



Employee Health Matters in Oregon Schools

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“The conditions that affect the health of employees also influence the health and learning of students. Protecting the physical and mental health of school employees is integral to protecting the health and learning of students and ensuring their academic success”

Directors of Health Promotion and Education (2005) School Employee Wellness ~ A Guide for Protecting the Assets of our Nation's Schools. Washington DC

Why is a healthy school workforce important?

School employee wellness is not just a fringe benefit. It's essential to achieving the primary goal of education — to ensure student academic success. A healthy school staff reduces costs and stress. It also increases productivity at a time when schools are under enormous pressure to do more with less. School employees make up a large percentage of Oregon's workforce, and they play an enormous role in their students' lives. While under the care of educators and other staff, children learn life skills that help them become successful, productive and healthy community members.

"If we have healthier educators working with our students, we're becoming true role models," said Gail Rasmussen, president of the Oregon Education Association and member of the OEA Choice Trust Board. "We're helping our students understand that it's important to be responsible for our lifestyles early on, rather than waiting until we find ourselves with some health condition we could have avoided."

More than 104,000 staff are employed in Oregon's public schools, spending half of their waking hours at work. And, just as in any workplace, the health risks that school employees face impact how they do their jobs, the number of sick days they use and health care costs. In fact, a majority of employee health care costs can be controlled by supporting healthier lifestyles.

There's a clear need for employee wellness programs in Oregon schools. The 2009 Oregon Behavioral Risk Factor Survey for School Employees showed that:

- 62 percent of school staff are overweight and obese
- Only 26 percent eat the recommended five or more daily servings of fruits and vegetables
- 61 percent meet physical activity recommendations
- 90 percent are trying to maintain or lose weight
- 5 percent currently smoke

School districts recognize that employees are their most valuable resource — they nurture and shape the health and learning of students. Because of this influence, when districts make efforts to promote employee wellness, **they can extend their reach by also improving the health and learning for students.**

Today, an increasing number of kids struggle with obesity, hypertension and cardiac issues. That means school employees are more important than ever in creating a positive influence on a child's health. This in turn creates change at home and beyond. "Healthier children make healthier communities. It's a positive contagion," said Joan Kapowich, administrator of the Oregon Educators Benefit Board (OEBB).



Improving the health of a school employee is an excellent investment. Research shows that for every \$1 spent on employee wellness programs, an average of \$5 is saved.¹ By creating a culture of health for staff, schools can:

- Attract and retain healthy employees
- Improve employee morale and health
- Reduce absenteeism
- Lower health care costs, disability and workers' compensation

Wellness saves dollars

To see how employee health can impact a school's bottom line, look no further than Baker School District. Baker was first awarded an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant in 2009 and used the funds to sponsor karate, yoga, Zumba and healthy cooking classes to help employees fit exercise and healthy meals into their hectic schedules. The district credits its employee wellness program with an 11 percent drop in substitute teacher costs, as a result of fewer sick days in the second year of its wellness program. Baker also reported that its wellness program has lowered the number of staff who are overweight or obese, reduced hypertension and lowered levels of bad cholesterol.

“When teachers are healthy and on their game every day, we are more effective at achieving our educational goals and promoting student success.”

— Barry Nemeč, special education director, Baker School District

11%

Decrease in substitute teacher costs in Baker School District

“Our people started taking better care of themselves,” explained Linda Honeywell, special education secretary and the wellness coordinator for

Baker School District. “And when staff members take care of themselves, they’re also taking care of the staff they work with and their students.”

Honeywell said that reducing the amount of time substitutes spend in the classroom creates stability and a better learning environment for students. “When regular teachers are in the classroom more, the students don’t have that disruption, and the teachers don’t have the stress of having to get things ready for the sub. It’s easier on teachers, students and parents.”

And it’s not only teachers who students need to see, she said. It’s also administrators, office workers and other staff. “Our kids see them every day. If they’re not there in the students’ lives, it makes a big difference,” she said.

¹Chapman, L.S. “The Art of Health Promotion: Meta-evaluation of worksite health promotion economic return studies: 2005 update.” Am J Health Promotion, 19 (6), July/Aug. 2005.

