

Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act

Introduced by: Representatives Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), and Susan Wild (D-PA)

The Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken an incalculable toll on the mental health of students, families, and the more than five million educators and education support professionals in K-12 public schools. Growing teacher shortages, increasingly unfavorable working conditions, and rising community-wide trauma have pushed more educators and support staff members to a breaking point. Educators – particularly those working in underserved schools – have left the teaching profession in record numbers, citing burnout, stress, low pay, and limited resources for mental health care as primary reasons for transitioning to a new career.

According to a RAND survey from 2021, teachers are almost three times more likely to report symptoms of depression than other adults. Despite these alarming statistics, investments in specific mental health supports for the education workforce have been limited in scope and scale. A nationally representative survey from 2022 shows that only one third of school and district leaders have made counselors or mental health services available to staff since the start of the pandemic.

It will not be possible for students to recover from academic declines suffered during the public health crisis unless educators and education support professionals are physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy. For schools to be safe, inclusive, productive, and welcoming environments for students, schools must provide educators and support staff members with meaningful, accessible, and continuous structural supports for their mental health.

The Solution

Educators and support staff members must have access to ongoing training and professional development opportunities designed to improve their mental health and help them feel supported in their work. The *Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act* will increase access to these critical resources by designing and scaling up evidence-based approaches to addressing the mental health needs of the education workforce across the United States. Specifically, the *Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act* will:

- **Require coordination between federal agencies to develop best practices** by directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services and Secretary of Education to identify and disseminate evidence-based or evidence-informed practices for (1) preventing suicide and improving mental health and resiliency among education professionals; and (2) training education professionals in appropriate strategies to promote their mental health;
- **Destigmatize mental health care among the education workforce** by designing and disseminating an education and awareness initiative encouraging education professionals to use mental health and substance use disorder services;
- **Provide direct support to educators and school staff members** by establishing programs to promote mental health among the education professional workforce; and
- **Promote accountability for federal resources for new programs** by requiring a report on the extent to which federal substance use disorder and mental health grant programs address the prevalence and severity of mental health conditions and substance use disorders among education professionals. The report will include an analysis of available evidence and data related to such conditions and programs and assess whether there are duplicative goals and objectives among such grant programs.