

Identifying and Addressing Underlying Causes of School Staff Stress & Well-Being

Presented by

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September 11, 2026

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Introductions



Cheryl Holm-Hansen, PhD



Mark Sander, PsyD

**Please introduce
yourself in the chat!**

Three session series



September 11:

**Roadmap to understanding and assessing school staff stress
and burnout**

Three session series



September 11:

Roadmap to understanding and assessing school staff stress and burnout



September 18:

Strategies to effectively address root causes of school staff stress and burnout

Three session series



September 11:

Roadmap to understanding and assessing school staff stress and burnout



September 18:

Strategies to effectively address root causes of school staff stress and burnout



September 25:

Creating and successfully implementing a plan to address root causes of school staff stress and burnout

Midwest Center for School Mental Health

BUILDING THE CONDITIONS FOR STAFF WELL-BEING

A Toolkit for Addressing the Root
Causes of School Staff Stress and Burnout



Cheryl A. Holm-Hansen, PhD
Mark Sander, PsyD

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Upcoming toolkit

- Recommended approach for identifying needs, prioritizing solutions, and making changes
- Best current evidence for specific staff stress-reduction strategies
- Strategies for ensuring successful implementation and systems change

Toolkit will be shared with all attendees at the conclusion of the series

Upcoming learning/consultation series



Planning for an 8-session learning/consultation cohort is underway

More information will be shared at an upcoming session

Today's agenda



Background – What do we know about school staff stress?



Process – How can we understand and address staff needs?



Look forward – How will the next two sessions fill in missing pieces?

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Background

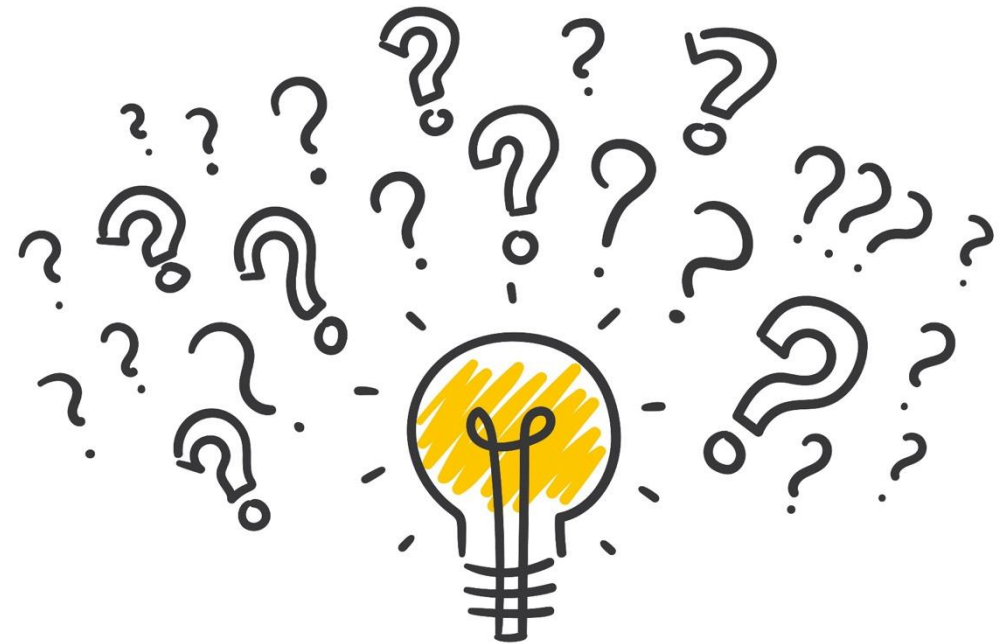
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What do you think?

What trends/challenges are you seeing related to staff stress or burnout?

- OR -

What are you hoping to gain today to help support staff well-being?



2026 State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND)

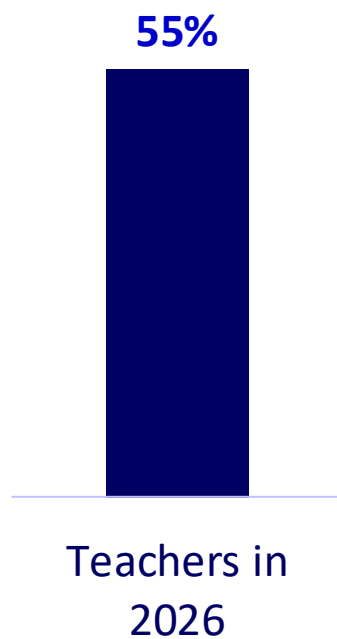
In 2026, teachers were more likely than other working adults to report poor well-being on every indicator—a consistent pattern since 2021



2026 State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND)



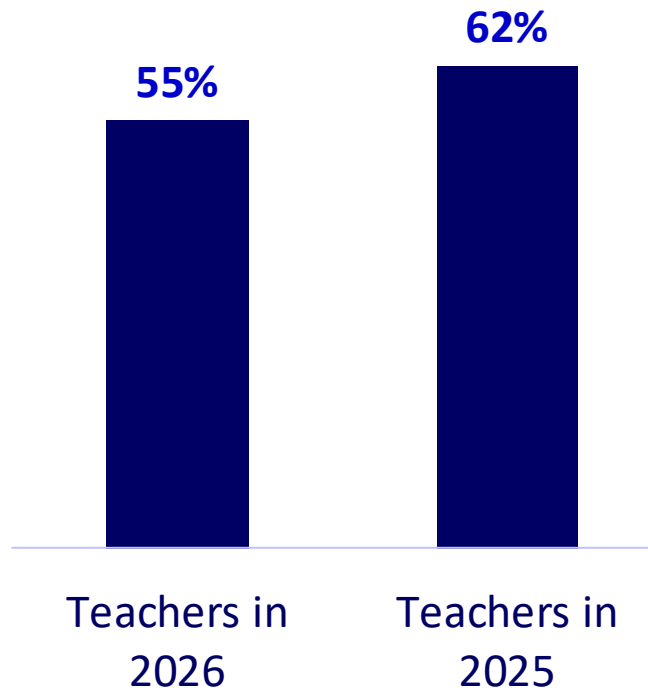
Percentage of teachers experiencing significant job-related stress



2026 State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND)



Percentage of teachers experiencing significant job-related stress

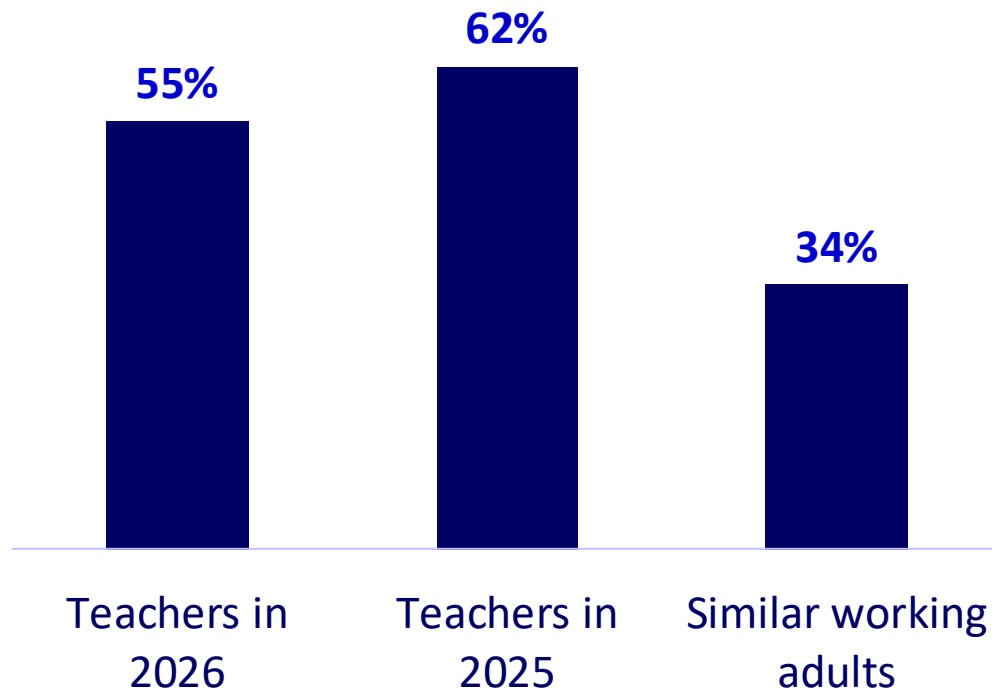


This is actually a slight improvement from 2025...