Attract and retain healthier, happier employees

Jamie Smith, school nurse for Jefferson County School District, said his district's wellness program gives employees a reason to stick around, even in the face of high turnover in recent years. "Every summer, we have an influx of new employees. And every year, we're spending a ton of money on substitutes," Smith said. "If employees are taken care of, they're going to be happier, more productive. And if our insurance usage decreases because of that, it could potentially reduce the cost of premiums in the future."

In Port Orford, a fishing town of about 1,100 on the southern Oregon Coast, residents have to drive at least 30 minutes to get to a commercial gym. That's something Julie Ells, an administrative assistant at Port Orford School District, used to do on a regular basis. As a cancer survivor, Ells knows it's critical to maintain her health. And although the round-trip drive and workout claimed about two hours of her day, she did it anyway.

So when Port Orford School District applied for an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant, Julie and her colleagues knew exactly what their school community needed to promote health and physical activity. In 2011, they converted a classroom at the high school into a gym — complete with a treadmill, an elliptical machine and an exercise bike.

"The thing I really like about having the gym here is that you can go whenever it's convenient for you,"

Ells said. "Our gym is open almost 24/7. For me, the ease of access makes it easy to exercise."

The renewed focus on wellness at Port Orford has inspired employees to form a Weight Watchers group, bring fresh water and fruit into staff rooms, and open nutrition workshops to their community. Several staff members have stopped smoking or chewing tobacco. The district's head cook, who is participating in Weight Watchers herself has been trying different menu items for the school lunches, such as a crustless quiche. This translates into healthier meals for students.

"We're encouraging ourselves to make life changes," Ells said. "This isn't some fad, like going on a diet to lose weight. We're getting people to move, eat smarter and be healthier."

Inspire positive change in the community

Educators have long held strong ties to their communities. Because of this, school employees could very well be the catalyst that inspires wellness in their local communities across Oregon.

At Griffin Creek, only 19 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls were found to be overweight or obese.

“There’s a lot of motivation in our community to improve the health of our students,” said Jamie Smith, the school nurse with Jefferson County School District. “If we’re going to ask our kids to be healthier, we need to set that example for them. We’re the ones they see every day. We become their role models.”

The district used an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant to offer exercise classes, fitness challenges and workout stations. The stations were built along a public walking path adjacent to the high school and offer instructions in English and Spanish. “It’s part of the city path, so the community has benefited as well,” said Smith.

Meanwhile, at Griffin Creek Elementary in Medford, educators are more explicitly encouraging students to buck the trend in childhood obesity.

At three other elementary schools in Southern Oregon, children are struggling with their weight. According to a study performed in April 2011 by nursing students from Oregon Health & Science University, 32 to 36 percent of students at these schools were overweight or obese².

But nearby, at Griffin Creek, only 19 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls were found to be overweight or obese. Administrators said this is no surprise, given the school’s emphasis on healthy living. Griffin Creek is a recipient of an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant, which has funded fitness, yoga and cooking classes,

healthy recipe and nutrition challenges, and health screenings to create an environment that promotes health. In a 2011 *Mail Tribune* article, Principal Ginny Hicks said students are constantly exposed to the importance of diet and exercise. Daily announcements on the PA system remind students and staff about making healthy lunch choices, and incorporating physical activity into their day. “What sustains Griffin Creek’s culture of health is when you have personal success, and when you’re surrounded by other people who are taking steps to improve [their health],” said Hicks.

In the Monmouth-Independence region, Central School District sponsors a community-wide event that educates students and parents about wellness. “One of our goals is for the students and their families to connect with community health and wellness resources,” said Cheri Higgins, health educator and co-coordinator of the district’s employee wellness program. In particular, low-income families can find doctors, dentists, hospitals and other resources they may not otherwise would have known were available to serve them.

²Darling, John. “Healthy Habits: Griffin Creek Elementary students are at the head of the class when it comes to exercise and nutrition.” *Mail Tribune*, May 9, 2011. <http://www.mailtribune.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20110509/NEWS/105090316&cid=sitesearch>

Manage stress to lose pounds

1 in 3 employees signed up for stress-reducing programs at Lane

Wendy Simmons
wasn't expecting the results she saw. After receiving an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant, Simmons, the employee wellness coordinator at Lane Community College, launched an "Undress the Stress" campaign. It was designed to help Lane's 1,000+ employees cope with stress. In turn, this would help lower blood pressure, improve productivity and enhance quality of life. But there was one other side effect.

