



# Central Curry School District

## Community Makes the Difference for School Employee Wellness Program

### Background

Central Curry School District (CCSD) is located in scenic Gold Beach, Oregon, which is the seat of Curry County. Nestled at the mouth of the Rogue River, Gold Beach is a community where residents and visitors can experience the beauty of the southern Oregon coast. The 2,200 people who call the Gold Beach area home appreciate its tight-knit community and recreational opportunities. The city is surrounded by wildlife and is isolated; many residents travel nearly 30 miles to a larger city for shopping and amenities. The district consists of one K-8 school and one high school, which also houses the district office. The district has 65 employees and a student body of approximately 474. Sixty-four percent of students qualify for free and reduced meals; 76% of students are white, 13% are multi-racial, 8% are Hispanic/Latino and 3% of students are American Indian/Alaska Natives.

### The Challenge

In 2015, CCSD was experiencing an especially difficult economic time. The limited resources in such a remote location and the poverty experienced by many in the community was acutely felt in the district. These factors negatively impacted the district climate, and employees felt mounting stress. As a result, CCSD was experiencing increased staff turnover and early retirements. In such a close community, the need to support the district's school employees was clear to all. As a teacher shared at that time, "It takes an entire community to support staff and schools, so they are effective role models for the students, which in turn, develops and strengthens the community." The community acknowledged the direct impact that school

employee well-being has on students and the community at large.

### What They Did

The school community wellness advisory council (SCWAC) applied for an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant to launch a school employee wellness (SEW) program. Three members of the SCWAC, two teachers (one of whom was the local education association president) and one community member, shared the responsibilities of coordinating the SEW program. In the first year, the program established wellness champions in both schools, offered a health screening, physical activity challenges and classes and created "cocoon rooms:" rooms with massage chairs and relaxation resources where staff could take breaks. That first year, the program saw 30% participation. There was a significant change after the program's first year, which included the hiring of a new superintendent and a new, part-time SEW program coordinator.

The new program coordinator was a recently retired teacher from the district who had participated in the program the previous year. She had strong existing relationships with staff and had more time for program coordination. The coordinator worked hard to recomunicate that the program was for and about the staff, develop a diverse SEW program committee with both certified and classified employees as well as community partners and gain staff buy-in. As a result, CCSD's employee wellness program shifted to a collaboration between leadership and staff. In 2016, the school board adopted an updated district wellness policy to include a school employee wellness component, and leadership became more actively involved. The

committee used the results of a staff health and wellness needs and interests survey to guide the program, and they promoted activities informally during and outside of school hours. This approach proved to be an effective way to engage employees and increase buy-in.

To further increase participation in the second year, the program worked with OSU Extension Services to offer education on healthy eating on a budget, they relocated the high school cocoon room to be more accessible, improvements to the cocoon rooms were made and school administrators were enlisted to help staff members use the rooms by using GOSE (get out of school early) release time, during which administrators would step in to give staff members a break to use cocoon rooms. These changes led to a participation rate of 50%.

After the second year, the wellness coordinator resigned to enjoy her retirement, and another recently retired teacher was hired as her replacement. Under her leadership, the program continued to grow and increase engagement, despite many challenges out of the program's control. That year, the area had approximately 163" of rain, experienced significant smoke from a major wildfire in the south and the buildings were retrofitted for earthquakes. The program charged on, engaging employees in new well-being activities, including Walker Tracker challenges, various well-being workshops and monthly potlucks. With the retrofits, cocoon rooms again had to move, but better locations were identified, which led to an increase in use. At the end of the third year, participation had increased to 97%!

## Outcomes / Impact

Over the course of the program's first three years, it became increasingly staff-driven, and as a result, reached 97% overall participation. CCSD administers an annual survey to collect information about employee participation, satisfaction, lifestyle changes and reduced health risk factors. Fifty-six percent of staff members responded to the survey during year three, with the following results reported by survey respondents:

- 95% reported that having the wellness program has helped to create a greater sense of camaraderie
- 92.5% reported that having the wellness program makes them feel that their well-being is an important priority for school leaders
- 82% reported being very satisfied or satisfied with the program
- 75% reported that their health has improved as a result of the program

In an interview with the superintendent and wellness committee members in October 2018, they shared that "wellness has become the norm," and

that there is a heightened awareness of the small, healthy changes they can make in their lives. The committee reported that there is healthier food in staff rooms and that relationships among colleagues are deeper and more personal as a result of the program. The program offered employees something to look forward to and brought about much-needed fun.

## Continuation / Sustainability

CCSD is committed to school employee well-being. School employee wellness is included in the district's wellness policy, and they continue to employ a part-time employee wellness program coordinator. In the time since the writing of this story began, CCSD's program has continued to evolve. The 2018-19 school year welcomed a new superintendent, who is an advocate for school employee well-being, and the wellness coordinator relocated to a new city. She serves as a mentor to the new wellness coordinator who is an alumna of CCSD and a registered nurse at the local hospital. The wellness committee, in partnership with school leadership, is planning for sustainability and continues to create new partnerships in their community to help support the program in the future.

CCSD's employee wellness program has shown tremendous resilience despite many obstacles. The committee believes this resilience is the result of their continuous team work, partnerships within the community and word-of-mouth communications. As the wellness coordinator shared, "It's not a one-person program." Continuing the program is a community effort.

### 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.