



# **SCHOOL EMPLOYEE WELLNESS**

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

**WHY WELLNESS PROGRAMS FOR EMPLOYEES OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS?**





## WELLNESS PROGRAMS IN THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Investment in employee wellness programs has excellent potential for major dividends in longer, healthier, more productive lives for employees and the successful functioning of organizations.<sup>4</sup> A well-developed employee wellness program provides individuals with an integrated approach to improving their health, creates an environment that reduces exposure to health threats, and incorporates health promotion into the culture of the organization.

Worksites have taken a leading role in helping people maintain healthy lifestyles. The manufacturing, retail, service, and transportation industries, as well as municipalities and most other employment sectors, provide wellness programs in addition to jobs and benefits. Worksites hire health professionals to draw blood, monitor weight, encourage healthy eating and physical activity, and help employees participate in preventive screenings. Primary disease prevention and health promotion have become the responsibility not only of the individual but of employers, corporations, and companies.

School districts are like businesses in the private sector when it comes to employee-related expenses: they must pay for employee absenteeism, health care costs, workers' compensation, lost productivity, and disability. Employee wellness programs can directly affect each of these employee-related costs; for that reason alone, the programs should be considered. Employee wellness programs also make economic sense. Consider the following:

- Approximately two-thirds of all deaths in adults aged 25 years and older in the United States can be attributed to cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes. The primary causes of these conditions are four preventable risk factors – tobacco use, poor eating habits, inadequate physical activity, and overweight.<sup>5</sup>
- Mental disorders are the third most limiting health condition in terms of performing major daily activities, following cancer and stroke. Mental illnesses cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$79 billion in 1990, with \$63 billion attributed to loss of productivity. A 3-year study of a large corporation attributed 60% of employee absences to psychological problems.<sup>6</sup>
- Each year, millions of occupational illnesses and injuries occur in the United States. Between 1972 and 1993, employer costs for providing workers' compensation rose from \$6 billion to \$57 billion, an annual growth rate of 12.5%.<sup>7</sup>
- The United States spent approximately \$2.0 trillion on health care, or \$6,697 per person in 2005, 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.<sup>8</sup>
- Health insurance expenses are the fastest growing cost component for employers.<sup>9</sup> Since 2000, employment-based health insurance premiums have increased 87%, and premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance have been rising four times faster on average than workers' earnings.<sup>10</sup>

Although many published examples of the financial impact of worksite health-promotion and employee wellness programs come from the corporate sector, the same outcomes could apply to educational settings.

Worksite health-promotion and employee wellness programs can make a difference in reducing occupational injuries, sick leave, and health care costs, as demonstrated by the following examples:

- A 20-minute stretching program to help a furniture maker's employees warm up before they engaged in repetitive work reduced on-the-job injuries by as much as 50% in one department.<sup>10</sup>
- Weekly participation in supervised exercise reduced sick leave by an average of 4.8 days per person in the year after implementation of a multisite intervention that included a police force, chemical company, and banking firm.<sup>11</sup>
- An assessment of the city of Birmingham's comprehensive worksite health-promotion program revealed a 1.4% increase in health care costs for participating employees compared with an increase of 11% to 14% among nonparticipants.<sup>11</sup>
- A health-promotion program initiated by Orgill Brothers, an international hardware distributor, that included on-site physical examinations, health risk appraisals, and financial incentives reported participation in excess of 95% and health care costs that were 35% lower than projected.<sup>11</sup>

- A Martin Marietta Energy Systems program to reduce lower-back injuries that included instruction on fitness, stretching, flexibility, sports injuries, posture, ergonomics, and lifting reported a net savings of approximately \$830,000, or a 9:1 benefit-to-cost ratio.<sup>12</sup>

Although reducing risk factors appears to result in cost savings, less than 5% of annual health care costs are devoted to prevention.<sup>13</sup> The Health Management Research Center at the University of Michigan found that medical care costs for individuals decrease an average of \$153 with every decrease in the number of risk factors and increase an average of \$350 with every increase in the number of risk factors.<sup>14</sup>

In 2001, a review of all the research on the financial impact of employee health-promotion programs was completed. At that time, there were 32 scientific studies that looked at the effect of health-promotion programs on health care costs. Only 4 of the 32 studies failed to report lower health care costs. For every dollar spent on offering the programs, an average of \$3.50 was saved. A total of 14 studies that evaluated the effect of health-promotion programs on employee absenteeism demonstrated that those who participated in programs had less absenteeism.<sup>15</sup> Almost all published studies showed that worksites benefited financially from employee wellness programs.

