

Onward Summary

By Elena Aguilar

You may have heard that teaching is vocational - that it's a calling. The reality is that teaching is inherently a highly stressful profession.

Onward is a guide to cultivating educator resilience, with the aim to empower educators, and help manage stress. Aguilar provides a comprehensive framework that accounts for the politics, economics, policies, and how a school's distinctive culture, impacts teachers and education.

Did you know that 70% of teachers quit within their first five years? The stress and mental-health implications of teaching are often brushed aside, and no one knows this more than Elena Aguilar. Aguilar is a leadership coach and author, with 25 years of teaching experience. She designed *Onward*, to make teacher resilience a reality. Aguilar understands what teaching is all about, and she gets the big picture.

Aguilar wants us to become change agents for education. By drawing on positive psychology, neuroscience, and mindfulness, she provides helpful tools and wisdom to empower us as teachers. Furthermore, the anecdotes and insights gained from her work, fill the book with practical knowledge for teachers, with an additional insert in each chapter specifically for school leaders.

This brief summary examines why *Onward* should be an essential text for anyone in education. It has a teacher-friendly structure, where each chapter fits into the rhythm and flow of an annual school calendar, and

they also explore one of twelve resilience habits. These habits link to our dispositions, which are vital to who we are and how we act.

Number One: Gain Better Self-Awareness

The first step is to be clear on our core values so that what we do, fits comfortably with what matters most to us. If school leaders help staff do this, they can revisit their school's mission statement to explore how the two align.

Aguilar suggests that personality questionnaires such as the Myers Briggs, are highly useful for staff. Part of the Myers Briggs test, helps us establish whether we're extrovert or introvert. Knowing this will help us understand how and when to replenish our energy, which is crucial in any busy school environment.

Aguilar's experience of growing up outside of a dominant culture, has sensitized her to socio-political identity. She discusses the need to develop awareness around identity, and culture, to identify when we may be imposing our way of seeing things on others, which is crucial in a learning environment. All of us need to realize, that our cultural perspective may not be a fact of life. By being more self-aware, we can pinpoint why we may feel disrespected at times, and identify the strengths of our own socio-political identities.

Number Two: Understand Emotions

Habit number two invites us to engage with our feelings. A teacher's central role is to help children manage their emotions, but how often do we stop to acknowledge our own feelings and emotions? Aguilar explains

that we react to an event by attaching emotion to it, which sets up a physical, mental, and behavioral response cycle. If we can identify where we are in this cycle, we can intervene at any step.

Aguilar provides a helpful list of words that we can use to better articulate, and unpack our emotions and then invites us to work with them constructively. For instance, have you ever felt that anger is an emotion that schools don't deal with? Anger can't be ignored, and it also has a positive side. For example, it can fuel energy to correct wrongs.

Conversely, it can also smother other emotions and cause us to act inappropriately. The solution, is to investigate an emotion like anger by setting aside a time to have constructive conversations about it at school.

Number Three: Tell Empowering Stories

Narrative is an essential tool for any teacher. Stories provide context, and our own life stories tell others who we are and what we hope for. Aguilar encourages us to make our stories empowering. She uses the example of a school principal, who might walk right past us. We often assume this is because of something we've done. More likely, it's because they could have something else on their mind.

Our storytelling minds often gravitate towards the negative, so it's crucial to craft stories that build our optimism, as optimism is key to resilience.

Number Four: Build a Community

A school is more than just a learning environment; it's a community. We're

all aware of the importance of social connection, and that it's a primary need. So, it makes sense that a healthy school community strengthens our resilience.

Toxic cultures are incredibly harmful. These cultures can sap energy and creative thinking. Aguilar defines a healthy school culture as one that encourages listening, and where we celebrate both individual and group accomplishments. Furthermore, we should always address unhealthy conflicts, and make decision-making more transparent.

This section provides tips on practicing empathic listening, monitoring body language, and checking our ability to interact cross-culturally. Unhealthy conflict, and addressing gossiping and other poor communicative behaviors are also addressed.

Finally, her message regarding community building is about reducing fear, and not judging or isolating others. A healthy community welcomes all with empathy and compassion.

Number Five: Grow and Develop Mindfulness in Schools

How many thoughts do you think you have each day?

Research indicates it's at least a whopping 65,000. This number is astonishing. It's unsurprising that we can get distracted by our own thoughts. The difficulty with this behavior is that distractions make us unable to be fully in the present moment. What if, instead of getting so entangled in our thinking, we could notice them as mental events that

come and go?

Aguilar suggests seeing, accepting, and letting go of thoughts with an attitude of compassion, which will help us be more at ease and present. Mindfulness isn't just a buzzword, it's something that should be taught and acknowledged from a young age. Mindfulness can help cultivate a moment-to-moment awareness, which, if practiced for just a few minutes every day, has mental and physical benefits. Importantly, it opens us up to experience humor and joy more robustly.

Number Six: Practice Self-Care

If you're a teacher, you probably think that this is easier said than done. Why is it that educators find it so hard to put themselves first? Aguilar explains that it's due to four gaps in self-care.

Firstly there's a knowledge gap, which means we're often missing relevant information. Secondly, there's a skills gap, where we don't have the skills of self-care. Thirdly, there's the gap in will, where we don't think we need to bother with looking after ourselves. Finally, there's an emotional gap.

