



# Astoria School District

## Forming Community and Friendships through a School Employee Wellness Program

### Background

Astoria School District (ASD) is located in historic Astoria, Oregon. Astoria is the oldest US settlement west of the Rocky Mountains and the oldest city in the state of Oregon. It is a port city in the far northwest corner of the state and is the seat of Clatsop County. The school district was founded in 1854, making it one of the oldest school districts in the West. The district is comprised of four schools, a district office and a transportation building. Two-hundred and forty employees currently serve the district's 1,891 K-12 students. Sixty-nine percent of students qualify for free and reduced meals; 76% of students are white, 17% are Hispanic/Latino and 7% represent other ethnicities. There are families in the district with seasonal mobility due to a sizable number of jobs based in service and fishing industries.

District health and wellness has long been a priority in Astoria. In 2015, the ASD School Board updated the district wellness policy to include a school employee wellness component and made it a priority for district administration to create a comprehensive school employee wellness program for all employees. Along with the district wellness policy, ASD had a strong school health advisory committee with diverse representation. The committee included licensed and classified representatives from each building and community partners. ASD used the Center for Disease Control's School Health Index to evaluate the district's health and wellness needs and had several community partners in place to offer support and resources. The district had set the stage for a strong school employee wellness program.

### The Challenge

ASD staff members were feeling overwhelmed by stress. As one teacher in the district shared, "People who go into education are selfless—they always put others first." The school board and superintendent took notice. The superintendent said, "The district office could see the amount of stress people had; we wanted to do something to help." The superintendent had personal experience with how exercise and wellness help to alleviate stress, and leadership thought a district-wide employee wellness program could help ASD staff members. When he learned of the OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant program, he partnered up with a grant writer in the district technology department and applied for a grant.

### What They Did

ASD's employee wellness committee used an employee needs and interests survey to drive the program and designate their priorities. Ninety percent of employees responded to the initial survey, and 75% of those employees were in favor of a school employee wellness program. The survey also indicated that the top wellness priorities for employees were physical fitness activities, healthy eating and stress reduction. With these goals in mind, the program offered a variety of wellness challenges, including Walker Tracker challenges, on-site exercise equipment, yoga passes, healthy eating/cooking programs, stress reduction activities and the annual district-wide in-service focused on relaxation and mindfulness strategies. The first year was a great success with 74% of employee participating in the program.

The second year built upon the successes of the first and adjusted based on employee feedback from the annual school employee wellness program survey. It was apparent that ASD staff loved friendly competition and access to parks and recreation facilities. The committee also identified the need to engage classified staff whose work hours differed from the standard school schedule and the need to expand to a more holistic approach to well-being. As a result, they invited the classified union president to join the committee, and they created a spring well-being challenge to encourage staff to focus on any aspect of well-being that they were personally drawn to. The superintendent and committee recognized that buildings had their own unique wellness needs, and staff with families found it more difficult to participate due to time constraints. This led to mini grants so that each building could provide well-being opportunities specific to the needs and interests of its employees and more family-friendly activities.

This fine-tuning in the second year brought about a significant shift in staff members' perception of the program. It expanded from a program primarily focused on physical well-being to one that addressed all aspects of well-being. As a result, more employees engaged in the program, and people felt more connected. Staff members felt that the program was for them and about them. Moving forward, the committee plans to continue expanding upon well-being offerings and is dedicated to finding ways to engage every staff member in the program.

## Outcomes / Impact

Since the program's onset, it has had strong administrative support as well as employee buy-in. By consistently using staff needs and interests and program evaluation data to drive the program and designate priorities, the program has maintained over 60% employee participation, and more employees continue to get involved. The program has fostered a deep sense of community among school employees and has helped grow friendships as a result. Wellness committee members have noticed that employees are leading wellness activities on their own, independent of the formal employee wellness program, and these opportunities are open to all. The informal activities have created a "buddy system" which promote safety, encouragement and fun.

The employee wellness program and sense of community it has created has linked to ASD's work in trauma-informed practices. Middle school staff members read a book about cultivating emotional resilience in educators together, with discussions led by the school principal, and a group of staff began gathering for soup nights during which they watch TED talks on well-being topics, such as resilience, together. They recognize the important

role school employee well-being has in their ability to serve their students and community.

## Continuation / Sustainability

ASD is currently in its third year of the OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant program, and it remains committed to school employee well-being and to the future of the program. Not only has the school board included school employee wellness in the district wellness policy, it has also included compensation for a wellness coordinator in the district budget, and employees have access to the healthy food provided by the district's nutrition services program. The district has developed strong relationships with community partners who offer resources and facilities to the school employee wellness program, and, as one wellness committee member shared, "Employees feel like they have permission to care for themselves." ASD is creating a culture of well-being, one in which school employees feel supported by one another.

### 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 well-being 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 well-being programs to build a culture of wellness that becomes the norm. We prioritize quality service and partnerships that support a journey to wellness.