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Maximizing Resources to Make School Employee Wellness a Reality

Abstract

Because of the large number of Americans employed within school districts, they are a prime target population for the development and implementation of employee wellness programs. Even with grant support, funding for these programs can be limited. Forming partnerships with universities who have health- and wellness-focused areas of study can be mutually beneficial; school districts can stretch their dollars further, while college students gain hands-on experience for effective employee wellness program implementation. This article addresses a successful partnership between a local school district and nearby university department to provide an employee wellness program. Specific tips and ideas for implementation of an employee wellness program are provided.

Maximizing Resources to Make School Employee Wellness a Reality

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Abstract

Because of the large number of Americans employed within school districts, they are a prime target population for the development and implementation of employee wellness programs. Even with grant support, funding for these programs can often be limited. Forming partnerships with universities who have health- and wellness-focused areas of study can be mutually beneficial; school districts can stretch their dollars further, while college students gain hands-on experience for effective employee wellness program implementation. This article addresses a successful partnership between a local school district and nearby university department to provide an employee wellness program. Specific tips and ideas for implementation of an employee wellness program are provided.

As of 2009 approximately 4.7 million people were employed as elementary and secondary school teachers or as college faculty. Other professional, administrative, and support staff at educational institutions totaled 5.4 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). According to the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (2009):

This large workforce is charged with one of the nation's most critical functions – preparing our young people to become successful and productive citizens. Thus, the conditions that affect the health of these employees also influence the health and learning of students. Protecting the physical and mental health of school employees is integral to protecting the health of students and ensuring their academic success (1).

Eaton, Marx, and Bowie (2007) estimated as of 2006 that approximately 67% of states provided assistance for districts or schools to develop faculty and staff health promotion activities or services. Schools receiving this assistance offered at least one health promotion service or activity; however, few schools offered coordinated activities and services within a comprehensive employee wellness program. Additionally, no health screenings were offered by more than one third of schools; in one-third of the schools only a few of the health promotion activities and services were offered; about one third of schools offered physical activity programs, employee assistance programs, and subsidies or discounts for off-site health promotion activities, and only 1 in 10 schools provided health-risk appraisals for faculty and staff.

The National Association of State Boards of Education (as cited in Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007) supported nine areas that should be addressed for staff wellness: 1) health promoting actions, 2) access to facilities, 3) application of nutrition standards, 4) tobacco use policies, 5) safe social and physical environments, 6) integration of the staff wellness program, 7) linkage with other programs, 8) worksite screening programs, and 9) evaluation and improvement. Addressing these nine areas can be an overwhelming and daunting task for many school districts, not to mention financially difficult. As a result, tackling employee wellness one step at a time may be a more effective and realistic solution for many districts.

To address the issue of employee wellness, USD253, located in Emporia, Kansas, applied for and received a Kansas Coordinated School Health Grant. The school district was determined that the program have a profound impact on as many of the district's employees as possible. Doing so would require financial responsibility; in other words, "getting the most bang for their buck". The district wellness committee, under the direction of the Assistant Superintendent, sought to form a partnership with the Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (HPER) at Emporia State University (ESU). The partnership arrangement was designed to benefit both entities. USD 253 would benefit in that they would receive assistance with implementation of their staff wellness program at a minimal cost, while the Department of HPER health promotion student majors would be provided with hands-on experience in developing and implementing such a program. Of the nine targeted areas for a staff wellness program previously identified above, seven were implemented by the district. The ESU health promotion students were specifically asked to assist USD 253 in thoroughly addressing two of those seven areas that required more than policy changes: health promoting actions (#1) and integration of the staff wellness program (#6). In order to determine what the district needed, the ESU health promotion faculty members met with members of the district wellness committee. Together they concluded that the students could feasibly, as part of their coursework for a Worksite Wellness Programming class, assist with the development and implementation of events and materials needed to address these two areas.