2026 State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND)



Percentage of teachers experiencing significant job-related stress

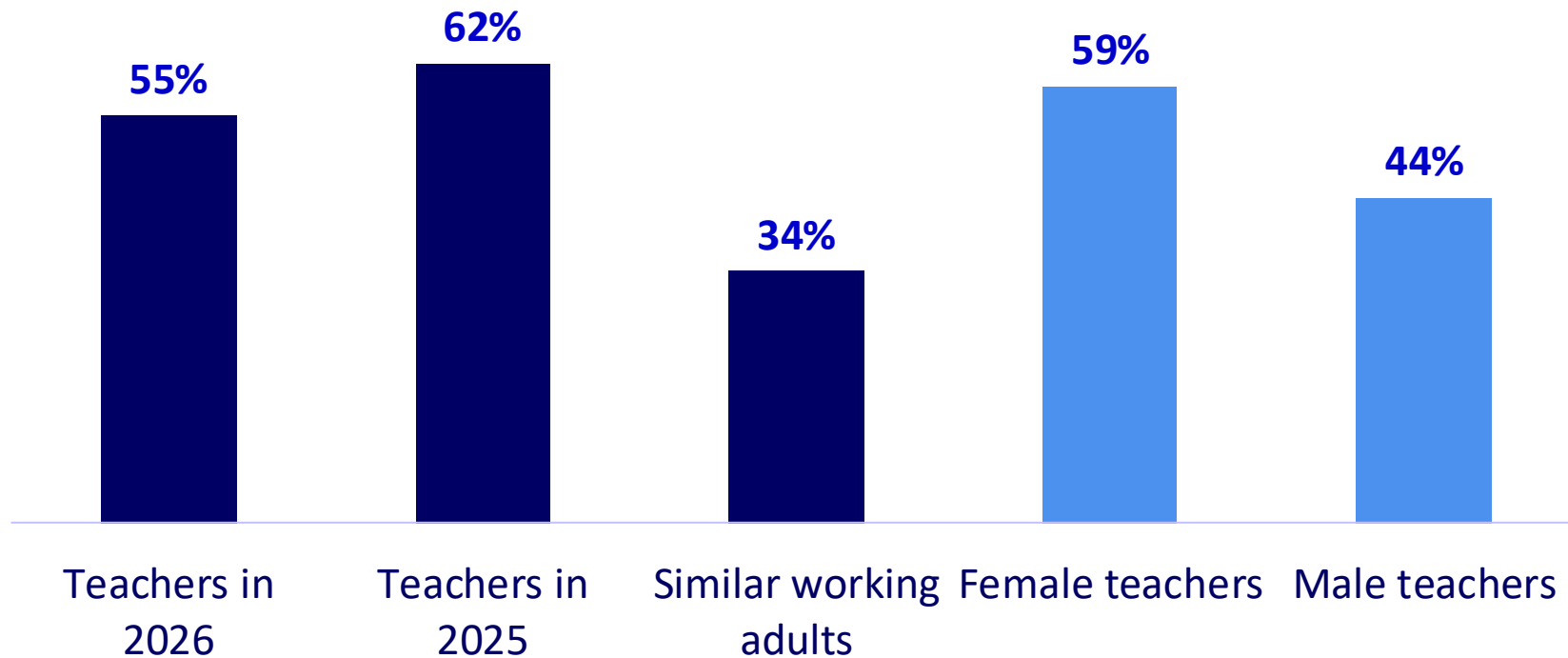


...but still considerably higher than the rate for similar working adults

2026 State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND)



Percentage of teachers experiencing significant job-related stress



Rates are especially high for female teachers as compared to male teachers

2026 State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND)



- Teachers also were more likely than other working adults to report **burnout**, difficulty **coping** with job-related stress, and symptoms of **depression**
- The results also highlight **retention** challenges, with 18% of teachers saying they were likely to leave their job by the end of the school year
- Only 23% of teachers said they planned to remain in teaching as long as they were able

American Federation of Teachers – Survey of 1,300 educators (2023)



- *“My administrator takes my concerns seriously” – 47%*
- *“At the end of the day, I’m too exhausted to do anything” – 47%*
- *“My administrator encourages staff to set healthy boundaries related to work” - 39%*
- *“Staff at my school share challenges without being judged” – 35%*

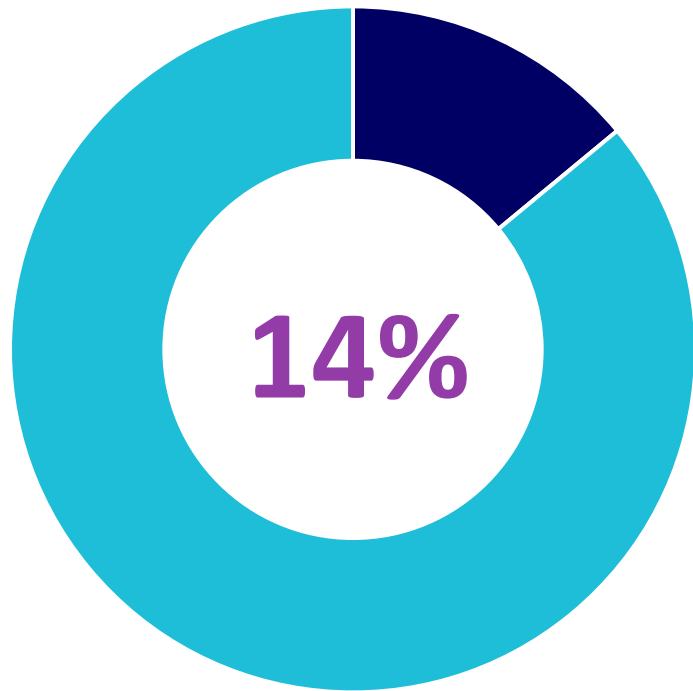
American Federation of Teachers – Survey of 1,300 educators (2023)



“I feel like much of this year I’ve been in crisis mode, crisis-hopping. When you’re living that way, it’s not sustainable, there’s no longevity. And you’re not thinking long-term either. It’s the complete antithesis of well-being.”

