

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Supporting Educators through Employee Wellness Initiatives

By Michelle Faggert

Nearly half of all U.S. teachers report experiencing high levels of stress daily during the school year.¹ Chronic stress is associated with higher teacher absenteeism and turnover, which are most prevalent in schools that serve low-income students.² Symptoms such as depression, anxiety, heart disease, and exhaustion impair teachers' performance.

Across the nation, educators are aligning with the #RedforEd movement to demand better support. By creating opportunities and infrastructure for employee wellness programs, state boards of education and other state policymakers can help foster the physical and emotional well-being of teachers and school leaders. Doing so will mitigate a significant

cause of educator turnover, create more supportive school environments, and enable school personnel to do their jobs better.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model as a framework to align support for the whole child through community engagement, collaboration between education and health sectors, and evidence-based school policies and practices. One of the 10 components of the WSCC model is employee wellness, which focuses on factors such as healthy eating and active lifestyles, tobacco and drug abuse, workplace hazards, and stress management.

According to NASBE's recently updated State Policy Database on School Health, which reports and links to state policies across all

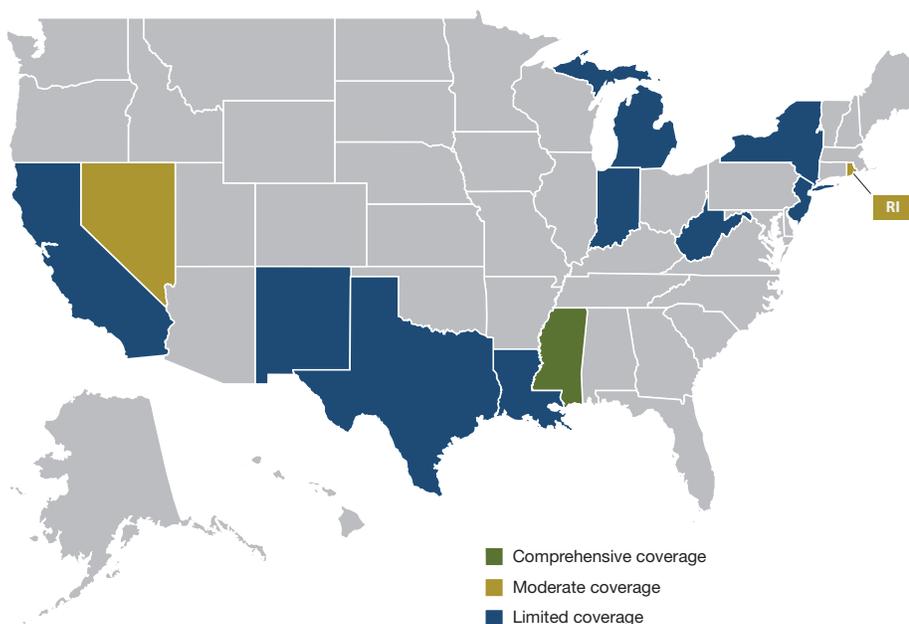
WSCC components, 12 states have policies on at least one aspect of employee wellness (figure 1). The database details eight areas: staff wellness programs, tobacco cessation, substance abuse, stress management, health assessments, flu shots, physical activity, and healthy food policies. Three states—Mississippi, Rhode Island, and Nevada—address multiple areas. Mississippi provides comprehensive coverage, addressing all eight areas of employee wellness, while Rhode Island and Nevada address four each.³

LEADING STATES

Mississippi addresses all areas of employee wellness identified in the NASBE database through a program for all state employees who participate in the school employee health insurance plan.⁴ Mississippi's school accountability standards and the Mississippi Healthy Students Act further require that each local school board establish a local school wellness policy consistent with regulations adopted by the **Mississippi State Board of Education**.⁵ Each local school board must establish a local school health council to oversee implementation of the wellness policy. These councils develop coordinated plans that include recommendations for advancing staff wellness to fit their communities' unique needs. Councils include at least one parent, one public school teacher, and one public school administrator.

