



Klamath County School District

Connecting Staff, Schools and the Community Through Their School Employee Wellness Program

Background

The Klamath County School District is located in Oregon's fourth largest county in square miles along the eastern slope of the Cascade Range. Its borders stretch from central Oregon in the north to the Oregon-California line in the south. Klamath Falls is home to the Klamath County School District offices, yet the majority of the twenty-one schools are outside the city. These schools are spread out over the county and extend from border to border in each direction. Within the Klamath County School District there are approximately 6,400 students in grades K-12, with 76% economically disadvantaged. Approximately 68% of the students are white, 18% Hispanic, and 7% American Indian/Alaskan Native and 5% representing other ethnicities.

The school district's local wellness program policy, readopted in January 2015 includes school employee wellness:

The district encourages school staff to pursue a healthy lifestyle that contributes to their improved health status, improved morale and a greater personal commitment to the school's overall wellness program. Many actions and conditions that affect the health of school employees may also influence the health and learning of students. The physical and mental health of school employees is integral to promoting and protecting the health of students and helps foster their academic success. The district's employee wellness program will promote health and reduce risk behaviors of employees and identify and correct conditions in the workplace that can compromise the health of school employees, reduce their levels of productivity, impede student success and contribute to escalating health-related costs such as absenteeism. The district will work with community partners to identify programs/services and resources to compliment and enrich employee wellness endeavors.

Klamath County School District completed their funding with the OEA Choice Trust school employee wellness grant program in June 2014.

The Challenge

Like many school districts across the state, Klamath County has faced economic challenges, furlough days, and the resulting morale issues. The district's Blue Ribbon Panel, a special committee convened by the Superintendent, was working to improve nutrition in the school lunch program. Realizing that job related stress was the number one health issue for Klamath County School District staff, the Blue Ribbon Panel became the district wellness team and expanded their focus to include school employee wellness. The vision, through grant funding provided by OEA Choice Trust, was to combat employee stress through a healthier lifestyle and to role model for students that it is essential to be healthy to learn.

What They Did

The district employed ten new elementary physical education teachers and as part of their contract, they led the employee wellness program activities throughout the school district. Very quickly the overwhelming staff interest in participating in the program's activities made it apparent that each school needed its own wellness champions. The following school year, each school formed an employee wellness committee co-led by two staff members. The district wellness committee reported about program activities, successes and challenges to the school board. After the presentation, several school board members expressed interest in being part of the district wellness team and now participate in the wellness activities. The district's ownership for the program grew through support and participation by the board. Now, the school board anticipates and requires the district wellness committee to provide an annual report about the employee wellness program.

The Klamath County community became involved in the employee wellness program through providing incentives for the staff challenges. It was important to the school district to give back to and support the community through purchasing their incentives, healthy food, and utilizing and promoting the community's businesses. The emphasis on serving healthy food during district and school sponsored meetings and events is so ingrained in the new culture that when a new catering business comes into the community, they bring their menu and "samplings" to the district office.

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Staff members report that the initial years involved a lot of "trial and error" and attending the OEA Choice Trust Journey to Wellness grantee meetings and the follow up technical assistance was a big help. They state that, *"they have learned how to move the needle and make their program successful!"*

Outcomes / Impact

The employee wellness program continued to grow and expand participation through creative approaches used by the wellness teams to address their large geographical region. The *Game On* challenge doubled initial participation, then the *100 Mile Club*, a challenge to walk or run 100 miles during the school year, had over 50% of the staff participating. Each of these activities were structured so that staff could participate on their own, at their own level, and involved community businesses through incentives. The wellness teams also challenged other schools to reach and exceed individual and participation goals.

Towards the end of the grant funding, the wellness teams recognized that they had been focusing on physical activity and nutrition, and they wanted to be creative about what "fit" under the wellness umbrella. They added a stress management component and a lot of staff came to the workshops who hadn't participated in the previous physical activity and nutrition wellness activities. These small stress management focused steps encouraged more staff to participate. The wellness committees realized many staff members need to address their stress levels before they can work on improving their physical fitness and eating habits.

The district has experienced a significant change in safety and injury since the start of the employee wellness program. Klamath County School District has the state's lowest risk rating and has steadily decreased from a 2.1 to a .9 rating. This includes slip and falls, back injuries, and broken bones. The district attributes this rating reduction to safety vigilance, employee weight loss, and increased physical activity.

Continuation / Sustainability

The employee wellness program is led by teachers and staff, not by the administration, and entirely focused on the well-being of staff. The district sponsors a beginning of the year workshop for the school wellness co-leaders. During this workshop, the co-leaders network, share successes, address challenges, and plan the activities for the year. Communication about the program across the district has been identified as an on-going challenge, and the district technology coordinator is helping to improve the communication methods.

When OEA Choice Trust grant funding ended, the school wellness teams asked the district and school board for \$15,000 to continue the program. They collected testimonials from staff who were impacted by the wellness program and presented to the school board. The board and administration gave \$25,000 *"without blinking an eye."* One board member stated "we would never think of not having it" (employee wellness program).

Like many other school districts, Klamath County faces a teacher shortage issue. The employee wellness program is a recruitment tool to attract new, highly qualified staff and to retain their current dedicated staff. The district invests in its employees by dedicating professional development opportunities to wellness. They use these days not only to learn about how to support their students, but to help themselves and each other. The superintendent has started his opening-year comments emphasizing the importance of wellness!

About Us

The OEA Choice Trust is the only organization solely dedicated to workplace wellness for all Oregon public school employees. We offer free expertise; best practices and proven strategies based on national worksite wellness research and our own experience across Oregon; and grant funding to help schools create employee wellness programs that support their employees' specific goals. Together with teachers, administrators and school staff, we are building a culture of wellness in Oregon schools. Please join us.

Our Vision and Mission

All Oregon public school employees are healthy, resilient and engaged as champions for healthy school environments and vital communities. As a result, they are fulfilled in their work, model health for students and are better equipped to foster student success. We provide expertise and resources to help Oregon public school employees create comprehensive and flexible wellness programs to build a culture of wellness that becomes the norm in school workplaces. We prioritize quality service and partnerships that support a journey to wellness.