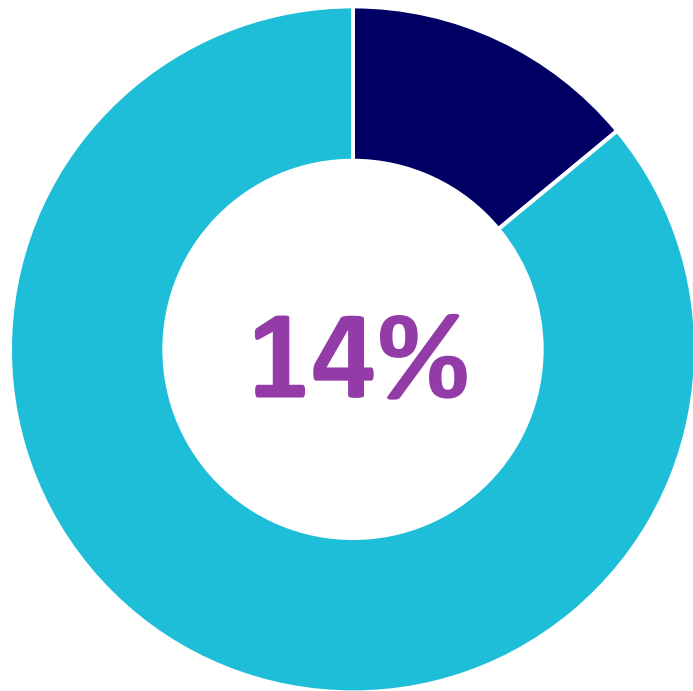
– American Federation of Teachers educator

American Federation of Teachers – Survey of 1,300 educators (2023)

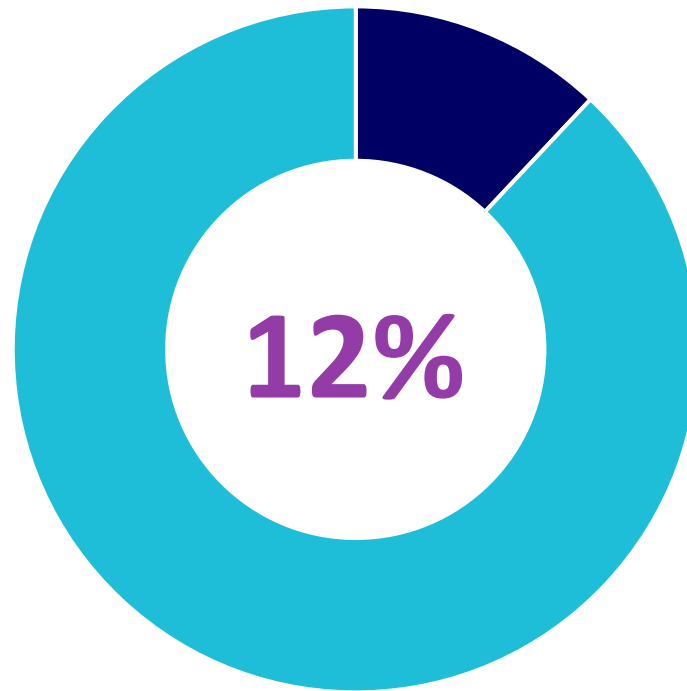


feel they are **adequately compensated** for the work that they do

American Federation of Teachers – Survey of 1,300 educators (2023)

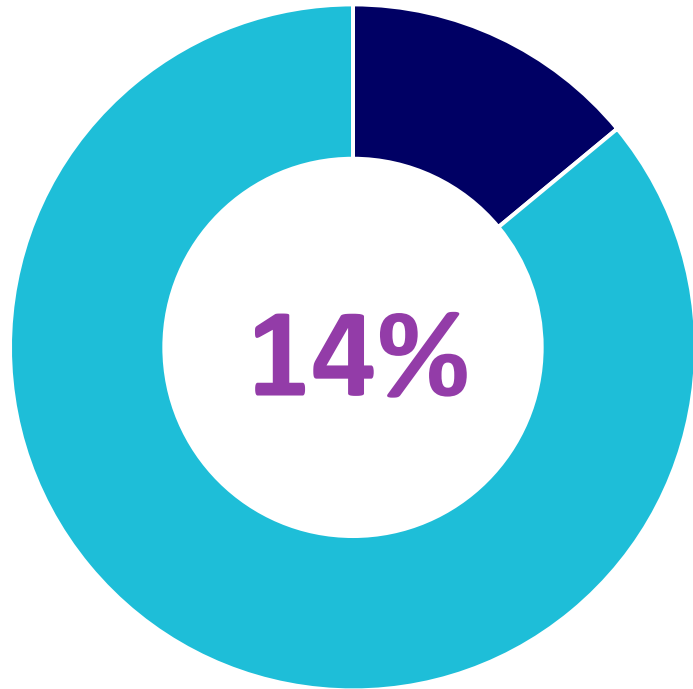


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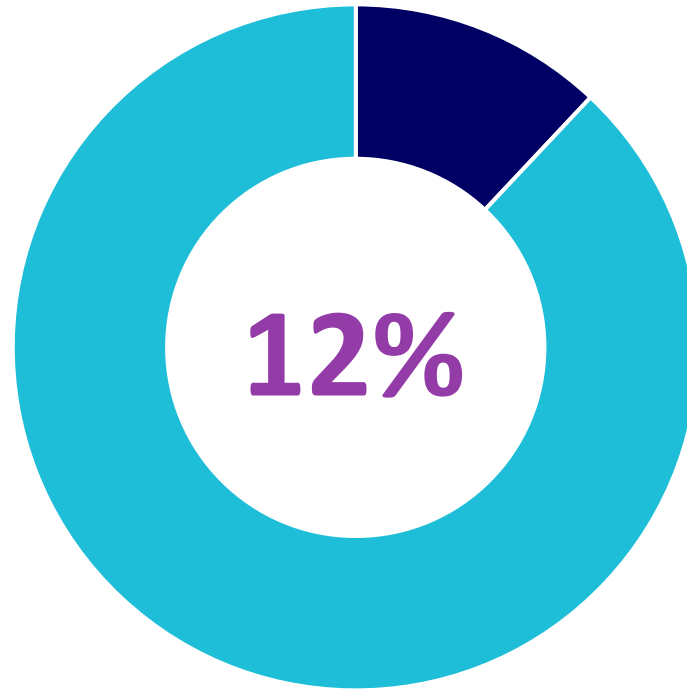


feel they have the **staff they need** to adequately meet student needs

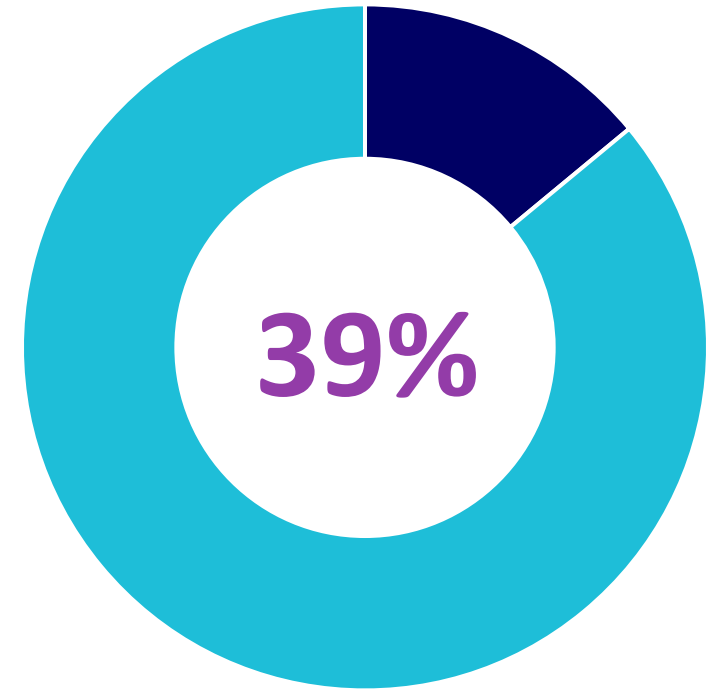
American Federation of Teachers – Survey of 1,300 educators (2023)



feel they are **adequately compensated** for the work that they do



feel they have the **staff they need** to adequately meet student needs



feel their school buildings are **physically and emotionally safe**

Stress impacts all school staff – not just teachers



It can get better



Research shows that targeted strategies to reduce staff stress/ burnout and to increase well-being can be effective

