

Lake County School District

School Employee Fitness Center Transforms a Rural Community

Background

Lake County School District (LCSD) is a small, rural district in scenic southeastern Oregon. It is located in the town of Lakeview and serves 730 K-12 students from the town and the surrounding countryside. Lakeview is the county seat of Lake County, with a population of approximately 2,287 people. The district is one of the largest employers in Lakeview, employing 102 staff members, and it is composed of three elementary schools, a combined middle and high school, and a district office. In its prime, the community was home to a thriving timber and agricultural industry, but since the timber industry's decline, Lake County has become predominately dependent on government agencies for economic sustainability. As a result, LCSD serves a high number of economically disadvantaged families, with 55.5% of K-12 students qualifying for free and reduced meals. The district serves a population of students who are approximately 76% white, 19% Hispanic, and 5% representing other ethnicities.

In 2012, School Counselor Brandi Harris learned of the school employee wellness grant program and introduced it to middle and high school administrators Bob Nash and Steve Prock. They saw it as an opportunity for the district to give something back to its hard-working staff members during a time of especially low morale. At the time, LCSD was experiencing a tightening budget and an overwhelming number of accountability measures. They hoped that an employee wellness program would boost morale and promote overall health and wellness opportunities to help employees achieve a healthy balance in their lives.

The Challenge

The superintendent and administrators of Lake County School District recognized that their staff is its most valuable asset. In order to achieve their mission of providing the students of Lake County with the knowledge and skills to become life-long learners and contributing citizens, they understood that it was critical to create a culture of staff wellness and provide their staff with opportunities for exercise, eating healthfully, and reducing stress. Given Lakeview's small size and remote location, the community had limited access to health and fitness resources to help them in this endeavor. They hoped that an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant would help them to meet this need that could not be met in their community.

What They Did

The district formed a school employee wellness committee to manage its employee wellness program. The committee surveyed district staff members to assess their needs and interests and learned that 76.7% of survey respondents were interested in exercise and fitness.

Without exercise and fitness facilities within the community to support LCSD employees in perusing this interest, the committee decided to create a fitness center for the sole use of LCSD staff members. The district supported the committee by providing two dedicated rooms in the middle school to become a fitness center, including on-going janitorial maintenance and heating of the space. The wellness committee used funds from its OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant to purchase the equipment for the fitness center, and it obtained \$1,000 worth of in-kind donations for the

space from the local community. To successfully launch the fitness center, the committee finalized a fitness center waiver for staff to complete prior to using the facility, provided an orientation to the equipment, and organized wellness challenges which would incentivize facility usage. The center would be a cornerstone of their wellness program and their comprehensive effort to build a culture of wellness for the district.

After the fitness center was established and the employee wellness program matured, the employee wellness committee recognized that the center had the potential to make a greater impact. Some LCSD employees who worked in other buildings found it was a barrier to travel to the middle school to use the fitness center. To remove this barrier, the committee made arrangements for employees to be able to check out portable equipment to use in other district buildings. In an annual survey, staff members shared that they would be more likely to use the fitness center if their partners and spouses were permitted to go with them. With this, the committee adjusted the guidelines to allow partners and spouses to use the fitness center so long as they were going with the district employee. In 2015, employees of Lake Education Service District (LESD) expressed interest in using the fitness center as well. To support these additional public school employees in Lakeview, the LCSD wellness program granted LESD staff members access to the facility. Each of these changes increased utilization of the space and broadened its impact on the community.

Outcomes / Impact

After three years of implementing the school employee wellness program, 84% of LCSD employees are actively participating, and 100% of those surveyed in 2015 want the program to be sustained after the grant from OEA Choice Trust ends. Some of the feedback staff shared with the wellness committee included that the fitness center has helped people get “unstuck” from their unhealthy habits and that it is a safe place where everyone can go. Since partners and spouses have been allowed to accompany staff members to the fitness center, it is used more often, has created bonding time for couples, and reinforced healthy living by engaging staff members’ families. LCSD administrators have noted that staff morale has improved and employees are more energetic in their engagement with students.

Lake County School District uses the fitness center as part of their new employee recruitment efforts. Middle and High School Principal Steve Prock explained that *“Lakeview is a hard place to get people to come to. The fitness center is something to show perspective teachers as a perk. Our facilities are older; the first place we show is the staff fitness center.”* The fitness center helps with

employee recruitment and retention and has proven to be a morale-booster. The center has enriched the community and created a place for staff to make healthy lifestyle changes.

Continuation / Sustainability

From the inception of LCSD’s school employee wellness program, the creation of a fitness center for staff has been a fundamental component of their plans for program sustainability. Through their OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Program, all of the major purchases for the fitness center have been made. The district will continue to invest in it through its dedication of the space and commitment to maintaining it. When the grant ends in 2017, the district envisions using the fitness center during the school day, when it is not being used by staff, to support student wellness. For students, the fitness center will become a comprehensive exercise and nutrition lab to teach children about lifetime health and fitness.

Lake County School District has demonstrated its commitment to employee health and well-being through its board-approved sustainability plan and inclusion of school employee wellness in the district wellness policy. Lake County’s school employee wellness program has created a culture of health, and its fitness center has provided a much-needed health and wellness resource for the school community to use and enjoy for years to come.

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.