Student Succeeds Act"

¹⁶ Edweek.org

¹⁷ Vuleta, 35 teaching statistics [2022]

EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

in teachers wellness? While it is true that there are many grants given each year by the Department of Education, these grants focus more on teacher leadership or professional development opportunities around academic success. None of these policies have any explicit instructions in place for teacher well and mental health. Instead, one must look district by district to see if they support teacher wellness and in what form that policy takes.

A Look at Two Districts: DC Public Schools and Providence Public Schools

District of Columbia Public School Wellness Policy

The District of Columbia (D.C.) Public School (DCPS) system serves about 48,000 students a year in the nation's capital. With over fifty percent of students being African-American and between 70-78% being classified as economically disadvantaged based on free and reduced price lunch designation (FRL) and SNAP benefits with a total of 118 schools in the district. The Washington Teacher's Union is the local union chapter of the American Federation of Teachers.

While the district has a teachers union and until right before Covid they had consistent collective bargaining contracts the school district and union leaders have been unable to negotiate a new contract and currently have a memorandum of understanding. Past teacher's contracts as well as the current memorandum of understanding do not have any mention of policies and negotiated expectations of teachers' wellness. Instead DCPS had a district-wide wellness policy that is for all staff and students in the district to promote wellness and make sure teachers are emotionally equipped to deal with the day to day work of being a DCPS employee. This local wellness policy, which began in 2014 and was updated in 2017, has policies on everything from Health Education, part one to Community Engagement and Staff Welfare, part eight of nine. Part B of this section begins,

“Staff Wellness DCPS values the well-being of staff members and offers a host of health benefits to support staff in achieving optimal health. DCPS partners with the DC Department of Human Resources (DCHR) to implement and promote workplace wellness programs that promote and support employees' health and wellness. This includes annual wellness opportunities and events, fitness and wellness discounts, and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a voluntary program that offers free and

confidential assessments, short term counseling, referrals and follow up services to employees who have personal and/or work-related problems.”¹⁸

It also gives the website where a more comprehensive list of medical services is available to teachers. This on top of ESSA’s mandate according to National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) that, “Districts must use at least 20% of these funds on efforts to improve student mental and behavioral health, school climate, or school safety, which could include...mental health first aid training, and professional development activities.”¹⁹

Makes DCPS a school district willing to invest in the physical and mental well-being of its teacher force. It can be seen through its policy that is district wide and for all how they acknowledge the hardship of the profession and the steps they take to make sure their staff are taken care of; there is even a review board which looks at the past year, gives the district a wellness, and makes recommendations as needed. This policy is most likely funded under its operating budget for school support, which in total is “\$237.2 million, or 18% of its operating budget.”²⁰ So while there are no ESSA funds spent on teachers DCPS also has its own Local Wellness Policy they invest in and take seriously from having a review board to metrics that the wellness policy should be meeting each year.

Providence Public Schools Wellness Policy

Providence Public Schools are the state’s capital city’s public school district. Providence has a Latino population of almost 69% making Latino students the largest population of students of color in the district. With over 30% of students also being Multi Language Learners (MLL) with over 50% of the students living in homes where heritage languages, languages that are not English, are primarily spoken. The district serves about 22,000 students over 37 schools, 87% of whom are identified as economically disadvantaged families as seen by free and reduced lunch and SNAP program enrollment.²¹ In 2019, Providence Public School District was taken over by the state of Rhode Island after a rather damning report by researchers from Johns Hopkins University. Since 2020 PPSD has worked through and begun their Turn Around Plan (TAP) with four core values, five promises, and three pillars which all center around students and their

¹⁸ DCPS health benefits.

¹⁹ *The Every Student Succeeds Act: Details of the New Law*

²⁰ Budget engagement.

²¹ About Us / who we are.

EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

families²². Looking at PPSD in the 2018- 2019 school year proposed spending 60,000 for Social emotional learning under Title IV funding. There was nothing proposed for spending around teacher wellness.

In 2020-2021 Title IV explicitly stated with 2.7 million in funding for social and emotional support at the elementary level under Learning, Equity, and Accelerated Pathways.²³ In PPDS School, there is a Health Advisory Board to look at policies around student health but nothing on teacher wellness. There are also multiple grants funded by the Rhode Island Department of Education to help schools with SEL and Mental Health Service for students. At PPSD, there is no funding stated anywhere or at RIDE for teachers unless it is professional development around equity.

Federal Dollars During Covid and DCPS vs Providence Public School: ESSER Funding Stream I, II, III

In March of 2020, two thirds of the way through the 2019-2020 school year a global pandemic sent all school districts in America home and both teachers and students to online platforms to continue teaching and learning. The government in response had congress authorized the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER), which has had three rounds of targeted relief given to schools across the country. Each round of ESSER funding was authorized by a separate legislative act, each becoming law by the power of the president. ESSER I, authorized by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, ESSER II, authorized by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, and ESSER III, authorized by the American Recovery Plan (ARP) Act. DCPS to date has received over 300 million dollars in covid funds the district has stated on their Covid budget website that “At DC Public Schools, we are working as a community to build back stronger than before...including health and safety measures and the academic, social and emotional supports our students need.”²⁰ In the first round of relief DCPS pledged to spend nothing around wellness for students or teachers more focused on technology and “learning loss.” The second round DCPS pledged to spend, “\$26 million: School-based academic and social emotional acceleration.”²⁴ However further details from this showed no actual commitment to social

