



# Influencers in the Field

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## Prioritizing Educators' Mental Health: How Professional Associations Help Members Thrive

Having grown up in a family deeply committed to teaching, I've witnessed the demands of this profession firsthand. My mother, Shirley Chube, was a passionate educator who helped establish the first Montessori school in Northwest Indiana in the 1960s, making a lasting impact on the region's approach to early childhood education. My sister is currently a devoted middle school teacher, impressing the value of education upon her students.

Despite their value to our children, communities and the future of this nation, educators are under significant pressure. During and after the pandemic, they've struggled with the challenges of remote learning, safety concerns, increasing class sizes and limited resources, leading to anxiety, stress and burnout. Meanwhile, students' mental health struggles cause behavioral issues in the classroom, requiring educators to act as support systems when they, themselves, need help.

In this article, I'll take a closer look at teachers' challenges and how associations can provide vital assistance.

### Teaching Under Pressure

Teachers play a critical role in our society, not only as educators, but also as mentors, guides and inspirations.

They make a mark on every child who enters their classroom, opening the door to a world of possibilities. Unfortunately, this critical role also carries significant weight, and recent trends show that career stressors are causing K-12 teachers to leave the workforce in droves.

The [2024 State of the American Teacher](#) (SoT) survey, a nationally representative annual survey of American Teacher Panel (ATP) educators across the U.S., found that teachers' reported wellbeing in January 2024 was worse than that of similar working adults — a consistent trend since 2021. Teachers shared that managing student behavior, low salaries and administrative duties were the top sources of job-related stress. Compared with similar working adults, about twice as many teachers reported frequent job-related stress or burnout. How are they handling that stress? Roughly three times as many teachers had trouble coping, according to the survey.

Unmanaged workplace stress can lead to burnout, a health condition resulting in feeling overwhelmed, fatigued and emotionally exhausted. It can also be accompanied [by feelings of depression and anxiety](#), leading to poor health outcomes.

## Associations' Role in Educator Mental Health and Wellness

Teachers play a critical role in our society. If their mental health struggles and concerns are not properly addressed, **educators will continue to leave the field** amid **existing shortages**. Without skilled educators to lead and inspire, our students might not be able to reach their full potential.

Associations help their members by providing a platform for like-minded individuals full of valuable career insight, resources and opportunities for professional development. In the face of this ongoing crisis, association leaders should consider the positive impact they can make by incorporating mental health tools into these offerings. Not only will you improve educators' overall health and wellness, but you can increase association engagement and loyalty by proactively supporting their needs. Here are some examples of steps associations can take to improve members' wellbeing:

### Leveraging Digital Tools for Mental Health

Digital mental health resources, such as phone apps, workshops and online communities, can be used to fill gaps in employees' mental healthcare needs, according to the **American Psychological Association**. Providing greater accessibility against teachers' busy schedules than a traditional office or group, digital tools can impart beneficial lessons in coping skills, relaxation and emotional regulation — all things that can benefit educators struggling with stress and burnout. Here are some of the programs your association can offer:

- **Counseling services** – Talking to an impartial third party about challenges and hardships in the workplace can provide teachers with much-needed emotional validation. Counseling offers valuable and educational insight into one's responses to stress, enabling positive changes as teachers gain tools to manage their workplace struggles and regain their sense of purpose.
- **Stress-relief programs** – Help teachers find ways to calm their minds and recover from workplace anxieties with stress-relief programs. Tools, such as self-directed **meditation and mindfulness apps**, can enable members to find mental relief in their own time with short, easy-to-understand directions.
- **Wellness initiatives** – Providing proven physical and mental health programs shows members their association cares about their wellbeing. Meditation courses, digital fitness classes, health screenings and tobacco cessation courses are all examples of wellness initiatives that can reduce stress and improve members' overall health.

Offering these services digitally allows educators in urban and rural areas alike to enjoy the same levels of care. Schools in rural areas have **greater difficulty filling teaching vacancies**, and teachers in those areas might need to travel farther to access the same services as those in cities. With their busy schedules, a long commute can be a barrier to care. Digital programs can help alleviate teachers' stress and ensure their needs are met, which can help them stay in the field longer.

### Creating Spaces To Be Seen and Heard

Mental health struggles can be isolating, causing us to pull away from the people and things we once cared about. Harness the power of community in your organization to inspire members to share their issues by fostering a space for empathy and shared solutions for mental health challenges.

Associations can accomplish this by organizing mental health workshops, peer support groups and forums where educators can share their experiences in a safe space. Members can feel empowered to discuss issues with their employers, brainstorm ways to avoid harmful situations or identify the root causes of career unhappiness. With your association as a platform, your members can make positive changes in their careers and futures.

### Pairing Mental Wellness and Professional Development

Professional development gives teachers valuable skills that help them achieve in the workplace. Mental wellness initiatives provide critical tools to help them manage stressors in their professional and personal lives, improving health outcomes by reducing the harmful feelings that lead to burnout. You can try incorporating mental health programs into your professional development opportunities, such as:

- **Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)** – This **evidence-based, early-intervention** course teaches participants about mental health and substance use challenges. This training can be vital in the classroom and outside of it by teaching educators how to identify, understand and respond to these issues.
- **Stress management** – Help your members shield themselves from the harmful effects of stress and build resilience. Stress management courses, such as those **offered by Harvard**, provide a greater understanding of stress drivers and communicate powerful relaxation strategies.

- **Mindfulness** – **Mindfulness** is the practice of being aware of one's thoughts, feelings and surroundings without being overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's happening in the present moment. Mindfulness can help teachers feel calmer, reduce stress and be more self-aware during high-energy moments in the classroom. (For a deeper look at the benefits of mindfulness, check out a [recent article](#) by my colleague Deirdre Mubaiwa.)

### Advocating for Mental Health Awareness in Education

Teachers regularly advocate for their students, fighting for resources and opportunities they might not otherwise receive. For associations, advocacy for mental health awareness — both within school systems and at a legislative level — can help members and students thrive.

Associations have keen insight into teachers' challenges and can provide valuable perspectives on overcoming these issues. For instance, you know members' struggles with [ballooning class sizes](#), [low wages](#) and [changing policies](#) can harm their ability to teach effectively. Meanwhile, ongoing issues involving [classroom safety](#) and [changes in student behavior](#) can pile more stress onto an already anxiety-inducing situation.

Fostering open conversations around shared experiences builds community and can have powerful effects on educators throughout the affected district or region. In the past, teachers have fought for pay raises, dedicated planning time and better benefits. With the coordinated advocacy efforts of your association, they can also achieve decisive wins for mental health and wellness.

### The Value of a Strong Partnership With Your Provider

Building a strong partnership with a trusted supplemental and group health provider is vital to improving educators' wellbeing. Gallagher Affinity offers specially designed solutions that address their needs, such as access to affordable health plans, mental health resources and support for managing classroom stress.

By partnering with Gallagher Affinity, associations can provide a range of supplemental health benefits designed to answer the challenges of today's education landscape, including telehealth services, counseling and wellness programs designed to promote balance and reduce burnout. With the right resources, associations can position themselves as vital allies in today's high-pressure education environment.

*If you or someone you know is struggling with harmful thoughts or feelings, you are not alone. Contact the national mental health hotline at 988 for support.*



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