

## Recognizing Teachers as Health Workers in the Philippines

As we celebrate the 42<sup>nd</sup> UP Manila Day and the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Health Sciences Center Autonomy, we find ourselves at a crucial intersection of education and public health. This year's theme, "*Pagdiriwang ng Kaalaman Tungo sa Pangkalahatang Kalusugan*" (Celebrating Knowledge for Universal Health), highlights the essential role that knowledge plays in fostering a healthier society. The recent study, "*Teachers as Health Workers in the Philippines*,"<sup>1</sup> serves as a compelling reminder that educators are not only disseminators of knowledge but also vital contributors to the health and well-being of our youth. This editorial reflects on the implications of this study, advocating for policy changes that recognize and support the health-related roles teachers play, while ensuring their well-being is not sacrificed in the process.

The findings from this study reveal the extensive health-related responsibilities that public school teachers undertake, often without sufficient recognition or support. From administering vaccinations to addressing mental health concerns and providing first aid, teachers are on the front lines of health promotion within their communities. The World Health Organization<sup>2</sup> underscores the transformative potential of educational institutions in promoting health and well-being, noting their significant influence on children's or student's health behaviors and outcomes. However, this potential remains largely unrealized when teachers are overwhelmed and unsupported. Historically, the systemic pressures placed on educators have gone unaddressed, resulting in chronic overwork and stress.<sup>3-5</sup>

As we reflect on these findings, it is imperative to advocate for changes that acknowledge and support teachers in their dual roles as educators and health workers.

### The Role of Teachers in Health Promotion

The study illustrates that teachers regularly engage in health-related tasks, such as monitoring students' health metrics and facilitating government health programs. These roles, while crucial, often come at a personal cost. Teachers reported feeling unqualified for these responsibilities and frequently sacrificed their own well-being to care for their students. This scenario is not unique to the Philippines; similar findings have emerged globally, indicating that teachers in various contexts are thrust into roles beyond their training.<sup>6,7</sup>

As we celebrate the achievements of UP Manila and its commitment to health sciences, we must also reflect on the challenges facing educators. The well-being of teachers directly impacts educational outcomes, and a healthier workforce contributes to a more effective learning environment.<sup>8</sup>

### Policy Implications: Towards Sustainable Support for Educators

In light of the study's findings and the overarching theme of this year's UP Manila celebration, it is imperative that we advocate for systemic reforms that recognize teachers as vital and transformative health workers. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) as well as the Department of Education (DepEd) should consider developing a framework that outlines the health-related responsibilities of teachers while ensuring they receive the necessary training and resources.

Integrating school health professionals, such as nurses and counselors, into the educational framework can alleviate the burdens placed on teachers. A study from the UK demonstrated that the presence of school nurses significantly improved health outcomes and reduced workloads for educators.<sup>9</sup> Implementing similar models in the Philippines could enhance both teacher and student well-being, aligning with the principles of comprehensive health promotion championed by UP Manila.



eISSN 2094-9278 (Online)  
Published: October 15, 2024  
<https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.v58i18.11881>  
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### **Celebrating Knowledge and Teacher Well-being**

The celebration of UP Manila's milestones serves as an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the health and well-being of both educators and students. As we gather to honor these achievements, let us also champion the need for policies that prioritize the mental and physical health of teachers. Research consistently shows that healthier teachers contribute to better student performance and overall school success.<sup>10</sup>

By creating a supportive environment, we acknowledge that the well-being of educators is integral to achieving universal health—a key tenet of this year's theme.

The call for action is clear: we must advocate for educational policies that not only recognize teachers' health-related roles but also equip them with the resources to fulfill these responsibilities without compromising their own well-being. By fostering an environment where educators are supported, we can ensure a healthier future for our students and, by extension, for our society as a whole.

### **Conclusion: A Shared Responsibility for Health**

As we reflect on the 42<sup>nd</sup> UP Manila Day and the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Health Sciences Center Autonomy, let us embrace the opportunity to reshape our approach to education and health. Recognizing teachers as vital and transformative health workers is a critical step toward creating a healthier educational environment. It is our shared responsibility—policymakers, educational leaders, and the community—to ensure that teachers are equipped and supported in their dual roles.

Together, we can celebrate knowledge as a powerful tool for universal health and well-being, ultimately building a brighter future for all.

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