"I was amazed when I started getting reports back about people losing 10 pounds or 30 pounds," Simmons said. "We had been focusing on stress, but we were losing a lot of weight as a result."

Employees who were practicing stretching, yoga, breathing and other physical activity liked the way it made them feel. They incorporated more exercise into their daily lives and lost weight. And because they started feeling so much better, they did less of one other thing — stress eating.

"One person used our stress management techniques and lost about 100 pounds over a couple of years," said Simmons.

Lane Community College has seen enormous success in its wellness program. In the 2011-12 school year, 292 people, or about a third of employees, signed up for "Undress the Stress" programs. A dedicated wellness website invites staff to look up jogging routes, find an exercise partner, or take advantage of

corporate rates for gyms. Classes range from Zumba to journal making. An aging parents support group gives employees a chance to talk with peers about caring for elderly family members, while a recent laughter seminar encouraged participants to have more fun in their lives.

Simmons said that some of these stress-relieving techniques trickle down to students at the college. One instructor now incorporates stretch breaks into her classes. Other students run into their instructors at the campus gym.

Because she engages with the entire staff, Simmons has seen a lot of employees going through difficult times. She also sees the impact Lane's wellness programs have on their lives. "I've had quite a few people say, 'I couldn't have gotten through this time without these programs.'"



What schools can do to improve employee wellness

Making healthy life choices to prevent chronic diseases is more than an issue of personal responsibility. Place matters; where people live, work and play influences their daily choices. Schools can take action to create an environment that makes it possible for school employees to integrate healthy behaviors - such as healthy eating, physical activity, quitting tobacco and reducing stress - into their daily routines. Launching a wellness program may take some time, but it is doable, affordable and can make a powerful difference in the lives of school employees. Start small and build a foundation of support and success. Effective wellness programs include practical ways to integrate health and wellness into your school environment and culture, making healthy choices the norm, rather than the exception.



Blueprint for Wellness

OEA Choice Trust has developed its **Blueprint for Wellness** to help employees build a successful wellness program. An organized, well-planned program has the greatest chance of making change in school employee health habits. The following seven steps can be the key to building and sustaining a culture of health.

1. Obtain administrative and board support
2. Establish a wellness coordinator and create a Wellness Team
3. Collect and analyze data
4. Develop an operating plan
5. Choose and schedule appropriate wellness programs and campaigns
6. Create a supportive environment and use incentives
7. Evaluate outcomes

“My board was very supportive from the very beginning. They do anything they can to support us. They’re also trying to stay fit and talk about wellness during board meetings.”

—Julie Ellis, administrative assistant, Port Orford SD

Inspire commitment from your school’s administrators

A crucial step in starting a wellness program is to win support from your school’s or district’s leadership. Consider your selling points before initiating a conversation with your administration.

“Better employee wellness can help improve health care costs and productivity, but it’s also a benefit for employees,” said Wendy Simmons with Lane Community College. “It increases morale, it increases social wellness, and it’s just a win-win for everyone.”

Engage employees across the entire school community

Form a committee devoted to employee wellness, and enlist champions to motivate employees across the entire school or district.

Because Lane Community College is so big, Simmons has up to three “wellness champions” in each department to act as liaisons. She meets with them regularly to discuss which activities and programs to pursue next.

Jamie Smith, the school nurse with Jefferson County School District, said that it’s important to have a core group of employees who are excited about wellness. “Try to find some person or group who can be the champion or motivator. The one who keeps talking about wellness. You’ve got to have those people to be successful.”

Find your starting point: Research wellness interests and health priorities

Before getting too detailed about what your program will look like, do some initial research to see what staff members and school administrators are interested in and their health priorities.

“If you’re going to have an employee wellness program, don’t just throw something out there that employees aren’t interested in. Try to find out what people want,” advised Smith.

