



Healthy Boundaries:

When a Teacher's Job Is Never Done

by Leslie Brown

School is back! It's a time for all things new—classes, students, routines. It is an excellent time for fresh starts and, perhaps, a renewed commitment to finding a healthy work-life balance.

This can be very challenging in the teaching profession. While you have good intentions to create a healthy work-life balance, there is that paper to prepare, that email to answer, that student you're worried about, that coworker who needs support... You get it. But, over time, that can compound, and a lack of clear work boundaries can be a fast track to burnout.

EdCan defines burnout as “*high work-related stress piled up over months or years, including mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion*” and it goes on to encourage “*promote working ‘smart,’ not working ‘long,’ and limiting after-hours work.*” (<https://www.edcan.ca/articles/reduce-stress-teachers/>). Teaching is often more than a career; for many, it is a passion. And when you care deeply about the work and the people you serve, the work can feel like it is never finished.

Boundaries in Teaching Are Hard

Teaching is relational work, not a collection of tasks. When unfinished tasks impact the people you care about, stepping away can be hard. Even when we know we need to stop, it can be difficult to shake the feeling that we're letting someone down. However, sometimes stepping away is exactly what needs to happen.

Easier said than done, right? It's hard to remind ourselves that boundaries are not about caring less. But quite the opposite. Boundaries allow you to work without work consuming your whole life.

Boundaries Are Not Walls

Boundaries can feel rigid. You're a teacher here to care for and support your students. Boundaries can seem at odds with that. But healthy boundaries don't have to look or feel rigid. A strong boundary is a decision about where your responsibility ends,

whether you have the capacity to take something on, or what you need to stay well.

We all have our reasons why boundaries are challenging and important. It could be your specific role, your desire to help, your compassion for students, your passion for the profession, or maybe even a bit of perfectionism. Below, we will explore things to consider when it comes to boundaries and work.

Technology

Technology has made it easier for work to follow us home. Emails, notifications and school-based platforms create a sense that we are always available. EdCan Network recommends intentionally planning for digital downtime and protecting time for non-work activities after working hours.

A boundary around technology doesn't mean not checking email outside work. Depending on the circumstances, that may not be realistic. It may simply mean making conscious choices around engaging in the moment. It could be something as simple as turning off device notifications to reduce distractions. Maybe it's choosing a specific time to check messages (and sticking to it). Perfection isn't the goal, but boundaries around technology can create more space between work and the rest of your life.

The Automatic Yes

Every yes uses capacity somewhere, and sometimes the trade-off is worthwhile. However, sometimes that yes can start to replace breaks, time with your family, sleep or the opportunity to decompress. Over time, it's easy to become stretched too thin, leading to feelings of overwhelm and fatigue.

Before you agree to something new, try replacing an immediate yes with:

“Let me check what I have on my plate and get back to you.”

By doing this, you take a pause. That pause gives you time to reflect on the impact of saying yes and

allows you to decide if you have the capacity (and interest) to take on the task.

From Caring to Carrying

The teaching profession is deeply relational; it is not just another task to get done. Caring about students and their families is part of what makes teaching, teaching. But there is a fine line between caring about someone and carrying what belongs to them. Research with Canadian educators found that “taking on the trauma of other people” was a significant part of the experience of compassion fatigue, while clear boundaries between school and home were associated with greater compassion satisfaction (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2021).

This doesn’t mean you need to become less caring, or that you turn away students who need support. What it does mean is exploring and recognizing the limits of your role and your own capacity. You can listen, connect and support without becoming responsible for fixing what is happening. Sometimes a helpful question is simply:

Am I supporting this person, or have I started carrying something that isn’t mine to carry?

Staying in your lane is not a lack of compassion; it allows you to keep caring without becoming depleted.

Sometimes Good Enough Is Good Enough

There are aspects of teaching that deserve your very best. But not everything requires the same investment of time and energy. Sometimes it is worth asking:

Does this need to be excellent, or does it need to be done?

That lesson plan may not need that extra hour of preparation, that resource may not need three extra revisions, or that email you just wrote may not be perfect, but it’s enough.

This may feel like you are lowering your professional standards, which can be difficult. But it really isn’t. Instead, remind yourself that it’s about using your capacity intentionally and asking whether the extra effort is adding value.

Protect Things Outside of Your Professional Life

What helps you feel like you outside of your professional role? Exercise, dinner with friends, walking the dog, reading, music, etc. Whatever restores you, make time for it. Ask yourself:

What do I want to protect outside of work this year? What boundary do I need to protect it?

Boundaries Aren’t Easy

If good boundaries haven’t traditionally been your thing, this will be hard. Setting a boundary does not always feel good. You may feel guilty, and you may worry someone will be disappointed. That discomfort does not mean the boundary was wrong.

In a helping profession, you may be accustomed to being highly available or responsible for others. In fact, for some, it may be a part of your identity. When something is unfamiliar, it is uncomfortable. Instead of taking the boundary off-ramp, get curious:

What am I worried will happen if I maintain this boundary? Is that based on what is happening, or what I imagine might happen?

Sometimes the hardest expectations to challenge are our own.

Boundaries Aren’t the Whole Answer

It is important to acknowledge that boundaries are not the solution to every cause of burnout and fatigue. Those things can also be driven by unreasonable workloads, insufficient resources and systemic pressures. Teacher well-being is not the sole responsibility of individual teachers. Workplace demands, resources and conditions matter.

Sometimes the problem isn’t that you need a better boundary. Teaching is a demanding role in a complex system. Sometimes, too much is being asked of you.

Boundaries are not going to fix all the challenges experienced in the workplace. They are one piece of a complicated puzzle. However, what they will do is help you be more intentional about what you take on, keep tabs on where your energy goes and notice when you’re becoming depleted.

Reflection

As you head into the new school year, it may be valuable to do some boundary planning. Below are some reflection questions that may help guide your thinking:

- 1.) What is important to me outside of work, and what boundary could help me protect time for it?
- 2.) When am I most likely to say yes when I’m already at capacity?
- 3.) What am I carrying right now that is not my responsibility to fix?
- 4.) Where could I let “good enough” be enough?
- 5.) What is one boundary I can implement to make work feel more manageable and sustainable this year?

The goal for this school year isn’t perfect balance or boundaries. It’s simply noticing sooner when work is asking for more than you can give and deciding what you want to do about it.

Reference

Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA). (2021). *Compassion fatigue, emotional labour & educator burnout: Phase 2 report—Analysis of the interview data*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Teachers’ Association.

Rodger, S. (2019, September 4). *How can we reduce stress and increase support for teachers?* EdCan Network. <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/reduce-stress-teachers/>

Leslie Brown is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance, please contact Lori Hewitt (733-3242), lhewitt@eapnlteachers.ca, Kenda Riggs (733-3265), kriggs@eapnlteachers.ca or Leslie Brown (733-3269), lbrown@eapnlteachers.ca.