



# Ashland School District

## A holistic approach to wellness that improves employees' health and well-being

### Background

Situated at the southern end of the Rogue Valley in southern Oregon, the Ashland School District serves a community that is home to a thriving arts, culture, outdoor recreation, culinary and hospitality economy. The district has approximately 400 employees and just under 3,000 students across seven schools: three neighborhood elementary schools, one K-8 outdoor school, one middle school, one high school and a K-8 community learning center. The student population is approximately 74% white, 1% Black/African American, 1% Asian, 12% Hispanic/Latino and less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native. About 30% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch.

### The Challenge

For the Ashland School District, one of the primary challenges when it comes to school employee wellness revolves around dollars and cents. While most school districts in Oregon offer health benefits through the Oregon Educators Benefit Board, ASD is self-insured. As such, the health of individual employees is directly tied to how much the district pays for insurance claims and how much employees need to pay for premiums. Faced with a two-year trend of rising claims, higher drug costs and a 14% increase in premiums in 2017, ASD determined that enhancing its already-established school employee wellness efforts could be an effective way to not only further benefit the health and well-being of its 400 or so employees, but to control costs.

### What They Did

Wellness in the school setting was nothing new to ASD. The district has long offered a curriculum that emphasizes a culture of wellness for students. ASD's board of directors has also recognized wellness as a priority for both students and staff through policy. Additionally, two committees, the Insurance Committee and the Health Promotions Committee, work together on wellness. The IC provides detailed claims data, which the HPC then uses to inform wellness challenges, classes and other offerings.

To build capacity and infrastructure that would allow for the expansion of the wellness efforts, ASD applied for and received a five-year OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness grant. That led to the selection of a wellness coordinator and the appointment of school wellness representatives at 13 different sites, including schools, the district office and other facilities, in the first year. In addition to regular communications about wellness offerings, sites hosted various activities, such as wellness classes, cooking demonstrations and presentations by local health care professionals. The district was also able to negotiate discounts for gym memberships, disc golfing at Southern Oregon University and skiing at Mt. Ashland. The first year, sign-in sheets and data showed that 35% of staff at each site had participated in at least one wellness session – 5% more than ASD had initially hoped.

Despite some second-year challenges with staff turnover that seemed to impact overall participation, the school employee wellness program continued to take hold. A partnership with SOU's Health Promotions Department brought in students who

taught wellness classes and earned practicum hours for their degrees, and the district continued to partner with local businesses, the hospital and its health benefit and insurance company to solidify relationships for the future.

“We have really great community partners. They see what we’re doing in our district and they want to be a part of it,” one Health Promotions Committee member said.

Wellness representatives have also tweaked offerings to better fit some employees’ schedules and improve participation. And at the annual health and wellness day during the grant’s third year, 74% of the staff attended and participated in everything from financial planning sessions to yoga, painting and massages.

“I really had a spectacular day with my colleagues exploring and caring for our mental, social and physical health needs,” one employee said. “It is this day and other little things that make our Ashland School District extraordinary.”

## Outcomes / Impact

If one of the goals of ASD’s school employee wellness program was to help control insurance costs, it seems to have at least played a role in making that happen. Though there are many factors at play, ASD has seen a gradual reduction in health care claims since the grant kicked in.

Beyond that, the wellness thread appears to be weaving itself into the very fabric that ties ASD together. At the end of year three, participation in wellness offerings had jumped to 61% of staff. And even when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the wellness program held strong. It forced wellness reps to think differently – offering a cook-along class via Zoom with the high school culinary teacher, for example, or moving a formerly indoor Zumba class to a socially distanced covered space outdoors – but it didn’t put a damper on it.

“We’ve actually seen that people have more recognition for the need for wellness than they have in the past,” one committee member said. “We have more requests, we’re having high participation and I think people are actually recognizing that, in order to survive something like COVID, they have to put self-care up front.”

## Continuation / Sustainability

Even before the OEA Choice Trust grant, wellness was on the minds of the employees of the Ashland School District. The grant, and all the work that the wellness coordinator, reps, community partners and employees have put in over the years, has only furthered ingrained the concept in all that the district does.

“It has become a strong part of our culture,” the superintendent said.

“I think what it really has allowed us to do,” one staff member said, “is to create a culture where people are conscious of taking care of themselves and are supported in taking care of themselves.”

That support from the administrative level has been consistent and will help, along with support and buy-in from both the certified and classified employee unions, ensure that the wellness focus lives on beyond the OEA Choice Trust grant. One future wish for the program, in addition to increasing participation and offerings, is to establish an employee wellness center. It would be outfitted with exercise equipment, a yoga studio and other gear that employees would be able to use anytime they wanted.

Another boost for the program’s future will come from the savings that ASD has enjoyed over the past few years. Money saved in part as a result of the employee wellness program has been set aside as health care reserves, and the Insurance Committee voted to fund the employee wellness program with that money after the grant cycle comes to a close at the end of the fifth year.

### About Us

OEA Choice Trust is the only organization solely dedicated to workplace wellness for all Oregon public school employees. We believe that no matter their role, all school employees should have the support they need to be physically, mentally, and emotionally well. We offer technical assistance; best practices and proven strategies based on national worksite wellness research and our own experience working with Oregon educators; and grant funding to help districts, education service districts and community colleges create employee wellness programs that support their employees’ specific goals. Together with educators, administrators, and staff, we are building a culture of health and well-being in Oregon.