²² RIDE website

²³ LEAP, 15

²⁴ DCPS health benefits.

emotional learning but continued academic support. Any commitments teacher related were to technology upgrades and professional development around new curriculums. The third wave of funding DCPS pledged. "...three key focus areas: Providing stability to school budgets, accelerating learning for students most impacted by the pandemic, and the district's COVID response across safety, operations, and technology."²⁴ They also pledged,

"Over \$40 million across FY22-FY24 for Academic Acceleration and Social Emotional Learning: Funding will support multi-pronged instructional and whole child strategies to train educators, provide targeted student supports and interventions, and expand enrichment opportunities to mitigate the effects of COVID on student outcomes. In FY23, schools have been budgeted \$6M in federal funds to support school-directed evidence-based acceleration programming."²⁵

Once again putting social emotional wellness on the website but with no substantive approach for either students or staff despite how traumatic teaching has been for teachers.

Providence Public School District has been given 202,153,663 dollars from the three ESSER congressional acts. With the CARES Act and CRRSA Act Providence received 112 million dollars and with the third round of funding; the ARP Act, Providence is set to receive 128 million dollars.²⁶ According to the Annenberg Institute, "Districts submitted initial spending plans to RIDE for ESSER I in July 2020 and ESSER II in May 2021. The first wave was supposed to support immediate health needs and the transition to online learning while the second wave was meant to launch longer-term recovery."²⁷ Upon closer expectation though the money is being spent to help students as opposed to students and teachers during this difficult time. Even when looking at memorandum of understandings for both DCPS and PPSD, there is no mention of teacher wellness beyond thinking medically about COVID. There was nothing mentioned about teacher wellness, mental health, or ways to help teachers transition to the new learning model

Conclusion

²⁵ Budget engagement.

²⁶ About Us / who we are.

²⁷ Schwartz and Bolves, "Investing in the Future: How Rhode Island Districts are Spending Federal COVID-19 Funding and Why It Matters.", 5

EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

While there is much literature to support why teacher wellness is important to foster healthy schools, healthy students, and as a byproduct healthy districts. There is much work being done at the Federal level with the Department of the State Superintendent of Education which has a sub department; the Health Programming and Services whose job includes facilitating and grant funding, "...Programs and Initiatives - health programs and services designed to enhance academic achievement and health outcomes for learners, educators, families, and service providers in educational settings."²⁸ The federal policy is that there are very few if any funding streams, often they are grants around giving money towards professional development which may or may not include continuing credit hours toward social emotional intelligence of students. While there can be a byproduct that helps teachers, at the Federal level, there is no mandate around mandating wellness for teachers as a federal priority deposit initiatives like diversifying the work; of which wellness plays a very important part. Many Black Indigenous, and People of Color leave their education jobs at higher rates than their Caucasian counterparts due to racial tensions and pressures with no way to relieve the stress²⁹. Through investing dollar bills and not just having words on a website would help prospective teachers feel that the teaching profession values them more than just educators, nurses, public health servants, and mental health professionals.

With teacher programs suffering record low enrollment, the pandemic shining a beacon on the lack of teachers to the point of certain states having to call in the National Guard to have a human body in the class during the last school year. While states have begun to really look at the mental health crisis facing students there needs to be Federal action around teacher burnout and retention. While some districts have policies to combat and make sure teachers have resources besides their basic medical benefits, every district should have policies. In the case of DCPS, they have taken the time to invest in their teachers' welfare. In the case of PPSD this has not been the case; with the State taking over the next five years they are focused on closing the achievement gap for students with social emotional skills thrown in if and when there is time.

Recommendations

²⁸ "Fact Sheet: Sustaining Investments in Teachers Beyond the American." U.S. Department of Education.

²⁹ Terada, Why black teachers walk away

For ETGE to become a leader in teacher wellness, there are three suggestions that the authors think would be great steps toward having wellness be equitable across school districts. The first is to work with school districts and help them create local wellness programs. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) Division of Health and Wellness has an entire website dedicated to helping start local wellness policies for Local Education Agencies. Within these policies can be district mandated ways to support teacher wellness, reduce burnout, and the percent of teachers who stay and retire as teachers. It is known that healthy teachers have healthy classrooms and the more tools you give teachers to invest in their own wellness the more this influence will be seen in the classroom.

The second recommendation is for ETEG to begin partnering with teachers unions and through cross-sector collaboration have teacher wellness be a new negotiating subject. When looking at the collective bargaining agreements pre-Covid there was no mention of teacher wellness beyond sick leave. Teacher unions are a great resource for fighting for policies around teacher wellness at the local, state, and Federal level. Teacher unions are the voice and advocates for educators in America and a great path to better policy.

The third recommendation is to partner with college and teacher preparatory programs and work with both education, political studies, grant writing, as well as Women and BIPOC study programs to help promote teacher wellness. If you start working with programs and students before they go into the workforce there is a greater chance that a grassroots movement can begin on this topic. Teach for America (TFA) is a great program where teacher wellness is severely lacking due to the high needs of students and intensity of both working and learning for the educators. Teacher Fellowship Programs are another avenue for starting a movement on teacher wellness.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Franchesca Uribe-Rheinbolt: Graduate Student, Division of Biology and Medicine, Brown University, Providence, RI.

Mary Olive Gosselink: Urban Education Policy Masters Student, Department of Education, Brown University, Providence, RI. Montessori Guide