Impact of staff well-being initiatives



Improved physical/
mental health

Impact of staff well-being initiatives



Improved physical/
mental health



Increased job
satisfaction, morale,
and effectiveness

Impact of staff well-being initiatives

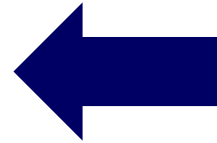


Students

Increased school
connectedness

Improved behavior

Enhanced learning



Improved physical/
mental health



Increased job
satisfaction, morale,
and effectiveness

Impact of staff well-being initiatives



Students

Increased school connectedness

Improved behavior

Enhanced learning



Improved physical/
mental health



Increased job
satisfaction, morale,
and effectiveness



Schools

Improved school
climate

Reduced staff
absence and
turnover

Not just self-care

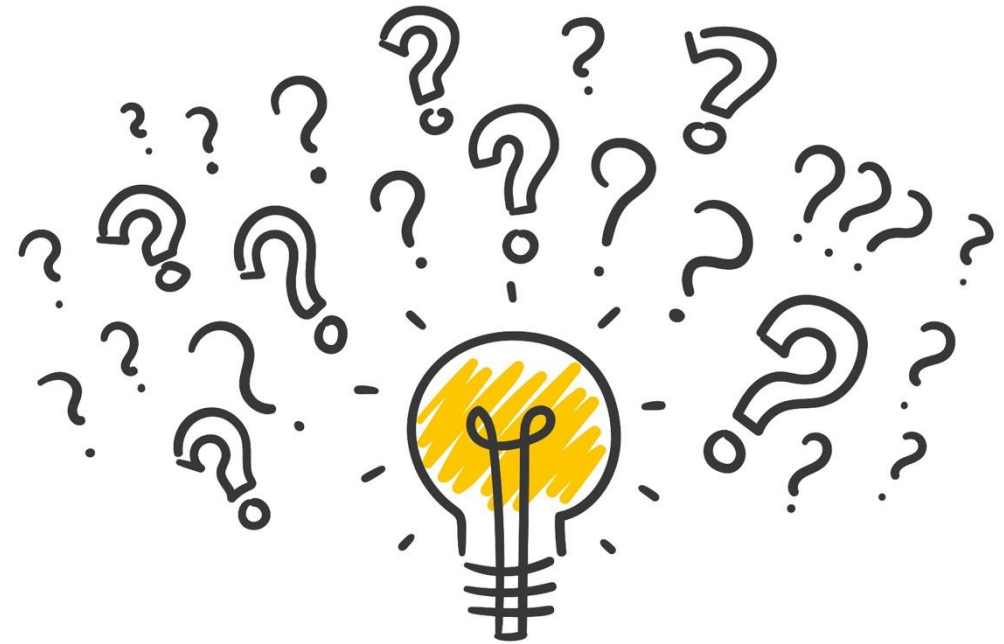
Self-care is
important...

but not sufficient
without
organizational efforts
to reduce causes of
stress and promote
collective well-being



What do you think?

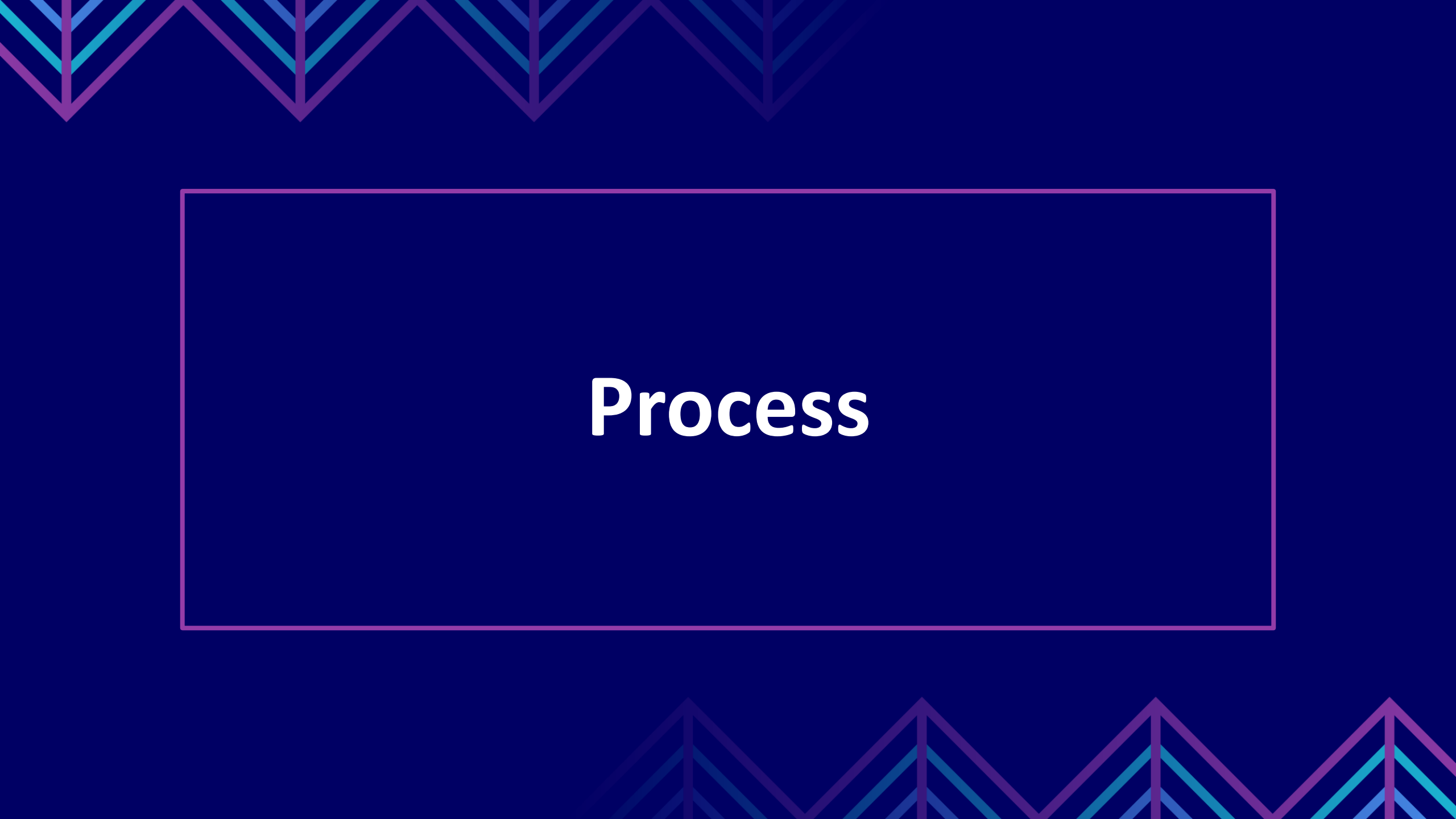
What do you see as
primary causes of staff
stress or burnout in your
schools or districts?