Linda Honeywell with Baker School District has asked most of her wellness class instructors, who are also staff members, to double as Wellness Team members. But she doesn’t stop with her core team when she’s looking for input. “When I’m asking for ideas for a new activity, I send an email to all of our staff. I don’t just ask our team members.”

Act: Design an action plan with specific steps to achieve your goals

Simmons reminds people to take it easy at first, and then build momentum. “Start small and make it doable,” she said. “It’s taken me a long time to get to where we are today. We started simple, and then we added more classes and programs.”

(Continued)

“We’re all in it together. We support one another on the good days and bad days. It’s wanting to be healthier so we can be around.”

– Tina Fulps, Business Services, Reedsport School District

While it may take lot of work up front, creating a sustainable wellness program can be easier than you might think. “Just go for it,” said Julie Ells at Port Orford School District. “There are so many successful ideas, that you can use. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”



Reedsport: Healthy eating is a mindset

8%

Decrease in sick time in Reedsport School District

One day, Tina Fulp's husband, then a physical education teacher in the Reedsport School District, signed the couple up to coordinate

the district's wellness program. Tina, also a district employee who works in Business Services, had no idea how it would change her life.

"I can tell you now," said Fulps, "it's the best thing that's happened to me in a long time."

Today, Tina Fulps is the HEART (Healthy Educators Active Relaxed Toned) wellness coordinator at Reedsport School District. She's lost 52 pounds. She's also provided support to her colleagues as they learn how to eat better, reduce stress and lose weight.

The results are stunning. During the 2010-11 school year, sick time at Reedsport decreased by 8 percent. The district saved money in substitute costs, and students received a more consistent education. Since the program began, staff members have lost a total of 600 pounds of weight through the Weight Watchers program, a benefit they receive through their OEBC health insurance.

An OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant has funded culinary classes, during which staff members have learned to prepare healthy wraps, fruits and vegetables. During district meetings, breakfasts include yogurt, fruit and bran muffins, instead of

donuts or pastries.

The district's cook has been a powerful ally in Reedsport's efforts to improve nutrition. As part of her mission to offer students less fatty foods, she now prepares salads and soups. "Our meal count has gone up since she's started leaning in a healthier direction. The staff is eating our cafeteria food more often," said Fulps.

Fulps said that Reedsport's wellness program has built camaraderie among the staff and dramatically improved the atmosphere in the schools. "Our success has reached out to people all over, even the students," Fulps said. "Our students see that their teachers are happier, moving better and feel better about themselves."

As for Fulp's husband, who is now retired, he's blown away with what his wife has accomplished. "He just can't believe it," she said. "He's really proud of me. He sees that I'm happier and healthier."



Make the most of your resources

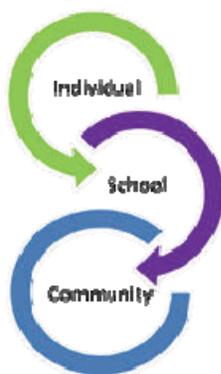
Know your benefits

Many school districts, educational service districts and community colleges in Oregon are members of the Oregon Educators Benefit Board (OEBB), a statewide program for school employee benefits. The following benefits are available to all OEBB participating districts and can make a big impact in your wellness efforts:

- Weight management programs (such as Weight Watchers)
- Health coaching sessions
- Tobacco cessation programs
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to help with stress
- Online tools and health assessments through individual health plan providers
- Free preventive health screenings (such as mammograms, pap smears and immunizations)
- Lower copays for office visits to treat chronic conditions (such as hypertension, asthma or diabetes)
- Free or reduced cost medications to treat chronic conditions

Oregon's School Employee Wellness Conference

Sometimes, a little inspiration is all you need to get started. You can get ideas for building or strengthening a wellness program — and hear success stories from other districts and schools — at the Oregon School Employee Wellness Conference. A wide range of school employees and community partners come together to learn more about the latest best practices and strategies for wellness in Oregon schools. This annual event was launched in 2012 as a way to promote overall employee health. It also connects individuals with each other to share ideas and build a movement toward healthy Oregon schools.



“When people get together, they’re able to share stories, have a dialogue, and shape their future actions by what they have learned,” said Suzanne Dalton, coordinator of professional development at COSA (Confederation of Oregon School Administrators). Dalton attended the 2012 conference and said that many of the attendees were able to find help and information to strengthen their own programs.

