State Board Voice

Educator Mental Health

In my second grade classroom this year, my students exhibited higher levels of anxiety, stress, and frustration than in previous years. After our first fire drill, students were sobbing, shaking, and expressing concerns that they would die or their backpacks would burn up. Staying calm and providing supports to meet these mental health needs took a toll on me as well. Stressors like these are resulting in higher than normal numbers of people retiring and leaving the profession. What is the path forward?

House Bill 301 would require the Delaware Department of Education to create a K-12 mental health program. The bill passed in 2022 and awaits the governor’s action. A synopsis states,

This Act increases student awareness of mental health by requiring the Department of Education, with the approval of the State Board of Education, to establish and implement statewide mental health educational programs for each grade, kindergarten through grade 12, in each school district and charter school in this State.

Annie Slease, Delaware’s director of advocacy and education for the National Alliance on Mental Illness and a 25-year classroom veteran, writes:

To effectively teach mental health literacy, we must first master it ourselves. Understanding the facts, acknowledging the stigma, and embracing help-seeking and self-care practices must begin with our education leaders. To do this, our educators need support. They need time. And they need to feel valued. The self-care and help-seeking behaviors included in mental health literacy must be prioritized by them, but also for them. This means administrators must embrace these concepts, too. All education professionals should experience the benefits of positive mental health through their own literacy and shouldn’t feel burdened doing so. They need incentive to develop this expertise. That could come with microcredentials in mental health training, increases in compensation for educators with that training, and Youth Mental Health First Aid as part of student-teacher preparation.

Megan Blanco, NASBE’s director of safe and healthy schools, recently wrote this outstanding piece: “Six Questions State Boards Should Ask About Student Mental Health.” I’d like to recast her questions a bit:

1. What existing policies, services, and funding streams address student educator mental health in our state?
2. What is the state of our students’ mental health, and are there subgroup differences?
3. What partnerships can our board build that support educator mental health?
4. What mental health education do students receive?
5. How is our state building adult capacity to support student educator mental health?
6. What is our board doing to eliminate stigma and public misunderstanding about mental health?

Board members can initiate conversation on educator mental health and support policy that builds the system Slease described. This work also needs a place in educator preparation. Educators live at the intersection of policy, practice, and people. They are a critical resource who education leaders must nurture and protect. Do you know the state of educators’ mental health in your state? Now is the time to do this work.