The health promotion profession is proactive in nature, and focuses on wellness prevention through education, assessments, and environmental support. Health promoting actions involve finding ways to disseminate information, build awareness, provide health education, and support health-promoting activities that attend to skill development and lifestyle behavior change for staff members.

The HPER health promotion student majors determined creation of a monthly "wellness newsletter" would be a way to address target area number one, health promoting activities. These newsletters were designed to address popular health topics (e.g., weight management, stress, tobacco cessation.) The newsletters were distributed as part of the district's regular monthly newsletter sent to all faculty, staff, and city residents who have children in the district. The response to the wellness newsletters was overwhelmingly positive with the district receiving numerous calls and e-mails from recipients commenting on the usefulness of the information provided.

The next initiative tackled by the ESU health promotion program was the implementation of health education sessions with the students presenting on various topics. To determine the topics for these sessions, district employees were surveyed via an interest questionnaire. The educational sessions were conducted on-site at the different schools. To accommodate various schedules of faculty and staff, the sessions were offered immediately following the end of the school day, during the late morning, and over the lunch hour and/or during weekly meeting times. Attendance of the sessions was voluntary. Some of the session topics included "Top 10 Tips for Better Nutrition", "Getting FITT", "Safe Suggestions for Weight Management", and "Eating Healthy While Out and About." The sessions were interactive in nature. Samples (healthy foods and beverages) were offered and prizes were awarded (e. g., heart rate monitors, stability balls, resistance bands.) at each session as an added incentive for attendance and participation. A portion of the grant money was used to purchase the samples, prizes, and any materials needed for each session. A surprise in these sessions came as a result of the intense interest in health shown by the district's transportation workers. To further promote health enhancing behaviors in this population, a bulletin board was created on-site at the district's transportation building. Each month the health promotion students used this bulletin board to educate on a different health topic appropriate to this population, including "healthy substitutions for soda pop" and "how to get fit on a limited budget."

In addition to aforementioned strategies, the health promotion faculty and staff were asked to coordinate and facilitate two district-wide health fairs. These events were conducted on "in-service" days. Faculty and staff were given the option of attending the health fairs in lieu of some of the regularly scheduled meetings or office plan time. The fairs consisted of interactive tables and booths, each addressing a different area of health. Stations included Family Health and Safety, Nutrition (Healthy Snacking, Beverages, and Cooking), Weight Management, Heart Health, Fitness, and Self-Care. Educational handouts were available, samples of healthy recipes and products were offered, and employees could enter drawings for numerous health- and wellness-related prizes. Employees could also observe or take part in demonstrations of fitness equipment and exercises.

The overall response of the district participants was enthusiastic and positive. The participants were asked to fill out evaluation questionnaires following their participation in the sessions. Multiple comments were made regarding the breadth and depth of the students' knowledge, as well as their enthusiasm for the information and their willingness to assist the employees in understanding the information. The program benefitted the districts employees, as well as the health promotion majors. The district plans to continue the program with more presentations and sessions, as grant funding permits.

According to the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (2009), health insurance expenses are the fastest growing cost component for employers with employment-based health insurance premiums increasing 87% since 2000. Furthermore, premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance are rising four times faster on average than

workers' earnings. Additionally, in 2005 the United States spent approximately \$2.0 trillion on health care, or \$6,697 per person, which is more than a 30% increase from 2001. By 2015, health care spending in the United States is projected to reach \$4.0 trillion. Districts with formal staff wellness programs not only experience savings in health care costs, but they also have higher daily attendance by staff, increased staff loyalty, job satisfaction, morale, and retention, and improved general health and well-being (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007). With such a large portion of the US population employed within school districts, it makes sense to address the wellness needs and interests of this population. Utilizing a university health promotion program is a mutually beneficial way to do this. Students preparing for a degree in wellness need populations to interact with; the district employees give them a "real-life" population to educate. Thus, students get much needed experience, while school district employees are provided with a much needed wellness program.

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