

Mental Health and Schools

Support plan to expand Teen and Youth Mental Health First Aid in high school; and, the Legislature should pass legislation to increase the mental health literacy of school personnel.

Summary: New York State must expand opportunities to increase mental health literacy in schools for students as well as school personnel. We recommend the following: (1) support for the Governor’s proposal to expand Teen and Youth Mental Health First Aid; and (2) support the passage and enactment of legislation to require teachers and other school personnel to receive mental health training.

Mental Health First Aid Highlights

- ✓ The Governor’s budget for FY 2026-27 includes funding to expand the availability of Teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA) to all 10th-grade high school students. This expansion coincides with increasing the number of adults trained through Youth Mental Health First Aid.
- ✓ tMHFA teaches teens in grades 9-12, or ages 14-18, how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges in their friends and peers.

School Personnel Training Highlights

- ✓ Schools in New York have been required since 2018 to provide students with instruction about mental health as part of the health curriculum. No such requirement exists for school personnel.

Legislative Request

- ✓ Support expanding the availability of tMHFA to all 10th-grade high school students and Youth Mental Health First Aid training for adults.
- ✓ Support passage of legislation to require teachers and other school personnel to receive mental health response training. S.3627-A (Fernandez)/A.3041-A (Kelles)

Talking Points

- ✓ tMHFA is evidence-based training that empowers by providing a level of basic knowledge and helps normalize the conversation around mental health.
- ✓ Nearly 40% of teachers identified burnout and mental health as a top challenge in 2024-2025.
- ✓ A shared knowledge of mental health across the school community helps promote a school culture and climate of wellness.

Background

In 2016, New York State became the first state in the nation to enact a law (effective in 2018) requiring all schools to teach students in grades K-12 about mental health from a mental health literacy perspective as part of the school health curriculum. As we mark the 10th anniversary of this law in 2026 and build on a number of initiatives, the Governor's proposed 2026-27 Executive Budget includes a \$17.5 million investment in Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid. This additional investment and expansion will continue to position New York State as a leader in raising mental health literacy among our youth.

Teen Mental Health First Aid teaches teens in grades 9-12, or ages 14-18, how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges in their friends and peers. The trainings also help to foster a supportive environment that values physical and mental health and encourages teens to talk openly about mental health and substance use. Over 15,000 teens have been trained in Teen Mental Health First Aid in New York State, the second most of any state in the nation. Youth Mental Health First Aid trains adults who work with youth. Studies have found that those who have completed MHFA show improved mental health literacy, increased confidence, likelihood to act in ways that are helpful and not harmful, reduced stigma, and increased empathy.

However, teachers and other school personnel are not currently required to have any training in mental health. The need for mental health training is undeniable. A 2023 article of Education Weekly stated that, "Teachers are broadly concerned about their students' mental health—and don't always have the knowledge or support to help." One recent study found that, while 93 percent of teachers are concerned about student mental health needs, 85 percent expressed the need for further mental health training. A comprehensive survey conducted by the New York State Council of School Superintendents in 2024 found that 98% of superintendents indicated that they have a high or moderate level of concern about the mental/emotional health of students in their schools. This included 67% of superintendents, indicating a high level of concern.

The mental health and wellness of our teachers and school personnel is also paramount. Nearly 40% of teachers identified burnout and mental health as a top challenge in the 2024-2025 academic year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, School Pulse Panel. As students begin to learn more about mental health, it is vital that teachers and school personnel have similar training. A shared knowledge of mental health across the school community helps promote a school culture and climate of wellness that benefits everyone in schools, as well as families and the community at large.