Rhode Island policy requires districts to have staff wellness programs that include substance abuse prevention, health assessments, and physical activity opportunities. Rhode Island's state plan to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes teacher chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school success and defines a chronically absent teacher as one who is absent more than 10 percent of school days in a year. The Rhode Island Board of Education Act § 16-2-9 requires that a school committee be responsible for the care, control, and management of public school interests such as student and employee health and wellness. These committees must establish

Figure 1. State Policies on Employee Wellness



districtwide, coordinated school health and wellness subcommittees, which recommend ways to decrease obesity and enhance the health and well-being of students and employees. To support these efforts, the Rhode Island Department of Education launched the Coordinated School Health Program, which is designed to prevent serious health problems in order to create safe, healthy places for teaching and learning.⁶

Nevada Statute 439.521 recommends a staff wellness program that includes tobacco cessation, tobacco-free and breastfeeding-friendly environments, healthy food and beverage choices, and physical activity opportunities in schools, businesses, and public buildings. To support implementation, Nevada's Division of Public and Behavioral Health created a wellness toolkit that covers assessing the worksite, engaging employees, creating programming, and evaluating success. The division's recommended program addresses health risk assessment, medical care and self-care, general health education for disease risk factors, physical activity, nutrition, mental health and stress management, alcohol and other drug abuse, tobacco cessation, and maintaining interest and motivation.

Among six goals the **Nevada State Board of Education** prioritized in 2019, one is: "All students learn in an environment that is physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe." One step to accomplish this goal, according to the board's improvement plan, is to ensure that "systems promote healthy staff and students."⁷

ACTIONS STATE BOARDS CAN TAKE

Drawing from these state examples, state boards can take several actions to promote school employees' well-being. As a first step, boards can integrate employee wellness programs into existing coordinated school health wellness policies. Coordinated school health is a holistic approach to improve the health of students that combines multiple factors, including school health education, community involvement, and physical environment, and it has served as a blueprint for implementing health-promoting practices in schools.

According to the NASBE State Policy Database on School Health, 22 states require or encourage a wellness policy for each school district, and 17 states address coordinated school health, though not all address employee wellness.

As school districts develop action plans for student health, they should be encouraged to include objectives and goals surrounding employee wellness, as well as methods to assess progress. Although several states require wellness or health councils at a local level, boards should also develop policies to spark creation of a statewide council that can provide recommendations for coordinated school health. Statewide councils should include public school teachers and administrators.

State boards can leverage their state's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans to encourage funding for employee wellness programs. ESSA allows states and districts to use Title II funds to assess and improve teacher working conditions through mentoring, staff wellness, and mindfulness programs. School wellness can also be integrated into needs assessments, evidence-based practices, and professional development. States can also incorporate school wellness as part of their nonacademic indicator of school success, including factors such as teacher absenteeism or school climate in state accountability systems.

As suggested in the WSSC model, state boards can leverage their power of convening to encourage partnerships between education and health agencies and other stakeholders. A diverse set of stakeholders and professionals should be engaged to help create an integrated approach to addressing employee wellness. State boards can also make sure state and local education agencies are aware of federal grants and resources available to address coordinated school health and employee wellness.

Finally, state boards can encourage their state agency to offer nonregulatory guidance and sample resources. Model policies and toolkits, which can be tailored to meet the individual needs of districts, can be disseminated to support districts as they build school wellness policies and programs.

In the past, school policies to address disease prevention and health promotion have focused solely on students. However, as the adults with the greatest school-based impact on students, teachers can be powerful role models for maintaining healthy behaviors and lifestyles. Thus they play a key role in student health. Healthy educators are more productive, less likely to be absent, and better equipped to support student development when they themselves are mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally well. State boards can actively support creating employee wellness programs to support the nation's teachers and thereby support students as well.

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NOTES

1 Mark Greenberg, Joshua L. Brown, and Rachel Abenavolia, "Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students, and Schools" (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, September 2016).

2 Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, "Are Teacher Absences Worth Worrying About in the United States?" *Education Finance and Policy* 4, no. 2 (April 2009): 115–49, <https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp.2009.4.2.115>; Brandis M. Ansley et al., "The Hidden Threat of Teacher Stress," *The Conversation* (March 2, 2018), <http://theconversation.com/the-hidden-threat-of-teacher-stress-92676>.

3 NASBE State School Health Database, <https://statepolicies.nasbe.org/health>.

4 Mississippi Code § 41-97-9, State Employee Wellness Program.

5 Mississippi Healthy Students Act, Code 37-13-134.

6 Rhode Island's program is supported through the Promoting Adolescent Health Through School-Based HIV/STD Prevention and School Based Surveillance Program of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

7 Nevada Department of Education, "STIP 2018—Goal: Become Fastest Improving State in the Nation," <http://www.doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/ndedoenvgov/content/home/Docs/Stip2018%20.pdf>.