Common causes of school staff stress

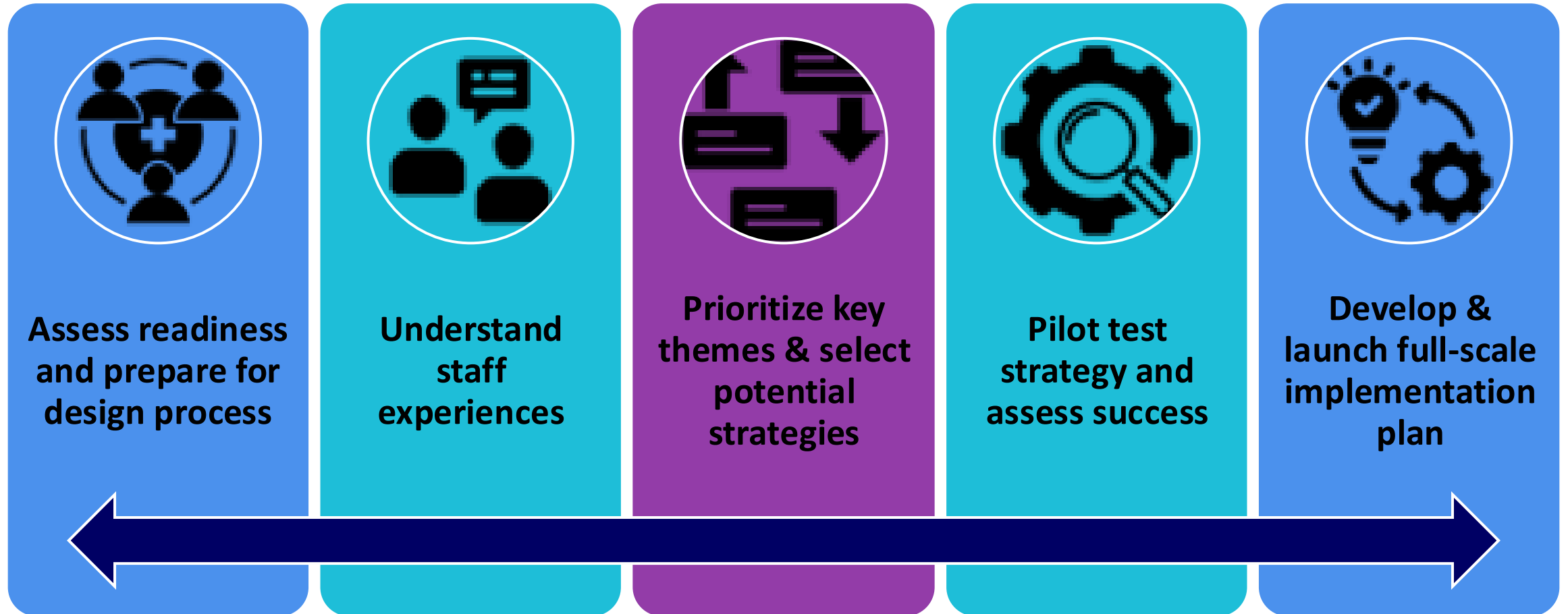


- Workload and time
- Staffing and resources
- Leadership support
- Voice, autonomy and influence
- Collegial relationships and belonging
- Psychological safety
- Student behavior and student-support systems
- Role clarity and competing expectations
- Professional learning and coaching
- Recognition and professional meaning
- Compensation, benefits, & material security
- Equity, discrimination, & inclusion
- Access to mental health support
- Work-life boundaries

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Process

Our process



Toolkit resources

- More detailed instructions
- Worksheets
- Examples
- Templates
- Supplemental resources

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Phase 1:
**Assess readiness and prepare for
design process**

Three phase 1 goals



- Assess readiness
- Ensure leadership support
- Build a diverse design team

What does readiness look like?

1. Motivation

Do we believe that this work matters?
Are we willing to invest in it?



What does readiness look like?

2. General capacity

Do we have the organizational conditions needed to support meaningful change?



What does readiness look like?

3. Project-specific readiness

Are we prepared to lead this specific project?



Leadership support



- School/district leaders ready to champion this work
- Consistent supportive communication
- Willingness to be challenged and to change practices
- History of listening to staff perspectives and making changes

Design team composition



Design team should represent a diverse group of 8-12 staff, including employees:

- With different roles (including 1-2 administrators)
- Working in different grade levels or departments
- With varying levels of experience
- Representing diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds
- Representing union or employee-association representatives, where applicable

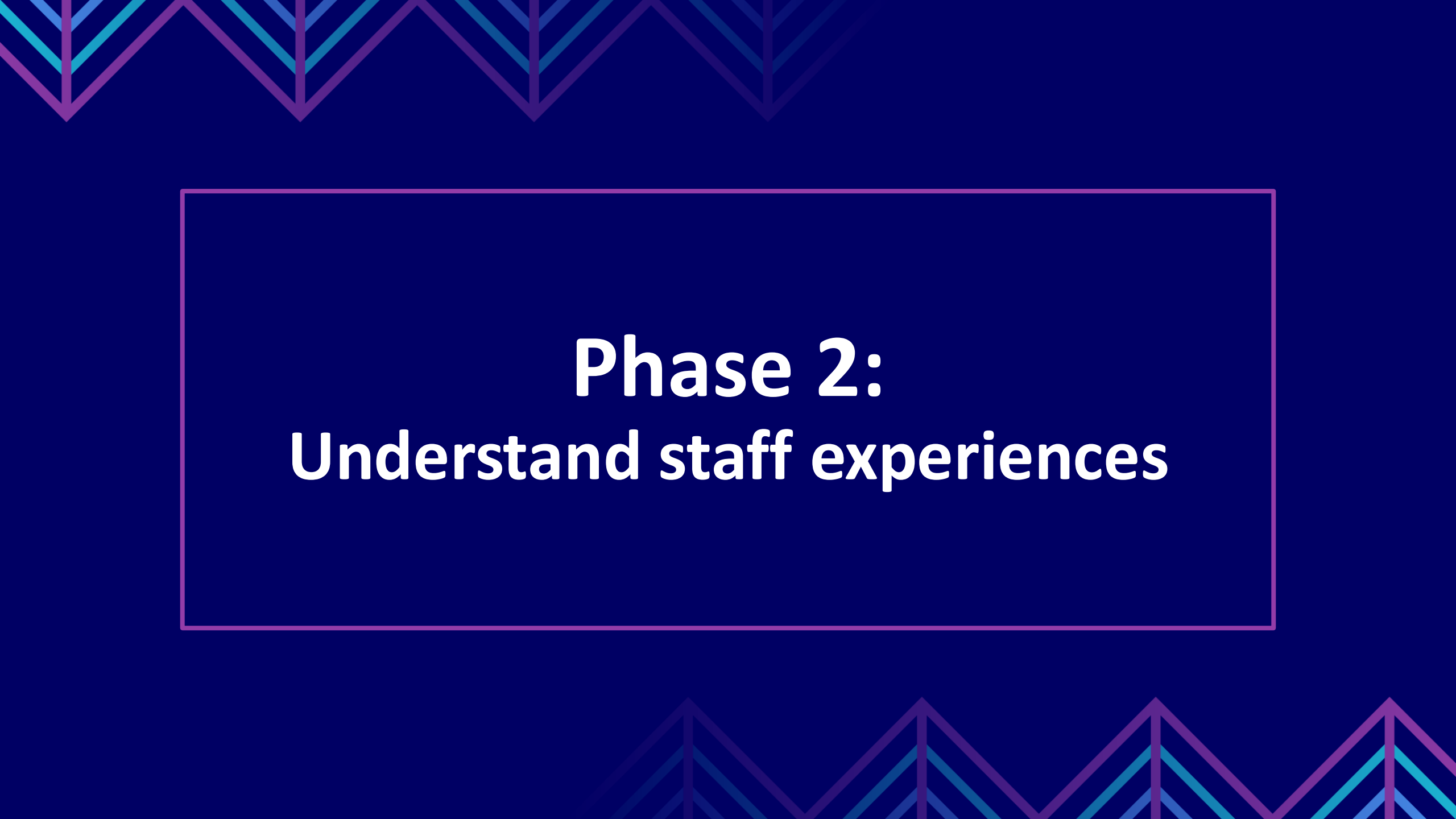
Design team roles



- Overseeing the process of identifying staff needs and concerns
- Interpreting findings with staff
- Developing problem statements
- Generating and assessing possible strategies to promote staff well-being
- Overseeing pilot testing of strategies to address staff needs
- Monitoring implementation and recommending adjustments

What do you think?





