



Tillamook School District

Making wellness work for everyone in a unique corner of Oregon

Background

Located on the northern Oregon Coast, Tillamook School District 9 serves a largely rural area whose economy is based on agriculture, farming, forestry and tourism. The district has 336 employees and is home to seven schools, including two alternative high schools, that serve 2,250 students. The student population is approximately 67% white, 27 percent Hispanic, and 1% Native American. About 57% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch.

The Challenge

Tillamook School District 9 has some inherent challenges associated with it that come with the district's geography and demographics. TSD9 lies within a somewhat isolated area with heavy rainfall – some years it's more than 100 inches a year – that, along with a lower pay range than other districts, can make it hard for recruiting and retaining employees. The student population is also a high-needs one. This latter aspect was highlighted when TSD9 became part of the ACEs Collaborative of Oregon, an effort to bring trauma-informed practices into Oregon schools. That work helped TSD9 better meet the needs of its students, but it also revealed that the district could benefit by increasing its focus on employee wellness. Though some informal wellness offerings had been made available to employees, there'd never been a coordinated, consistent wellness program in place.

What They Did

Backed by an employee needs survey that showed that employees would indeed be interested in a more formal wellness program with a wider array of options, TSD9 applied for and received an OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant.

In its first year, the endeavor saw the formation of a wellness team, with building representatives at each location, mini-grants for activities at individual sites and fairly widespread participation in a Walker Tracker challenge. The employee wellness program also developed community partnerships to help increase opportunities for employees. Though the program found some traction, there were some challenges coordinating administration buy-in, scheduling activities at times that were accessible to a wider range of employees and navigating a transition in the wellness coordinator position.

Over its subsequent years, the program evolved and gained more of a foothold. Building-specific activities were scheduled, as were districtwide offerings like healthy cooking classes, yoga, kickboxing and self defense. Some offerings were scheduled on the weekend so that employees who normally couldn't make early evening classes, like bus drivers or coaches, could attend. In addition, the program expanded its activities from just physical and nutrition to include more options for mental wellness.

"The first year was all about participation and gathering data," said one member of the wellness team. "Now we have been trying to be more well-rounded, talking about all aspects of health – social, emotional, mental and physical."

The program also aimed to integrate employee wellness throughout the entire culture of the district. While that is still a work in progress, it is happening through activities like weekly mindfulness sessions and Wellness Wednesdays, which find employees donning Wellness Wednesday T-shirts in an effort to raise awareness and show camaraderie. It's an act that's getting recognition even beyond the district nowadays.

"You'll walk into a grocery store and someone will see your Wellness Wednesday shirt and say, 'Oh, yeah. School employee,'" said a member of the wellness team. "Now we want to get beyond that so that it can be that way every day."

TSD has also taken a wellness approach to increase retention rates among teachers. After looking at its data and learning that many of the teachers who were leaving had been in the district for more than five years, TSD developed a kind of mentoring and support program. Called Wellness Partners, the program pairs up teachers – both veteran and new – who then provide additional support for each other throughout the year. They create goals, regularly check in with each other and help each other strike a healthy work-life balance.

"If we do that, we are more productive," the superintendent said. "Our test scores are better. We're more patient with our kids. We have fewer disciplinary issues. And it has nothing to do with the kids' behavior. A lot of it has to do with the adult behavior and being healthier. We call that trauma-informed care practices, but there's a lot of ways to get to that. Physical, emotional and mental health is a big part of it."

Outcomes / Impact

Despite standard wrinkles in its first year, TSD9's employee wellness program has shown some impressive results. At the end of the second year, based on a participation tracking system and sign-in sheets, overall participation in wellness activities grew from 65% to 90%. Engagement in the Walker Tracker challenge also had climbed by 28% over the first year.

On a more anecdotal level, a large percentage of employees reported that the wellness program helps them feel connected and cared about at work. The Wellness Partners program also gets rave reviews for increasing a sense of mental well-being, support and belonging. The superintendent has seen a rise in productivity and a decline in leaves of absence, and multiple staff members said there's a new sense of lasting relationships being created because of the wellness connection.

"Those are the kinds of things that will make people want to come and work here – and stay here," one employee said.

Continuation / Sustainability

In 2020, TSD9 was wrapping up the third year of its five-year OEA Choice Trust grant cycle. The wellness team plans to stay the course with its grant while also expanding options and activities for employees. The team's efforts to weave wellness throughout the culture of the district are aimed at making the program sustainable long after the grant cycle closes.

"You look at what we have right now, after three years, and you see all the successes," one employee said. "We have to keep it going, and we're going to."

One of the ways that will happen is through the continued backing of the superintendent, one of the biggest proponents of the wellness program. But it's not lip service the superintendent will back the efforts with. Wellness has become part of TSD9's strategic plan, and the superintendent has pledged to help fund it as part of the general budget.

"I think we're doing a great job and are actually at the forefront of wellness," he said. "It's really nice to see this culture of wellness take shape. We're headed in the right direction."

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.