



Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services

Piloting a course for wellness for themselves – and others

Background

Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services is the department within Portland Public Schools that provides meal services to students across the district. The department typically comprises close to 240 employees at more than 90 sites, including program managers and supervisors, Nutrition Services leads and assistants, a supply chain manager, supervisor, buyer, warehouse workers and drivers. There is also a central office business team that supports technology, finances and payroll and processes the district's meal benefit eligibility. On average, Nutrition Services serves 9,000 school breakfasts, 19,000 school lunches and 1,500 suppers to students every day, as well as a fresh fruit or vegetable snack to all students within 23-26 K-8 schools. There are approximately 49,000 students in the district.

The Challenge

As its own unique department within PPS – one that's also not funded by the general fund – Nutrition Services is often perceived as almost a separate entity. Past district wellness offerings haven't always connected with PPS Nutrition Services. Additionally, wellness activities and learning sessions that were offered during lunchtime hours didn't work for most PPS Nutrition Services employees because that is when they are most in-demand. Similarly, many wellness offerings require health benefits, something the majority of PPS Nutrition Services employees are not eligible to receive due to their part-time status.

At the same time, PPS NS employees – and, in general, all nutrition services, facilities, and

transportation employees in school districts everywhere – could benefit greatly from the impacts of a coordinated employee wellness program that would help them manage chronic stress, improve nutrition and fitness levels and tend to their emotional and mental well-being.

What They Did

Looking for ways to make wellness a bigger part of PPS NS employees' lives, leadership reached out to OEA Choice Trust. The connection was a mutually beneficial one, as OEA Choice Trust had been looking at how to design a wellness plan for school employees in nutrition services, facilities, and transportation departments. The Trust had been learning through other grantees that engaging classified staff in an employee wellness program had been challenging because the planning of the program does not consider their diverse needs, interests, cultures or work schedules and conditions.

The result was an OEA Choice Trust pilot program in partnership with PPS Nutrition Services. The goal of the five-year pilot was not only to offer a culturally responsive and holistic wellness program to employees – based off their input around needs and interests – but to use the lessons learned along the way to inform future wellness programs for nutrition services, facilities, custodial and transportation employees in other districts around the state.

The program kicked off with the selection of a wellness coordinator and the creation of a wellness committee, which initially comprised seven members who met six times throughout the year.

It became known as the Heal Well Committee. This in itself was considered a significant milestone, as there had been uncertainty around the ability to form a wellness committee with diverse staff representation. In fact, the committee has continued to grow in numbers, a telling sign that staff members have taken ownership of the program.

A health and well-being needs and interest survey and multiple focus groups helped gather important information about wellness interests, barriers to participation and employees' willingness to make healthy life changes. Department leadership and the wellness committee convened jointly to review data and plan each year's wellness action plan. This created a collaborative partnership between leadership and staff, a key component in a successful employee wellness program

Over time, the program expanded and began to resonate with more employees. The Heal Well Committee grew to 15 members and employees participated in walking and hydration challenges; there were also financial well-being classes, and the committee created a robust Weekly Wellness Bulletin. Based on focus group results, a recognition committee was formed as part of the employee wellness efforts. It has been very active in honoring staff and creating a sense of community. For example, the committee put together thank-you packages to recognize employees who continued to work during pandemic-related school shutdowns.

"I think a huge focus of starting the program was just building a sense of community and camaraderie," one committee member said. "We are so spread out, so it's really important to build that within our team so they feel connected to each other."

The COVID-19 pandemic added more challenges to the PPS NS pilot program. But the committee adapted and was able to persevere, in part by meeting virtually. Staff stayed connected through a Wellness Matters Facebook group, and all staff were given care packages that included activity books, a Wellness Bulletin, Spring Wellness Bingo and a "Thinking of You" note.

Outcomes / Impact

Though the COVID-19 pandemic skewed some of the impacts of the PPS NS wellness program, survey data prior to that point suggest the program is making a positive impact on employees' well-being. At the end of the second year, 54% of staff had participated in the wellness program; a year later, that had dropped to 34%, which is still an impressive result considering the impact of COVID-19. Positive trends were also evident with

employees who said they've made changes in lifestyle behavior, whether that's becoming more physically active, eating healthier or cutting tobacco use. Some have said they've missed fewer days of work due to illness or injury, while others have reported decreases in blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

"Since we started the walking challenges, I've lost 12 pounds – and I'm looking to lose more," one committee member said. "The challenges make me challenge myself physically and mentally, so that's been a big benefit for me."

"I think we've definitely seen it grow to include more of the mental and emotional aspects of wellness," another committee member said. "It's really about looking at the whole person."

Continuation / Sustainability

Heading into its final year, the PPS NS pilot is focused on the future by examining what has worked and what hasn't so that the PPS Nutrition Services wellness program, Wellness Matters, can continue. Members of the wellness committee voiced strong support for the program and its continuation and are already adding goals for the future, including healthy happy hours, team trainings and a peer mentorship program.

Leadership at PPS Nutrition Services is also supportive of keeping an employee wellness program in place. "My commitment is to continue to support the committee's work and keep some of the systems in place so that they feel that they have that voice and can still support each other,"

"I think it's been such a rewarding experience, and I feel like there's so much more we'll get out of this." "It allows me to see how we can support our employees in different ways so that they can be successful as well as create healthy working environments," the director said.

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.