



David Douglas School District

Weaving employee wellness into an entire workplace culture

Background

Located in East Portland, the David Douglas School District covers 12 square miles across suburban neighborhoods, retail shopping areas and small businesses. It serves a community of nearly 54,000 residents with nine elementary schools, three middle schools, a high school and one alternative school. It is one of the 10 most diverse districts in Oregon. The student population is approximately 27% Hispanic, 15% Asian, 12% Black and 36% white. Of the 9,645 students enrolled in the 2019-2020 school year, 72% qualify for free and reduced lunch. The district employs roughly 1,600 people.

The Challenge

For the David Douglas School District, there was less of a challenge and more of an opportunity when it came to wellness. By the time the district applied for an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant for the 2016-17 school year, it already had a long track record of wellness. The district had had a formal District Wellness Team in place many years earlier, but that faded when a few members left. In 2013, DDSD began working with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools program, which focuses on physical education curriculum and equipment and professional development. The district had also received multiple wellness-related grants from Kaiser Permanente.

Although some of DDSD's early efforts were beneficial, particularly for student wellness, they also revealed that DDSD had some room to grow in terms of employee wellness. Additionally, a report

prepared for the district in 2015 by Kaiser Permanente and the Oregon Educators Benefit Board showed that of the 655 employees enrolled in Kaiser health plans, 71% were overweight or obese, 63% were not getting enough exercise and 28% had borderline or high cholesterol.

What They Did

To bring even more formalization to its employee wellness program, DDSD started with an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant. The effort, spearheaded largely by one influential employee, aimed to expand the existing school employee wellness program named HAPPY, which stands for Healthy, Active, Passionate, Productive and Your Best You.

The first year saw the selection of a wellness coordinator and the formation of a district employee wellness team with lead contacts at each site. Twenty percent of employees participated in stress reduction activities and 17% participated in physical activities. The program coordinated a Walker Tracker Challenge, partnered with the high school's culinary arts program to cater healthy meals for staff events and produced a regular wellness newsletter to encourage and promote wellness. In addition, DDSD took early steps to lay a foundation for the school employee wellness program's long-term sustainability by conducting a program survey at year's end and introducing a District Wellness Policy process that would later be adopted by the board.

One challenge team members noted at the end of the first year was that employees seemed reluctant to participate in physical activities, either because the activities were too difficult or not hard enough or that they felt like they were being told what to do. In the second year, physical activities were still a major component of the program, but more focus was put on mental health and stress reduction — with solid results. “I felt like that was a turning point for us,” one member of the wellness team said.

Ensuing years of the program saw popular kickoff events, quarterly challenges that find buildings competing for bragging rights – and a sizable trophy – healthy potlucks and other related activities. So as to not impede on employees’ time, many of the wellness activities, such as “mindful minutes” or walking groups, were woven into regular school days. “I feel like we’ve really tried to incorporate it into our day so it’s just what we do now,” one wellness team member said.

Outcomes / Impact

Anecdotally, DDS’s school employee wellness program has made a big impact on staff. There is an increased sense of camaraderie among employees and, according to one staff member, people just seem more positive.

But there are also numbers backing up the impacts that the program has made at DDS. Engagement, for starters, has grown. At the end of the third year of the district’s OEA Choice Trust grant, 65% of employees had participated in a stress reduction activity, a statistic measured through a participation tracking system and activity sign-in sheets. That was up from 25% after the first year.

Another impact of DDS’s approach to employee wellness is that it has been successfully integrated with other school programs, thus making it a more acceptable and understood component of the district’s culture. One example of that is how the program has partnered with the high school culinary arts program.

“I think we’ve gotten good at looking at everything through a wellness lens,” said one staff member.

Continuation / Sustainability

DDS has approached its school employee wellness program with the big picture in mind since the very beginning. Student and employee wellness has been part of the district for many years, and partnering with Kaiser Permanente, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and, now, OEA Choice Trust has laid a solid foundation for the future.

By integrating wellness throughout the district, employees have come to see it as a valuable and attractive appeal for working at DDS. Rather than having a single person spearhead the wellness efforts, having an active committee, individual contacts at each building and supportive administration has ensured that the focus on wellness would continue even if certain employees retired or left the district.

On top of that, wellness has formally become a priority for DDS. The district now includes funding for wellness in its annual budget. And not only is staff and student wellness one of the administration’s commitments, but it is the second goal in the district’s state-required Continuous Improvement Plan, which was approved in 2019.

“It’s not just a secondary thing for us. We’re trying to really make it part of the fabric of what we do every day,” said the superintendent. “I think wellness is a big factor in the success of a school district and in the success of the community

About Us

OEA Choice Trust is the only organization 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.