

The Village School

Public Charter School's Employee Wellness Program Focuses on Head, Heart and Hands

Background

The Village School is a K-8 public charter school sponsored by the Eugene 4J School District. Located in Eugene, Oregon, it was founded in 2000 as one of Oregon's first public charter schools. The mission of the Village School is to provide an education that fully integrates the arts with an academic curriculum, guided by observations of child development that promotes the healthy growth of the whole human being—head, heart and hands. Forty-two staff members serve 224 students, and there is one class per K-8 grade. Fifty-eight percent of students qualify for free or reduced meals, and students are 77% white/Caucasian, 11% multiracial, 9% Hispanic/Latino and 3% represent other ethnicities.

A strong sense of community has been at the school's core from the beginning. The Village School has an active parent body, and parents volunteer in a wide variety of ways. Village School parents brought about the Village Kitchen—the school's USDA-compliant scratch kitchen which prepares breakfast and lunch using mostly whole, local, organic foods. The Village School is environmentally-minded and is recognized as a premier green school by Oregon Green Schools. The school has a composting program and boasts a large school garden, complete with chickens. The school also gives back to the community every year during its annual community service walk-a-thon.

The Challenge

Village School staff members are deeply committed to their work. Even though they love what they do, the responsibilities of being a school employee can feel overwhelming at times. In 2012, there was an

on-going conversation around the how workloads could be lightened and extra duties be made more equitable. When the school principal met OEA Choice Trust staff at a Confederation of School Administrators (COSA) conference and learned of the OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant program, he was excited about the possibility of starting a program to take care of the well-being of the hard-working staff at the school.

What They Did

The Student Services Coordinator had a passion for health and well-being and offered to apply for a grant from OEA Choice Trust. She surveyed the staff on their health and wellness needs and interests and recruited staff to join a school employee wellness committee. Survey data indicated that staff was interested in stress management, emotional well-being and physical activity. They recognized that this showed a need to take care of their own heads, hearts and hands.

The school's leadership was supportive from the start. The principal participated on the wellness committee and offered time during staff meetings for wellness experiences and announcements. He and the executive director championed the program, offering facilities for wellness activities and participating themselves when possible. The school's board of directors chose to cover the cost of staff lunches at the Village School's scratch kitchen in the school budget in support of school employee wellness, and the principal hired lunch supervisors to enable staff to take their lunch breaks and eat together.

In the beginning, the program offered social-emotional workshops, on-site yoga, meditation and

tai-chi classes, a dedicated staff wellness room for peaceful breaks and an April fitness challenge. Using staff feedback and participation data, the program evolved to continue the popular yoga classes, include training in mindfulness and add a monthly focus on different well-being themes.

The staff recognized that the school community was rich with talents; in-kind resources were abundant. Parents were eager to offer their professional services to the program, including massage therapy and presentations on a wide-range of health and wellness topics, and they donated products and their time to create beautiful staff wellness spaces. Staff too led workshops on areas where they had special skills, such as cider pressing and basket-weaving.

While the program experienced great success, it was not without challenges. It was difficult for staff to make time to attend wellness committee meetings, so they developed a shared-leadership model, asking staff how they could lead aspects and contribute to the program even if they couldn't attend meetings. Tracking participation had been a challenge, so the committee developed monthly rosters with staff names and wellness activities from the previous month to pass around at monthly staff meetings so that staff could check off the activities in which they had participated. They also experimented with offering childcare and more family-friendly activities to boost participation. The program experienced wellness coordinator turnover after its second and third years, and the school saw four principals within four years. Perhaps the most significant change during the program's first years was that during that time, the school moved to a new site. These challenges tested the program but also helped to build the school community's resilience and resourcefulness to ensure the sustainability of the program.

Outcomes / Impact

At the end of the first grant year in the spring of 2014, the school employed 32 staff members, and 91% participated in the program. By the end of fifth grant year in spring 2018, the staff size increased to 42, and 100% participated in the program. School employee wellness has become part of the culture. As the Nutrition Services Coordinator/Employee Wellness Program Coordinator put it, "Taking care of our health is a priority now. It's an expectation—it's the norm, a given and part of the regular conversation. It's not something special. Wellness wasn't part of our work vocabulary before."

The program has not only touched the lives of staff members and their families but also students and the community at large. One teacher shared, "I get to brag to people about the program. It informs other people of what is possible. We're informing

the world that things can be this way." Students have directly benefited from the program as well. The executive director shared, "When the staff and kids do yoga and mindfulness, we get reports from parents that the kids self-regulate better," and the school principal added, "There is a trickle down to the kids—they model what they see...investing in ourselves will clearly benefit the students." Some teachers have begun integrating mindful moments into their teaching, and there is great interest in starting a school-wide mindfulness curriculum

Continuation / Sustainability

The Village School completed the OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant program in 2018, but the program's impact on the school remains. Employee well-being is ingrained into the daily life of the school, as evidenced by the multiple employee wellness spaces dedicated to staff (including a massage chair, exercise facilities and space for quiet and meditation), the standing wellness agenda item at the beginning of staff meetings and the way staff check in with each other and maintain caring relationships. In 2017, the school board voted to incorporate school employee wellness into the school wellness policy. The board is committed to continuing to cover the cost of staff lunches at the Village Kitchen, and since the conclusion of the grant, the board has offered each staff member the choice of five yoga class passes or a 45-minute massage annually.

One past program coordinator who is no longer at the school shared, "The program stays with you, with the individuals and with the community." The school employee wellness program remains in everyone's head, heart and hands.

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.