
Keeping Teachers Healthy

Rick Allen

Staff wellness program yields results

While health education advocates are urging schools to consider the connections between student health and student achievement, some schools are targeting the health of their staff. If teachers, administrators, and other school staff are overburdened with the cares of education to the neglect of their own health, schools can count on low morale, lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and possibly higher insurance costs, say experts.

In Washoe County School District in Reno, Nev., the staff wellness program requires the district's more than 6,000 staff members and retirees to pay \$40 a month—\$480 annually—into a fund that runs the program.

It's a stiff price to pay, but there are ways to lighten the burden. The district's Good Health Incentive Program allows members to reduce the monthly payment by meeting certain health standards or "taking responsible actions" to meet them, says Aaron Hardy, Washoe County schools' staff wellness coordinator. Each year, employees undergo screenings for blood pressure, weight, and tobacco use. Those who merely show up to get tested pare \$10 off their monthly fees.

If they meet particular criteria in the three target areas, the fee is further reduced. Indeed, a teacher could end up paying nothing, says Hardy. Joining one of the district's four weight loss programs or completing a course to quit smoking are "responsible actions" school

employees can take to improve their health and reduce their payments. Participation is high: 90 percent of employees and retirees attend the screenings and try to lower their costs, Hardy says.

Responsible Actions

After Washoe officials became alarmed by rising health care costs in the 1990s, district leaders made several attempts to encourage healthy lifestyles among their employees. Although an initial wellness fair brought out 200 people its first year, the next year only 30 showed up. The district then took more drastic action by starting the current wellness program, says Hardy.

“The whole idea is very simple—the district decided to treat adults as adults. When you look at the big picture, 70 percent of health care costs are related to lifestyle behaviors,” says Hardy. “The program is completely legal and was approved by the superintendent and teachers’ unions. It doesn’t cost the district or taxpayers anything.”

The success of the program is evident, says Hardy, noting that a 20 percent reduction in staff absenteeism has saved county schools \$3 million over six years.

Hardy, who has been coordinating the program for three years, has beefed up the district’s Wellness Program Web site (<http://www.washoe.k12.nv.us/wellness>) with inspiring stories of teachers who have been successful with long-term weight loss, details of incentive programs to encourage gym workouts, and myriad four- to eight-week challenges to get school employees to exercise and eat healthy foods.

Web Is Key

“The Web site is the ticket to getting more people involved. It reminds them to do what’s right for themselves,” says Hardy. He has introduced a Web feature that allows employees to check their current health indi-

cators and fee reductions online, download recipes for healthy eating, and receive health tips by e-mail.

In the last year, 54 percent of school employees participated in voluntary programs, an increase of 50 percent over the previous year, Hardy says. A voluntary program called Back to Basics, for example, describes 12 exercises to strengthen the back, has online video demonstrations, and gives incentives, such as a chance to win a reclining chair or a one-hour massage for those who commit to doing the exercises daily for a month.

The net effect of getting more school employees to take part in short- and long-term programs is “a cultural shift toward health,” Hardy concludes. “We’re holding adults accountable and getting them healthy, and we’re helping borderline folks to stay out of the at-risk category.”

School administrators are now exploring how the staff wellness model might be translated into similar health education initiatives for students, Hardy says. Because the staff program prods teachers and administrators to pursue “health and wellness from the get-go,” he points out, everyone is “already on board” to find ways to mirror the program’s successes for the district’s 60,000 students.

Rick Allen is the project manager for ASCD Express and a staff writer for ASCD’s Newsletters and Special Publications; rallen@ascd.org.

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