

SCHOOL EMPLOYEE WELLNESS

A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation's Schools



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FOREWORD

Businesses and industries are increasingly recognizing that workers are their most valuable resource. The most progressive businesses and organizations are implementing policies and programs to maintain the health and productivity of their workers. These policies and programs include worksite health-promotion programs and employee wellness programs, many of which have improved the health of workers and the ensuing success of the organizations. Few school systems have such programs in place.

Among the nation's workforce, more than 4% of all working citizens in the United States¹ are employed by school systems as teachers, administrators, support staff, nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers, bus drivers, food service workers, and maintenance staff. They form one of the most valuable workforces in the United States, because they nurture and substantially shape each and every generation of children.

School health programs in the 21st century should include eight components: family and community involvement in school health; comprehensive school health education; physical education and other physical activity; school health services; school nutrition services; school counseling, psychological, and social services; healthy school environment; and – the focus of this guide – school employee wellness. School employee wellness programs can be designed to increase recruitment, retention, and productivity of staff by focusing each of the other seven components of the school health program on improving the health and quality of life of employees as well as students. In essence, efforts to enhance the lives of employees can be integrated with efforts to enhance the lives of students.

The Directors of Health Promotion and Education have developed *School Employee Wellness: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation's Schools* to provide information about school employee wellness programs and practical tools that schools can use in implementing these programs. This guide will also prove invaluable to school systems that are interested in improving existing wellness programs for school employees.

To continue to improve the quality and academic achievement of our students, we must also improve the quality of life, health, and productivity of our school employees. School district policymakers, school administrators, and employees must be informed about the need and given the means for developing health programs for school employees that can become part of the culture of education.

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¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Civilian labor force*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2003. www.bls.gov/data/home.htm.

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Summit RE-1 School District*

Connecticut

*Aikens Elementary School
East Ridge Middle School
Farmington High School
Lewis Mills High School, Region 10
Milford Public Schools
New Haven Public Schools
Salem School
Windham Public High School*

North Carolina

*Ashe County Schools
Catawba County Schools*

Rhode Island

*Brown Avenue Elementary School
George C. Calef School
Sarah Dyer Barnes School
Thornton Elementary School
Winsor Hill Elementary School*

Texas

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Irion County Independent School District*

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INTRODUCTION

By ignoring the health of their employees, school districts put a valuable asset of the nation's schools at risk. This asset has the potential to either improve or diminish students' learning.

Public schools in the United States employ more than 6.7 million people. Nearly 3.5 million teachers instruct our children and more than 3.2 million school administrators, support staff, and other professionals manage our schools, transport and feed our children, provide for our children's physical and mental health needs, and ensure that the buildings and grounds where students spend their days are safe and well maintained.¹ We entrust this large workforce with one of the nation's most critical functions – preparing our youth to become successful and productive citizens.

Numerous studies on the health of the workforce in the United States indicate that a significant number of workers have chronic diseases and conditions. Many of these conditions are preventable, and they interfere with worker productivity. Though few of these studies focused specifically on employees of school systems, we can assume that they have similar health problems, as well as unhealthy behaviors – such as eating high-fat foods, not getting enough physical activity, and using tobacco – that directly affect their productivity, classroom effectiveness, absenteeism, and the cost of their health care. Like their counterparts in other segments of the U.S. workforce, school employees can be encouraged to practice “health-oriented preventive maintenance”² to ensure that they perform at optimum levels. By ignoring the health of their employees, school districts put a valuable asset of the nation's schools at risk. This asset has the potential to either improve or diminish students' learning.

Much has been written about strategies for addressing students' health, but less has been written about strategies for addressing school employees' health. Many actions and conditions that affect the health of school employees also influence the health and learning of students. The physical and mental health of school employees is integral to promoting and protecting the health of students and ensuring their academic success. Employee wellness programs can accomplish the following:

- Promote the health and reduce health risk behaviors of employees, and
- Identify and correct conditions in the workplace that can compromise the health of school employees, reduce their levels of productivity, impede student success, and contribute to escalating health care costs.

The elements of a comprehensive school employee wellness program (adapted from Healthy People 2010 and Partnerships for a Healthy Workforce) include the following:

1. Health education and health-promoting activities that focus on skill development and lifestyle behavior that change along with awareness building, information dissemination, and access to facilities and preferably are tailored to employees' needs and interests;
2. Safe, supportive social and physical environments, including organizational expectations about healthy behaviors and implementation of policies that promote health and safety and reduce the risk of disease;
3. Integration of the worksite program into the school or district structure;
4. Linkage to related programs such as employee assistance programs, emergency care, and programs that help employees balance work and family life;
5. Worksite screening programs, which ideally are linked to medical care to ensure follow-up and appropriate treatment as necessary;
6. Individual follow-up interventions to support behavior change;
7. Education and resources to help employees make decisions about health care; and
8. An evaluation and improvement process to help enhance the program's effectiveness and efficiency.³

“You have to understand that healthy employees are more productive employees and employees are tremendous role models for our students.”

— Mark Doody, Superintendent,
Hudson Falls Central School District, NY

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

SCHOOL EMPLOYEE WELLNESS: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation’s Schools was developed after an extensive literature review and interviews with school and district administrators and staff who have implemented school employee wellness programs, insurance providers, and state health and education agency staff who provide technical assistance and training in school health and employee health promotion.

The guide was reviewed by several national education and health organizations (see Acknowledgments for list of reviewing organizations) and was pilot-tested at 25 sites in five states and one U.S. territory. Quotes listed throughout the guide were obtained through interviews conducted to develop the guide.

The purpose of *School Employee Wellness: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation’s Schools* is to (1) promote the benefits of school employee wellness programs; (2) provide a model for establishing, implementing, and sustaining a school employee wellness program; and (3) supply practical tools and resources to support the implementation of school employee wellness programs.

The guide addresses the following four groups, which are essential for establishing, implementing, and sustaining effective school employee wellness programs:

- School district personnel who implement the wellness programs,
- Decision makers who approve policies and provide administrative support,
- Employees who will benefit from the wellness programs, and
- Stakeholders in the community.

SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSONNEL

Personnel in school districts who design and implement school employee wellness programs are the primary audience for this guide. They are most likely to be the same professionals who implement health programs for students: school health coordinators, school physicians, nurses, psychologists, health educators, nutrition professionals, physical educators, and counselors. School sites interested in implementing a school

employee wellness program will also find the information in this guide useful and relevant.

DECISION MAKERS

Decision makers who have the authority to approve policies and provide the administrative support essential for a successful employee wellness program include school board members, superintendents, human resources administrators, fiscal services administrators, and principals of school sites.

EMPLOYEES

There are numerous benefits for the target population of the wellness program. “Employees” are not limited to the instructional staff (teachers and instructional aides) but include administrators and all support staff. In addition to the employees, bargaining units that represent them may be interested in understanding these benefits.

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders in the community who share the mission of improving the health of all residents include officials in public health and voluntary agencies, health care providers, and parents.

In addition to this guide, a website has been established to support school districts as they implement school employee wellness programs. The website will contain this guide in downloadable format; success stories from a school employee wellness program; fact sheets about steps for establishing a school employee wellness program; links to organizations and agencies that provide health education materials and services; and tools to support implementation of a school employee wellness program such as PowerPoint presentations about the benefits of school employee wellness programs, tools to survey school employees about their interest in health programs, and more. The website address is www.schoolempwell.org.