

A collaborative approach to advancing health and vitality in the education sector

Teachers, school librarians, counselors, and other education professionals work hard every day to create a successful learning environment. However, they are encountering significant challenges that extend beyond their classrooms to impact their personal health.

For example, many teachers are dealing with growing workloads, bigger class sizes, reduced budgets, and constantly changing curriculum requirements. At higher education institutions, many faculty members work on a contractual basis, and they often experience more financial instability, fewer or no benefits, and less support than tenured staff. Meanwhile, tenured professors often have concerns about their job security amid mounting pressure to publish research.

“These education professionals are overwhelmed, especially in this post-pandemic environment, where they are expected to address both the academic and emotional needs of their students,” said Kim Funderburk, president of the government, education, and health systems business at Cigna Healthcare.SM “This can all take a toll on their own health and well-being.”

The administrators of public schools and higher education institutions experience their own job-related pressures as well. They are accountable for the overall welfare of their educational system and must navigate budget constraints and rising health care costs as they strive to offer competitive health benefits and salaries to attract and retain a talented workforce.

“The challenges education professionals face can intensify mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and burnout,” Funderburk said. She added that these pressures can also exacerbate physical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, musculoskeletal disorders, and cardiovascular diseases. These conditions are largely attributed to numerous physical and emotional demands of education work, including extended periods of standing, mental stress, irregular schedules, and limited time for self-care.

A tailored approach to delivering care

Cigna Healthcare partners with schools at all levels to create tailored benefits programs. Funderburk’s teams use a data-driven approach to identify and evaluate key health concerns, then collaborate with clients, incorporating feedback from staff and teachers to design a benefits and wellness strategy. Finally, Cigna Healthcare delivers a custom solution crafted to fulfill that jointly developed strategy.

“These solutions typically take the form of an integrated program, offering competitive medical, behavioral, and pharmacy benefits that fit the administrative budget while offering wellness incentives and specialized supports to address the diverse needs of the workforce effectively,” Funderburk said.

[Mesa Public Schools](#), the largest public school district in Arizona, is an example of Cigna Healthcare’s approach. The district identified a rising prevalence of diabetes and obesity among its workforce. Cigna Healthcare worked with Mesa to develop a comprehensive, integrated benefit management plan focused on prevention and whole-person health. Key components include the Cigna Healthcare Diabetes Prevention Program to encourage early detection and management and

an onsite 16-week weight-loss program. Both programs saw strong employee participation in their first year – 85% of those who qualified for diabetes prevention enrolled in the program, and more than 1,600 employees took advantage of the weight-loss program.* During that year, approximately 51% of Mesa employees who were managing chronic conditions were engaged in Cigna Healthcare plan initiatives to maintain and improve their health.*

Bringing well-being resources to school campuses

Cigna Healthcare’s onsite well-being coordinators play a pivotal role in increasing employee engagement in the Mesa district’s health and wellness activities. These clinical professionals provide educators and staff with resources, coaching, and mental health support. They also organize wellness challenges, nutrition workshops, and fitness programs. “The coordinators are viewed as an extension of the school community and become the trusted go-to resource for all health-related matters – both physical and behavioral,” Funderburk said.

Well-being coordinators and other onsite resources also are instrumental in addressing social determinants of health, particularly for K-12 educators who live and work in underserved communities. “These social factors can affect teachers’ ability to perform their job as well as manage their overall well-being,” Funderburk said. “The goal is to ensure all staff can connect to the care and services they need to stay healthy and productive.”

Cigna Healthcare also can provide onsite health coaches or specialists to support open enrollment and health fairs. “For these specific client needs, we provide experts with specialized knowledge in those areas to deliver tailored services,” Funderburk said. “It’s another example of our commitment to supporting education clients through customized solutions.”

Specialized “Smart Support” for clients and customers

Cigna Healthcare offers all covered education professionals access to the [Smart Support Program](#). “Smart Support team members have a deep understanding of both the operational and cultural intricacies of working in school systems and higher education institutions, which allows them to fully support and ‘speak the language’ of the individuals they interact with,” Funderburk said.

In addition to answering questions about benefits and coverage, the team acts as health advocates, looking for opportunities to promote health and guide members on their health journeys. “For instance, if a teacher casually mentions a recent doctor’s visit for diabetes, the Smart Support team member would seize the opportunity to ask, ‘Are you utilizing the diabetes management program offered by your school system?’ The team member could then guide the teacher through the program and even facilitate transferring the phone call directly to a program coach,” Funderburk said. “Smart Support goes beyond basic assistance – it focuses on proactively advancing individual health and well-being.”

Supporting the broader education community

In addition to collaborating with clients to address their specific health needs, Cigna Healthcare offers all clients in the education sector opportunities to share their insights and expertise on ways to better address workforce health issues. An example is the “Connection Point” webinar series, which bring together professional resources, trends, and best practices, often showcasing a client

that had success with a specific health improvement initiative. “The webinars are designed for the education sector and aim to provide actionable insights that participants can implement within their own institutions to enhance workforce health and productivity,” Funderburk said.

Cigna Healthcare also collaborates with local educational foundations, providing financial and physical resources to support education initiatives. These partnerships include a co-sponsorship with Howard University for entrants of the Urban Superintendents Academy to help them become superintendents in underserved communities, as well as Cigna Healthcare’s collaboration with Baltimore County Administration to develop a curriculum focused on servant leadership and civic responsibility for Baltimore County and Baltimore City Public Schools.

For the last 15 years, Cigna Healthcare has sponsored a Health Disparities Advisory Council comprised of representatives of the company’s education and government clients along with Cigna Healthcare professionals and clinicians. Council members work together to identify health disparities within their communities and develop best practices to address them. A recent initiative, the Multicultural Diabetes Campaign, has a goal to fulfill the need for diabetes education that acknowledges the unique cultural nuances of South Asian, African American/Black, and Hispanic/Latino customers of the Health Disparities Advisory Council. “We are seeking to mitigate diabetes care disparities and break down barriers to help their workforce achieve better health by providing diabetes education through an inclusive lens.”

“These programs and initiatives illustrate Cigna Healthcare’s dedication to empowering education professionals with the resources they need to thrive,” Funderburk said. “By supporting those who shape the future, we ensure they can focus on their mission – teaching and inspiring the next generation – while maintaining their own health and well-being.”

**Based on a June 2020 Cigna Healthcare analysis of first year program data, reflecting dates from January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019. Individual client results may vary.*