Teachers are notorious for overcommitting to things because we don't want to say 'no' to anyone. This section's central premise is unpacking these mindsets and providing practical ideas and advice on how to establish more balance.

Number Seven: Focus on the Bright Side

It's a cliched idea to tell people to focus on the positives. However, focusing on what we're grateful for, and what's going well, provably work wonders on the mind.

Our negativity-seeking brains try to persuade us to dwell on possible threats. That's why it's so easy to get caught up in negative thoughts. To counter this, Aguilar sets us the challenge of noticing what's going well in our classrooms. This strengths-based approach can broaden our perspective.

Appreciative Inquiry, developed by David Cooperrider, is an approach that trains us to look at what already works well, and to ask questions that point us in the direction of possibility and positive change.

Number Eight: Cultivate Compassion

Being a teacher is one of the most demanding jobs around. Teachers face so many interpersonal demands during the day, making it easy to experience strong responses and be caught up in the drama that this can create.

Aguilar suggests practicing and being mindful of compassion. She shows how everyday struggles can be dealt with more effectively by offering ways and practices of advancing one's own empathy.

The practices she suggests illustrate the benefits of compassionate behavior, such as positive well-being, and open-mindedness towards collaboration. Conscious compassion is good for us. It decreases stress hormones and boosts our immune response. However, compassion

needs to be applied to yourself first. Self-compassion, the act of being kind and gentle to oneself, is paramount. It's not an excuse to use when things go wrong, but rather a way of gathering strength to look inward and decide what change is needed.

Teachers are prone to empathic distress because of the profession's caring and pastoral nature, and that this can lead to burnout. She urges teachers to cultivate serenity and to be able to detach when necessary, especially as we learn what we can and can not solve.

Number Nine: Be a Learner

Teaching and learning go hand-in-hand. This association is why Aguilar urges teachers to become learners again. As a teacher, have you noticed that you sometimes feel more energized in the middle of the year? Maybe this is when we see that our students are making progress, and there's evidence of all our hard work? Or perhaps, this happens at some other stage during the year. Whatever the timeline, it's an excellent idea to self-reflect on being a learner, and how this shows up in our classroom.

Aguilar's tool - "mind the gap," - tells us that we can group the things that stand between our current ability and our desired ability into six categories. These are, skill, knowledge, capacity, will, cultural competence, and emotional intelligence. For example, difficulty teaching vocabulary could be due to a knowledge gap and not knowing the best practices. Once we have insight into our 'gaps,' we can be more specific in addressing them.

Number Ten: Play and Create

You're never too old to play. Play builds good relationships, it boosts creativity and memory, and most importantly, it reduces stress. Introducing games and discussion prompts, into all aspects of school life can be highly beneficial. Playfulness shouldn't just be a nice add-on to the day, and it's not just for kids. Play 'patches up our spirits,' and transforms our schools.

Play can also include creative art forms such as music, art, and theater, and these things are vital for deep and creative thinking. Creative thinking is one of the key elements for transformation, so playing and practicing forms of creativity are essential in building openness and positivity.

Number Eleven: Ride the Waves of Change

Change is inevitable, yet why are so many of us so ill-equipped in dealing with it? Aguilar suggests the need to explore how we interpret change so that we can broaden our emotional responses, and in turn, choose suitable actions.

Educators need to be aware of our spheres of influence. Aguilar says that we should all make a list of our complaints, and see what's within our circle of influence, and what's not. Once we have a list and a strategy, we can then use our energy more effectively by focusing on what we can change, and where we choose to direct our attention.

Strategies to deal with change include slowing down to assess a situation, changing our viewpoint, deciding if we should fight it, or being proactive. How we approach change is also important. Being too aggressive or assertive about making changes can promote fear and

shame in colleagues, so the secret lies in dealing with the emotions associated with change. This approach may take longer, but is the only way to embrace change.

Number Twelve: Celebrate and Appreciate

What makes you love your job?

In the USA, the main reason people leave their jobs across all sectors is that they don't feel appreciated. In a school environment feeling valued and appreciated, is of utmost importance. This is teachers fulfill so many different roles and responsibilities.

Schools need to structure opportunities for staff to express appreciation for one another, for students, and even for students' parents. Self-appreciation also matters. Why not try the "3 things exercise", where you choose three small things that went well at the end of a day or week, and how they were made possible?

Practicing gratitude, creating times for rituals, celebrations, reflections, and spirituality, builds resilience. As Aguilar so eloquently puts it, 'we need to tell our stories of love, sadness, healing, and resilience.'

In Conclusion

Becoming a teacher is often an easy decision. It's often instinctive, but it can be an extremely demanding job. How you react and adapt to the job takes extraordinary resilience.

Elena Aguilar's theory is that resilient teachers transform not only their classrooms but greater society. This enlightening and highly practical book provides multiple ways to translate theory into action. Her passion, practicality, and desire for teachers to be an integral part of transforming schools is evident throughout the book. She doesn't gloss over the high demands of teaching, and she doesn't sugarcoat how difficult the job can be. This approach makes it an honest and necessary read for anyone in education. In Aguilar's own words, 'if we aren't having difficult conversations in our efforts to transform schools, we're probably not making meaningful progress.'

Aguilar shows that one has to go onwards to go upwards.