

North Powder Charter School

A Wellness Program Grows out of Genuine Concern for Health and Well-Being of Colleagues

Background

North Powder Charter School (NPCS) is a public charter school in rural northeastern Oregon. The city of North Powder is located between La Grande and Baker City and has a population of approximately 440. North Powder's small size and remote, agricultural setting create unique circumstances for the district. The closest hospital, fitness centers and large grocery stores are 20 miles away in Baker City. The school has strong ties to the Farm to School program and boasts an expansive garden which includes a hoop house, green house and chickens. The school is considered a single district but has sought and obtained charter status to offer a variety of instructional methods. The K-12 school has 36 school employees who serve 297 students. Approximately 63% of students qualify for free and reduced meals; 84% of students are white, 13% are Hispanic/Latino and 3% represent other ethnicities.

The Challenge

Staff members of NPCS often found themselves in multiple roles, in addition to their official job titles. Although they supported one another whenever possible, a significant amount of work was being asked of staff, especially the superintendent. This high stress environment resulted in poor health for many. Additionally, NPCS lost two colleagues to chronic disease over the span of three years. The tight-knit staff became genuinely concerned for the health and well-being of their colleagues.

What They Did

In 2012, a school principal invited a NPCS teacher to accompany him to a Confederation of School Administrators (COSA) conference. They attended

a presentation by OEA Choice Trust and learned about the school employee wellness program grant opportunity. As the teacher recalled, it was "divine intervention." Upon returning to North Powder, they got administrative and school board approval to apply for an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant. In fact, the administration and board were so supportive of the program, they approved staff to use 30 minutes of daily contract time to participate in wellness activities, as long as it didn't interfere with teaching or time with students. With this endorsement from leadership, NPCS applied for a grant from OEA Choice Trust, and their program launched in 2013.

NPCS found spending grant money to be a challenge in the beginning. The committee reflected, "When schools are going through budget crises, it's hard to justify spending the money on staff." However, they realized this hesitation to spend money as an asset; it caused them to slow down and be thoughtful in how to best use the funds. Two teachers became co-wellness coordinators, and together they organized a wellness committee with representation from all departments and surveyed staff to identify needs and interests.

In the beginning, the program focused on awareness, communication and offering a variety of wellness activities. Throughout the year, they collected data by tracking participation and administering an annual survey. In year one, 50% of employees participated in the program, and 60% reported satisfaction with the program.

To strengthen the program, the committee sought out partnerships. They identified assets within the district; the school nurse agreed to measure blood pressure for those interested in blood pressure

monitoring, and the nutrition services department and FoodCorps volunteer offered to prepare healthy snacks for staff meetings. The healthy snacks often came from the school garden! The committee reached out to the medical center in Baker City to provide lab services for blood chemistry testing for the annual health screening and to local businesses to provide incentives for wellness activity participation. The program also promoted health and wellness benefits offered by Oregon Educator's Benefit Board's Healthy Futures program, including Weight Watchers and Healthy Team Healthy U.

After the program's third year, the staff of NPC's recognized a gap in wellness resources in North Powder—a fitness and wellness center. The closest gym was 20 miles away, a significant barrier for school employees wishing to exercise. The wellness committee worked with administration to identify a space which could be dedicated to staff wellness and purchased a variety of exercise equipment. To cover the cost of maintenance and ensure wellness center sustainability, participating staff members were asked to pay an annual fee of \$25 and sign an annual waiver. Realizing that the \$25 fee might be a barrier to some, staff members were allowed to pay the fee in installments over the course of the year. Before staff could use the wellness center, they received orientations to ensure safe use of the equipment. Employees were asked to sign in each time they used the center so they could track usage, and they organized wellness challenges to boost usage. The additions of outdoor sports equipment and a "stress-free zone" for massage and meditation brought in more participation. As the superintendent shared, "There are activities for everyone, and I think that has been an important part of the program."

Outcomes / Impact

NPC's school employee wellness program has demonstrated meaningful outcomes. By the fifth year, 90% of employees participated. Many staff members have reported improving their diets, walking to work and finding ways to be more active and reduce stress. In 2017, their annual survey had a response rate of 86%. Of these respondents, 90% were very satisfied with the program, 50% reported reduced stress as a result of the program and 100% used the wellness center and identified it as one of the best features of the employee wellness program. Additionally, 83% of staff paid to use the center in 2017. In an interview, the wellness committee shared, "There is such great camaraderie as a result of the program, and the friendly competition has been fun. Staff members grab buddies to exercise before, during or after school, and the equipment check out is well utilized during the summer."

The school employee wellness program has had an enormous impact not only on the staff but also on

the students. Students noticed when staff began walking at recess and refilling their water bottles, and they wanted to be involved. The wellness committee reflected, "Before the grant, classroom parties had a lot of chocolate and sweet treats. Now there's more emphasis on fruits and vegetables. More kids are packing water bottles; we didn't see that before." The employee wellness program led to a student wellness initiative, including nutrition standards for student snacks and celebrations. The culture of the district became one of health.

Continuation / Sustainability

NPC's school employee wellness program completed its OEA Choice Trust grant period in 2017 and is prepared for sustainability. The school board and administration continue to support the program, as demonstrated by the inclusion of school employee wellness in the district wellness policy and sustaining the dedicated staff wellness center. The \$25 use fee for the center will help to keep it in good operating condition and provide some funding for wellness activities.

NPC's knows that a successful program requires leadership and teamwork. The district continues to support a wellness coordinator by offering a stipend, and the wellness committee members remain committed to their work. The superintendent shared that the thought of ending the program has never entered their minds. As NPC's wellness coordinator stated, "We have a culture of devoted people. We obviously didn't get into teaching for the money. We see value in it and don't assign a price tag to it...we all value the program and want to help it succeed."

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.