Phase 2:

Understand staff experiences

Multiple forms of staff input



Survey of ALL staff

- Assess core aspects of staff stress
- Be mindful of confidentiality/ safety/ neutrality/ transparency



Targeted interviews/listening sessions

- Take opportunity to go deeper in learning about staff experiences
- Be purposeful in selecting sample of staff to interview



Direct observation



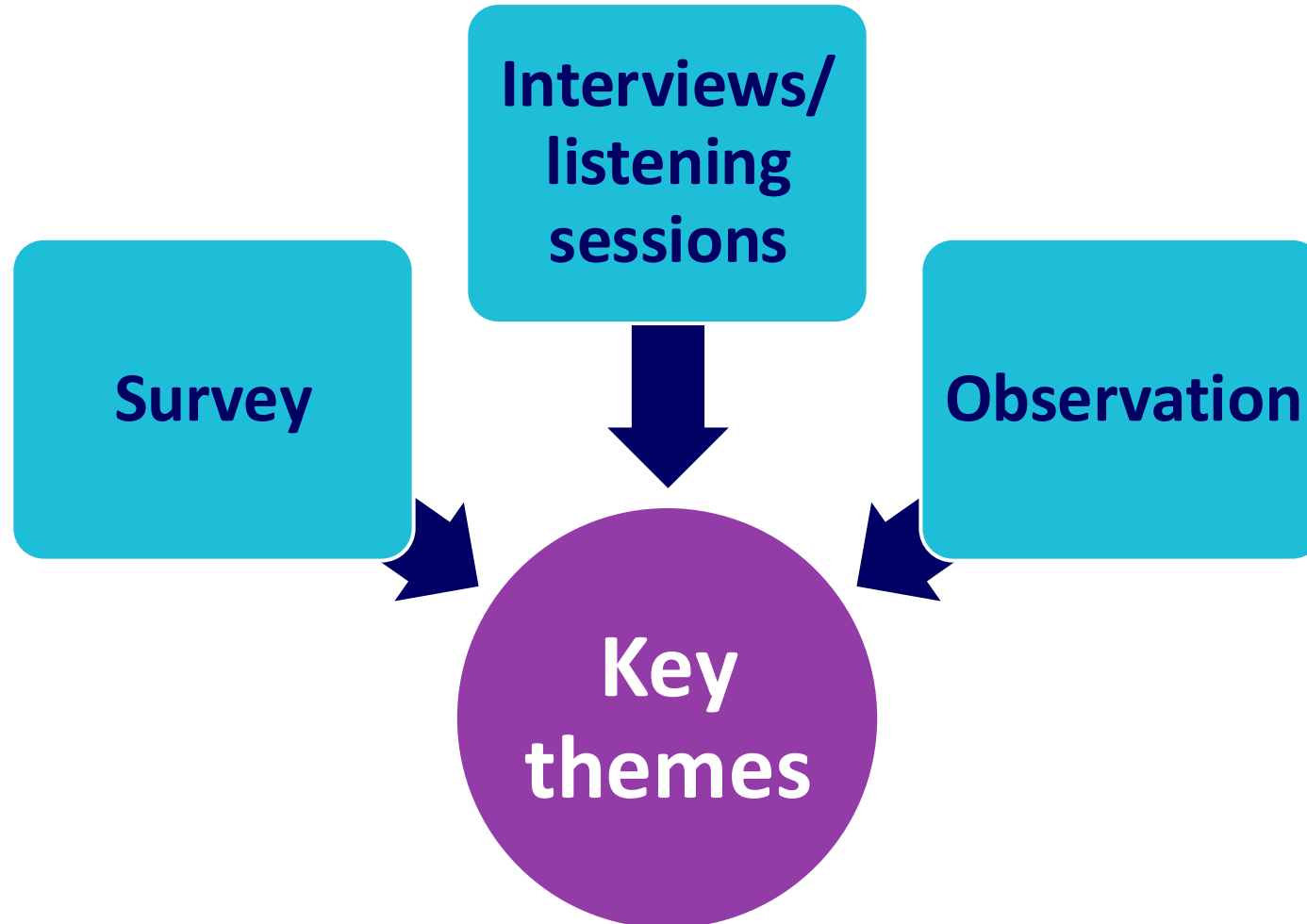
- Shadow staff members in several roles
- Map a teacher's or paraprofessional's typical day
- Observe arrival, transitions, lunch, dismissal and crisis-response periods
- Track interruptions to planning time
- Review meeting schedules
- Document duplicate data entry
- Count communication channels staff must monitor
- Examine how often employees cover vacant positions or absent colleagues

What do you think?



Phase 3:
**Prioritize key themes & select
potential strategies**

Identify key themes



Synthesize information into themes



Use a wall, spreadsheet or digital board to group findings into themes

Sample themes



- Planning time is regularly lost to coverage
- Staff do not know how leadership responds to concerns
- Behavior incidents create repeated classroom disruption
- Too many initiatives compete for attention
- Support staff are excluded from decisions
- After-hours communication has become normalized
- Staff do not have access to mental health supports

Describe each theme



- Symptoms
- Contributing conditions
- Root causes
- Groups most affected
- Existing strengths
- What is within school control
- What requires district or policy action

Sample theme description



- **Symptom:** Teachers report exhaustion, low morale
- **Contributing conditions:** Coverage of other classes, lost planning time, staff vacancies, severe shortage of substitute teachers, frequent last-minute teacher absences
- **Root causes:** Uncompetitive daily pay rates for substitute teachers compared to neighboring districts, rigid hiring requirements that deter potential applicants, lack of a transparent system for managing internal coverage
- **Groups most affected:** Elective and specialist teachers
- **Existing Strengths:** Strong culture of mutual staff support

Sample theme description



- **What is within school control:** Creating a transparent, equitable rotation schedule for coverage; Eliminating non-essential staff meetings to return planning time to teachers; Consolidating classes in large spaces when safe and operationally feasible.
- **What requires district or policy action:** Substantially increasing substitute pay rates; Hiring permanent, building-level floating substitutes; Changing licensing/hiring requirements for substitute teachers

Uncovering root cause

There are multiple strategies for exploring root causes

One easy strategy is
“The 5 Whys”



Example



1. **Why are teachers exhausted by classroom behavior?** They are spending a disproportionate amount of class time managing minor disruptions from a small group of students.
2. **Why are these disruptions happening repeatedly with the same students?** The standard behavior interventions (like detentions or loss of privileges) are not changing or de-escalating the students' behavior.
3. **Why are standard interventions failing to change the behavior?** The interventions punish the symptoms, but do not address the underlying emotional or academic triggers causing the students to act out.
4. **Why aren't the underlying triggers being addressed?** Counselors are not available to support the students (or to help teachers develop individualized behavior intervention plans)
5. **Why are counselors unavailable to support students and teachers?** The school's student support team (counselors and psychologists) is severely understaffed, forcing them to focus only on extreme crises rather than proactive, day-to-day teacher coaching

Develop clear need statements



Convert themes into staff-centered problem statements.

