

Silver Falls School District

District Priority + Staff Involvement + Education Association Partnership = Employee Wellness Success

Background

The Silver Falls School District serves the community of and surrounding the city of Silverton, Oregon. The district is 240 square miles in size and located in Marion and Clackamas Counties at the east edge of the rich and beautiful Willamette Valley. There are eleven schools, located both in the city and rural communities, within the Silver Falls School District. The district employs approximately 410 staff and serves approximately 3,740 students in grades K-12. Approximately 81% of the students are white, 15% Hispanic, and 4% representing other ethnicities. 17% of the students are economically disadvantaged.

Silver Falls School District is in year three of their OEA Choice Trust school employee wellness grant. To help ensure students possess the knowledge and skills necessary to make healthy choices for a lifetime, Silver Falls School District implements a comprehensive wellness program consistent with district policy EFA and state and federal regulations.

The Challenge

Working in a school district is a difficult and tiring profession even in financially secure times. However, when the Silver Falls School District experienced a budget crisis and staff morale was very low due to increased workloads and expectations, the district knew they needed to demonstrate to their employees that they cared about their health and well-being. The district recognized that all staff must be healthy, both physically and emotionally, to take care of children and youth. The vision, through grant funding provided by OEA Choice Trust, was to create a culture of wellness and provide opportunities for

staff to improve and maintain healthy lifestyles. The Silver Falls School District has been able to transform periodic fitness activities at a couple of schools to a district-wide, sustainable approach to staff wellness.

What They Did

The district began by creating a district wellness committee, led by the assistant superintendent, to guide the grant efforts. All eleven schools and the district administrative office were encouraged to form their own wellness committees, led by wellness ambassadors or champions, to address the unique health and wellness needs of the staff in their buildings. District wide “Wellness Wednesdays”, promoted through staff wearing school specific t-shirts, are a visual reminder of each school’s commitment to health and wellness. The initial year of the program focused on increasing physical activity and a “Body Age” assessment campaign. Although the fitness focus did not appeal to as many staff as they had anticipated, a wellness buzz was created. Staff who participated reported feeling better due to healthy lifestyle changes. Success stories highlighting individual staff making health and wellness changes were written and distributed to all staff, providing role models and mentors for other staff who may have been hesitant to get involved.

During the second year, there was a more comprehensive health and wellness approach, focusing on physical activity, nutrition and managing stress. The healthy lifestyles culture shift continued and district-level decisions were made with a wellness component mindset. The superintendent was filmed leading a wellness activity and the video was posted on the district website. School and district administrators began

questioning and discussing what they could do for the health and wellness of their staff, including stress management and emotional health. Many staff issues that are addressed by administrators or through education association representation often have a wellness component. Recognizing this, the district implemented an employee assistance program, without having this additional benefit be part of the bargaining or negotiations process.

Outcomes / Impact

After two years of implementing the school employee wellness grant program, with a 69% participation rate, staff report they are given opportunities to take care of themselves during the school day, such as the flexibility for walking clubs during lunch and walking meetings. The culture in the district has become more positive and there is an increase in camaraderie and morale. District leadership and school principals are modeling healthy behaviors and lifestyles. Healthy snacks are brought and provided during meetings. The employee wellness program, initially led by a dedicated group of staff, is now the shared responsibility of the school level wellness champions.

“The employee wellness program has not only had an impact on our ability to do our jobs better, but also on our ability to be better for our families and friends.”

Interest and participation in the employee wellness program continues to grow. During the first year, 31% of staff participated, and during the second year, the number of participating staff increased to 67%.

Additionally, the district has seen a reduction in employee absences and sick leave. Fifty-eight percent of staff report using less sick leave this year than last year, and 89% contributed their reduction in sick leave to wellness choices. Although anecdotal, this cost savings is attributed to healthier lifestyles, improved morale, and a decrease in employee stress levels.

Demonstrating a commitment to the wellness program, school ambassadors enthusiastically give their time to create healthy environments in their schools and determine school level funds to further the program activities available within their schools and district-wide. The financial cost of the employee wellness program is equally paid for through the partnership between the district, education association and the wellness program grant funding.

The employee wellness program has also had a tremendous impact on students through increased nutritional quality of the school meals program. It was best said by one of the building principals, *“We promoted health and wellness by participating in activities and wearing our Wellness Wednesday t-*

shirts, and then sent the kids to lunch, where they ate junk food.” This is no longer happening in Silver Falls School District.

Continuation / Sustainability

The Silver Falls School District Board of Education approved an updated local wellness policy in February 2016. The policy now includes school employee wellness:

- Health education and health promoting activities,
- Safe, supportive social and physical environments,
- Linkage to related programs,
- Education and resources to help employees make decision about health care, and
- Nutrition and fitness educational opportunities

Employee health and wellness will continue to be a priority for Silver Falls School District, encouraging staff involvement through school-level wellness champions and partnering with the education association. The district will work to quantify cost savings from decreased absences, improved morale, and decreased stress levels, in addition to staff testimonials. This information will be presented to the school board to demonstrate the impact of the employee wellness program.

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.