Conference attendees can also receive continuing education credits through Portland State University.



The event is sponsored by OEA Choice Trust, ODS, Oregon Public Health, OEA, COSA, OEBC, Oregon Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), Multnomah County Health Department, and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

Apply for an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant

School districts and educational service districts, community colleges and public charter schools in Oregon can support their wellness programs by applying for an OEA Choice Trust Wellness Grant. OEA Choice Trust's wellness grant program began in 2008. As of May 2012, the board of trustees has granted out close to \$1.25 million to a total of 26 Oregon public school employee groups. To learn more about the grant or apply, visit www.oeachoice.com/grants-awards.

It all comes down to employee health matters

For any school employee, student success and well-being will always be the educator's primary concern. This can make it difficult for staff to focus on their own health, let alone find the time and space to do so. Sometimes, it seems there aren't enough hours in the day. And the constant request to do more with less affects all school employees, administrators and students.

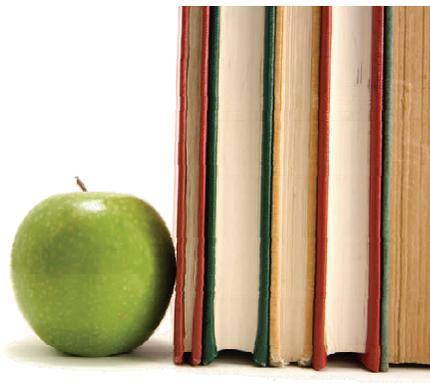
But this is where schools and districts can step in. School employee wellness is more than a nice-to-have. It's essential to the success of education. When employees are healthier and feel valued, it can lead to lower substitute costs and, ultimately, to student health and success.

"When students see their teachers and school staff making healthy choices, students are influenced to make similar choices to be more active and eat healthy," said Jamie Smith, Jefferson County School District's wellness coordinator and school nurse. Jefferson's employee wellness program is a great example of a program designed to change the school environment. The district has modified the contents of staff vending machines, offers healthy snacks at staff meetings and in-services, and promotes physical activity during the school day. All this motivates employees to consider wellness as the norm rather than the exception.

Recently, the district purchased a bicycle fleet. If a staff member wants to exercise during lunch or has an appointment across town, he or she can check out a bike. “We’ve provided easy access to physical activity,” said Smith. He maintains that starting small is the key to growing a sustainable wellness program. “Education is a busy place to work. Everybody is asked to do more with less, all the time. So just do something small to start,” he said. “You can make it what you want it to be.”

At the end of the day, healthier school employees benefit everyone involved. Better health can improve productivity, control health care costs and increase morale.

“Educators often put themselves on the back burner,” said Gail Rasmussen, president of the Oregon Education Association. “But this is about our health. This is about our well-being. We have to do a better job finding balance and time for our own wellness.”



Additional school employee wellness resources

For more information about starting and sustaining a wellness program at your school, district, community college or ESD, consult these following resources and tools.

- [OEA Choice Trust’s Journey to Wellness](http://www.oeachoice.com)
www.oeachoice.com
- [School Employee Wellness: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation’s Schools:](http://www.schoolempwell.org)
www.schoolempwell.org
- [Alliance for a Healthier Generation — School Employee Wellness:](http://www.healthiergeneration.org/schools.aspx)
www.healthiergeneration.org/schools.aspx
- [Oregon’s Wellness@Work:](http://dwp1.dhs.oregon.gov/WellnessAtWork/) http://dwp1.dhs.oregon.gov/WellnessAtWork/
- [ASCD’s The Whole Child Initiative — Health:](http://www.ascd.org/programs/The-Whole-Child/Healthy.aspx)
www.ascd.org/programs/The-Whole-Child/Healthy.aspx

OEA Choice Trust publishes “A Resource Guide on Health Care Consumerism.” This comprehensive guide is an excellent reference tool to help any reader become a more active health care consumer. It’s available at www.oeachoice.com/wp-content/uploads/Health-Care-Consumerism.pdf

Journey To Wellness



www.oeachoice.com