A useful format is: **[Staff group] needs a way to [important need] because [evidence-based explanation of the current barrier].**

Sample need statements



- Classroom teachers need reliable planning time because coverage assignments and unscheduled meetings regularly consume the time intended for preparation and collaboration.
- Paraprofessionals need clearer role expectations and access to behavior support because they frequently manage complex student needs without sufficient training or authority.
- Support staff need to be included in staff meetings and recognition events because they feel disconnected from colleagues and decision-making

Prioritize needs using a transparent process

Trying to address everything at once recreates the overload the process is meant to reduce



Prioritize needs using a transparent process

A useful portfolio could include:

- One **quick improvement**
- One **working-conditions change**
- One **longer-term systems issue**



Potential criteria for prioritization



- **Impact:** How strongly does this affect staff well-being?
- **Reach:** How many employees are affected?
- **Equity:** Does it disproportionately affect a particular group?
- **Urgency:** Is there a safety, retention or operational risk?
- **Actionability:** Can the school influence it?
- **Evidence:** Is there evidence that addressing it could help?
- **Feasibility:** Are time, authority and resources available?
- **Strategic fit:** Does it align with school and district priorities?

Generate possible solutions with staff



Conduct structured design sessions with a broader group of employees

Idea-generating prompts

- What could we eliminate?
- What could we simplify?
- What could we redistribute?
- What could we protect?
- What could we automate?
- What could we stop doing during high-demand periods?
- What support could be brought closer to staff?
- What could staff decide locally?
- What would the ideal experience look like?
- What is a small version we could test next month?



Sample brainstorming: Lost planning time



- A rotating coverage team
- Protected planning blocks that cannot be used for routine meetings
- Fewer duty assignments
- A substitute reserve
- Redesigned specialist schedules
- Monthly meeting-free weeks
- Compensation when planning time is lost
- An online process for requesting and tracking coverage
- Elimination of redundant documentation

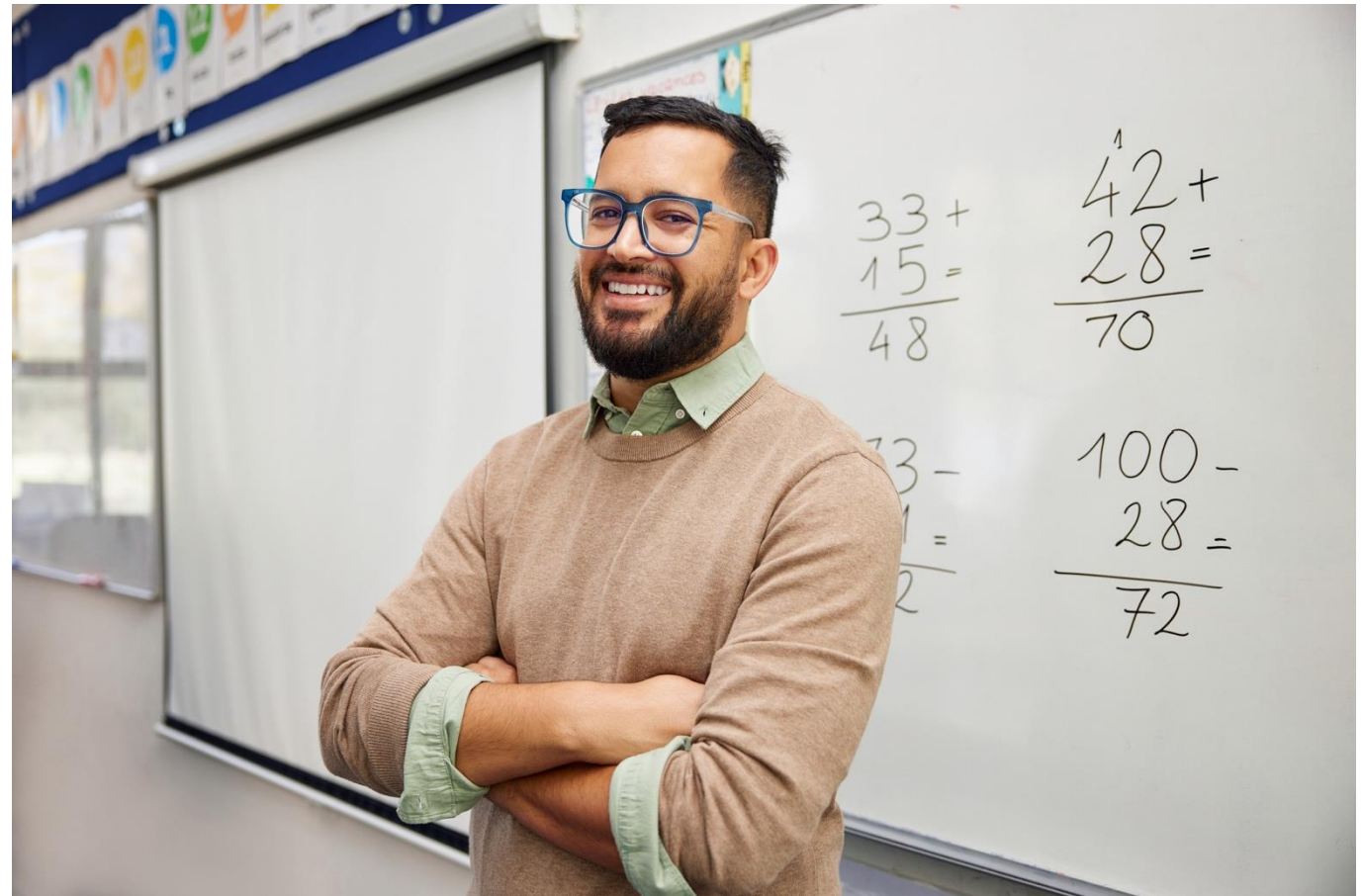
Screen strategies against evidence and design criteria



- Does it address a root cause?
- Is it supported by research or strong practice evidence?
- Does it reduce demands, increase resources, or both?
- Does it benefit the groups most affected?
- Could it create unintended burdens?
- Does it require unpaid staff effort?
- Is it within the school's authority?
- What staffing, time, and money are required?
- Can it be tested on a small scale?
- How will success be measured?
- What must be stopped to make room for it?

