

# Central School District

## School Employee Wellness Program Focuses on Sustainability from the Start

### Background

Central School District (CSD) is located in Polk County, Oregon and serves the communities of Independence and Monmouth, as well as the surrounding rural farm communities. The district lies in the mid-Willamette Valley, on the west bank of the Willamette River and is just 12 miles southwest of Salem. CSD is made up of five schools and employs 449 staff members who serve over 3,200 students in kindergarten through grade 12. The student population is 50% white, 43% Hispanic and 7% representing other ethnicities. Sixty-six percent of students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals.

### The Challenge

CSD was undergoing difficult times at the district level, which resulted in a sense of uncertainty and frustration for school employees. The district was on the verge of major leadership changes, and staff needed something to boost morale, break down silos and support relationships. An Oregon Education Association UniServ consultant brought information about OEA Choice Trust's School Employee Wellness Grant Program to the district, and a union officer, who was also a middle school health teacher and wellness enthusiast, saw the grant opportunity as a great way to do something for and about the staff. She shared the grant information with her middle school colleagues, and the vice principal expressed interest in helping her apply for it.

### What They Did

They surveyed staff to gauge interest, and approximately one quarter of employees expressed interest in participating in a wellness program. CSD

put a wellness team in place, including a representative from each building, and team members connected with people at each site who they thought could be champions for the program. They also reached out to the district and unions for their support. The district agreed to provide \$2,500 for the program, plus substitute days for the wellness team to implement the program. Seeing that the program was for all school employees, both certified and classified unions were willing to contribute funding for the program as well. The original program coordinator recalled that "it was a matter of asking and explaining what the money would go for," and that everyone was agreeable to the idea. With these commitments in place, CSD applied for an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant.

CSD's program began with a focus on physical health and chronic disease prevention. It offered a menu of wellness activities, including workshops, healthy eating and hydration challenges, blood pressure screenings and a variety of opportunities for exercise. They ordered fitness equipment, hired fitness instructors and incentivized participation. As the program progressed, it diversified its offerings to include a monthly Laughter is the Best Medicine outing, a family-friendly Amazing Race 5K and weekly Wellness Wednesdays. Wellness Wednesdays proved to be an effective way to engage staff members, as all staff members were given special t-shirts to wear and wellness activities were infused into the work day.

As the program progressed, it saw many changes in leadership at the program level and at the district level. The coordinator and wellness team recognized the importance of creating shared responsibility for the program, so they began

delegating to building champions. After the program's third year, the team made the case for a paid 0.25 FTE coordinator. The district agreed to create the position, and a new wellness coordinator was hired. The new coordinator helped evolve the program, but left the position after two years. CSD was again faced with the challenge of finding a new person to take the lead. That's when a recent district retiree who had been a wellness team member stepped in as coordinator. This new coordinator had existing relationships with staff members, and she focused on face-to-face employee outreach, which resulted in increased participation.

Since the program's inception, CSD has had four superintendents and a new business manager. The business manager has served on the wellness team and acted as an important link between the team and senior administration. She recalled that when she was hired, the superintendent "asked me to get involved with the program—helping with financials and the things management would like to see. My role was to make the case for sustainability...we didn't care about reducing sick days or workers' comp; administration saw the program as being about and for the staff."

## Outcomes / Impact

CSD's school employee wellness program has shifted the district culture and made employee health and well-being a priority. In the program's fifth year, a survey was administered and 47% of survey respondents reported exercising regularly and 60% were participating in Wellness Wednesdays. Multiple staff members have reported significant health improvements as a result of the program, including improving blood chemistries and lowering health risk factors. One Transportation Department staff member shared, "I am much stronger now, after a year of exercise at the Bus Barn, than any time in my life." In addition to organized wellness program offerings, employees are arranging activities on their own. The wellness coordinator shared, "People are asking if they can do activities for the wellness program and are leading them on their own. I think that's a big deal. Wellness is part of who we are now." With the program's bulletin boards in every district building and so many staff members wearing Wellness Wednesday shirts every week, the program is quite visible. Staff members role model healthy behaviors, and students are vicariously benefiting from the focus on health and well-being.

## Continuation / Sustainability

From the beginning, CSD's wellness team had its eye on sustainability. They sought out support and funding from administration and both unions and worked hard to find the right people to lead the program and serve as champions from all employee

classifications. The Wellness Coordinator became a 0.25 FTE paid position after the second year and is still in place today. The team learned that one person can't do everything and developed a network of empowered champions in each building. This program design has served CSD well, boosting the program's capacity and communication efforts. In 2016, CSD's school board incorporated school employee wellness into the district wellness policy, and the district agreed to keep a line item in the budget for up to \$30,000 for employee wellness when the grant period came to a close, including the 0.25 FTE Wellness Coordinator

In 2017, CSD welcomed a new superintendent to the district who appreciates the role that school employee wellness can have on a district. In an interview, she stated, "We need whole students and whole staff members. Staff need to be healthy, not only physically, but mentally...School employee wellness creates a system of support for the school staff, which impacts students and also the community. It's all connected." Central School District's commitment to school employee wellness is made evident by the support of district leadership and the school board as well as the numerous employees who continue to champion the program and ensure its success.

### 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.