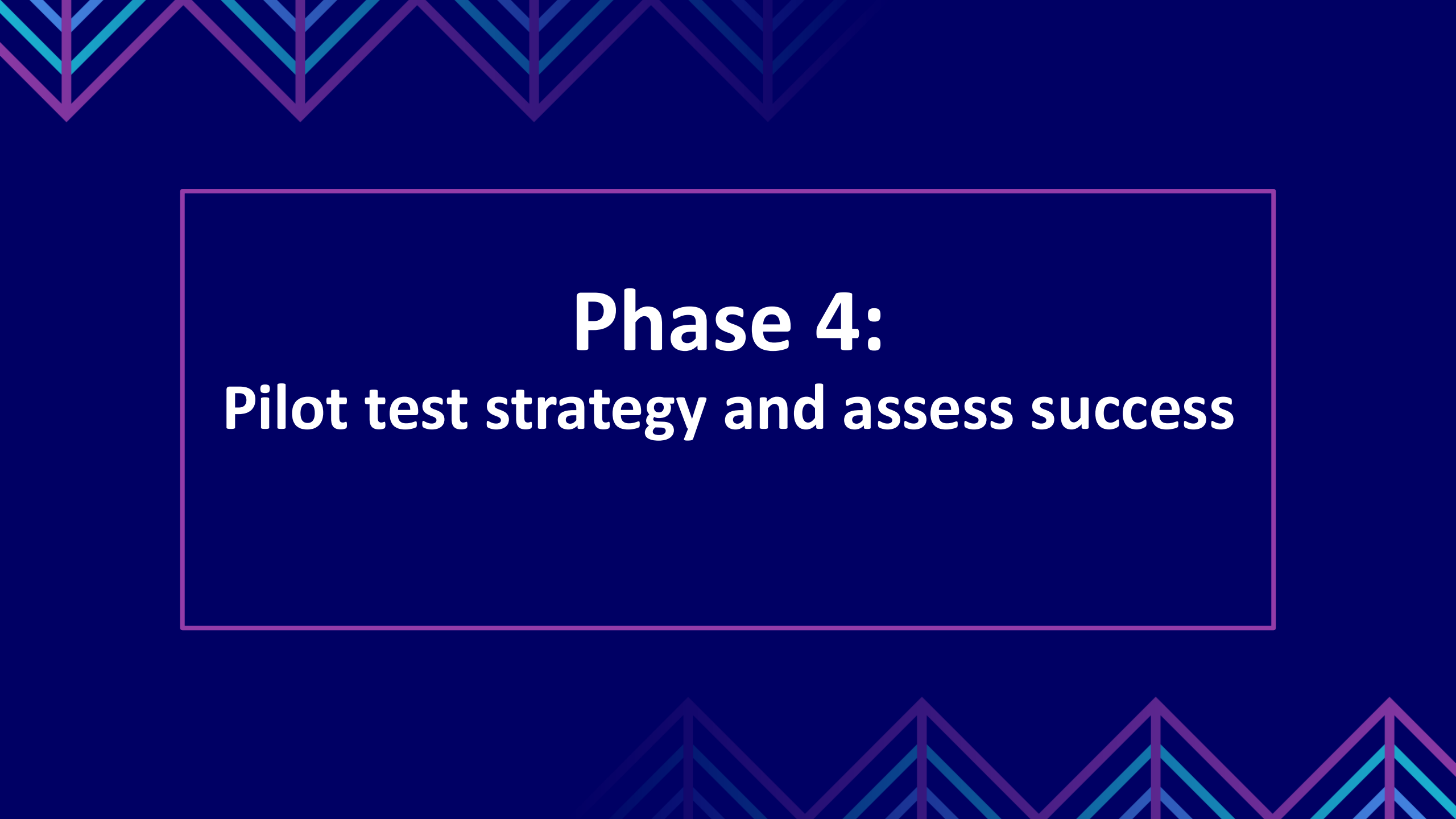
Reminder...Session 2 (September 18) will review potential strategies

- Leadership and supervision
- Workload and staffing
- Student support
- Culture and collaboration
- Support for new initiatives
- Support for staff well-being/mental health



What do you think?





Phase 4:

Pilot test strategy and assess success

Design a small pilot test



- Target need
- Staff group involved
- Intervention components
- Start and end dates
- Person responsible
- Required resources
- Current practice to stop or change
- Measures
- Conditions for expansion, revision or discontinuation

Sample pilot tests



- Test a protected-planning protocol in one grade level for six weeks.
- Pilot a rapid-response behavior-support process with one student-support team.
- Test a staff-concern tracking and follow-up system.
- Redesign one recurring meeting before changing all meetings
- Pilot job coaching with five volunteer teachers
- Test an after-hours communication boundary for one quarter
- Test a revised grading process in one high school subject

Sample measures of success

Outcome measures

- Perceived workload
- Stress or emotional exhaustion
- Access to support
- Planning time retained
- Psychological safety
- Job satisfaction
- Intent to remain
- Sense of belonging
- Confidence in managing difficult situations

Process measures

- Percentage of protected planning periods preserved
- Number of support requests receiving a response within the target time
- Coaching sessions completed
- Staff participation
- Administrator follow-up rate

Balancing measures

- Did workload shift to another staff group?
- Did students lose necessary support?
- Did meetings decrease but email volume increase?
- Did the strategy create more paperwork?
- Did only certain staff have access?
- Did implementation require unpaid time?

Conduct the pilot test...and collect feedback

- Two-minute pulse surveys
- Brief staff interviews
- Weekly implementation logs
- Observation
- Small-group reflection sessions
- Anonymous comment forms



Conduct the pilot test...and collect feedback

- What is working?
- What is confusing?
- What is burdensome?
- Who is benefiting?
- Who is not benefiting?
- What should be changed now?
- Is the strategy addressing the original need?



Phase 5:
**Develop & launch full-scale
implementation plan**

Develop an implementation plan



- What exactly will change?
- Who owns each responsibility?
- What resources are required?
- What will stop?

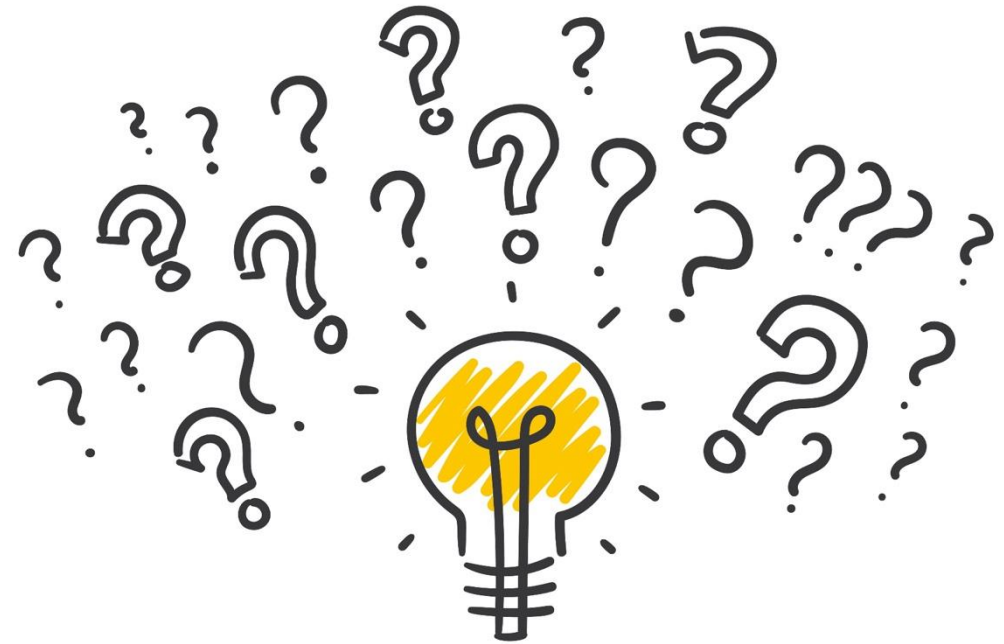
Primary focus of session 3

- Implementation planning
- Necessary supports for implementation
- Equity and accessibility considerations



What do you think?

What is one thing that you could do now to identify and address underlying causes of staff stress and well-being?



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What comes next?

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Next steps



- **September 18: Strategies to effectively address root causes of school staff stress and burnout**
- **September 25: Creating and successfully implementing a plan**
- **Distribution of toolkit**
- **Opportunity to participate in learning/consultation cohort**

What do you think?



What questions do you
have about what we
discussed today?

What do you hope we
address in the next two
sessions?