## WELLNESS PROGRAMS FOR SCHOOL EMPLOYEES

School systems have been slower than the for-profit arena to establish health-promotion programs for employees. In the past, when school districts addressed disease prevention and health promotion, they focused on student health problems.<sup>16,17</sup> Schools were identified as places for motivating students to lead healthy lifestyles and teachers were identified as the agents for showing them how to adopt and maintain healthy behaviors.<sup>18</sup> However, teachers who lack good health cannot be healthy role models for their students. One health condition that research has shown to be prominent in teachers is stress. For example, between 5% and 20% of all U.S. teachers are burned out at any given time.<sup>19</sup> Compared with other professions, teachers show high levels of exhaustion and cynicism, the core dimensions of burnout.<sup>20</sup> This intense stress leads to low employee morale and high turnover. In June 2005, the cover story of the *American School*

*Board Journal* reported that one-third of new U.S. teachers leave the profession during their first 3 years and almost half leave before 5 years.<sup>21</sup>

The Oregon Department of Education's launch of the Seaside Health Education Conference in 1977 provided a turning point. This week-long conference, later called the Seaside Health Promotion Conference, aimed to build awareness of the importance of school health education, including the promotion of health among faculty and staff. The conference brought together teams of school administrators, counselors, health and physical education teachers, school nurses, and school board members. The success of this conference prompted the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to provide funding for teams from other states to attend the conference, provided that the teams made a commitment to replicate the conference in their own states. By 1990, more than 25 states had duplicated Seaside-style conferences; by 1991, more than 30,000 people had attended such a conference.<sup>22</sup> Nearly 60% of these replication conferences addressed the establishment and improvement of school worksite wellness programs.<sup>23</sup>

In the mid-1980s, several nationwide organizations developed documents endorsing school worksite programs for health promotion. The American School Health Association passed a resolution promoting the design and implementation of school-site health-promotion programs. The American Association of School Administrators published *Promoting Health Education in America*, which devotes a chapter to developing employee wellness programs, and the Health Insurance Association of America developed and distributed a manual entitled *Wellness at the School Worksite*.<sup>24</sup>

In 2000, the School Health Policies and Programs Study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that 41.7% of districts and 93.5% of schools provided some type of health-promotion activities or services for employees. Activities ranged from making announcements or posting flyers about health-related topics to offering health-promoting activities such as sponsoring competitions between groups, giving release time, awarding prizes, and providing financial incentives for employees to participate.<sup>25</sup>

A number of studies have documented the benefits of investing in school employee wellness programs. Districts with such programs report that participating employees increased the proportion of low-fat foods in their diet, stopped smoking, and lowered their cholesterol, thus changing behaviors that contribute greatly to most illnesses and deaths in this country. Programs that emphasize physical activity, stress management, and nutrition increase teacher morale, reduce absenteeism, and result in higher levels of general well-being and ability to handle job stress among teachers.<sup>26,27,28</sup> Below are a few examples:

- In a 10-week health-promotion program for Dallas Independent School District employees that focused on exercise and physical fitness, 44% of teachers said they changed their overall lifestyle, 68% changed their diet, 26% who were initially sedentary started a regular program of vigorous exercise, and 18% quit smoking. Other benefits of the program for the school district included a reduction in absenteeism – exercising teachers had an average of 1.25 days less absenteeism than nonexercising teachers – which led to a savings of \$149,578 for the district in costs for substitute teachers.<sup>29,30</sup>
- In a community school district in New York City, the Health Enhancement Program (HEP) included four components: (1) an orientation session for eligible participants about behavioral risk factors that included a health risk appraisal (HRA); (2) a sponsored health fair that included a comprehensive series of diagnostic medical screenings; (3) group sessions for participants who completed the HRAs to discuss risk factors, results, and available health education programs; and (4) eight intervention programs that included stress management, nutrition education, healthy back, fitness, weight control, smoking cessation, recreational activities, and a daily salad delivery service. The HEP had a significant impact on the morale of teachers, and teachers rated school quality and climate more favorable after the HEPs were implemented.<sup>31</sup>

- In 2001, Washoe County School District in Nevada offered 11 different wellness programs to encourage school employees to engage in healthy lifestyles. Programs focused on brushing and flossing teeth, sensible eating during holidays, the importance of water, reducing TV time, getting the right amount of sleep, exercising for life, seatbelt safety, brain functioning, and fitness challenges. Results indicated that nonparticipants in the voluntary health programs had higher rates (20% higher) of illness-related absenteeism than did employees who participated. A cost-benefit analysis revealed that the district saved \$15.60 for every dollar spent on the wellness programs. The program saved the district \$2.5 million dollars in 2 years, and employees enjoyed dramatically improved health and quality of life, a situation in which employees and employer both benefited.<sup>32,33</sup>

Districts with school employee wellness programs have also found that a focus on health promotion attracts new employees and earns the loyalty of current employees.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, school employees interested in their own health are more likely to take an interest in the health of their students; students, in turn, are more likely to engage in health-promoting activities when school employees model such behaviors. A summary of the potential benefits of school employee wellness programs is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

**Potential Benefits of School Employee Wellness Programs**

- Decreased employee absenteeism
- Lower health care and insurance costs
- Increased employee retention
- Improved employee morale
- Fewer work-related injuries
- Fewer worker compensation and disability claims
- Attractiveness to prospective employees
- Positive community image
- Increased productivity
- Increased motivation to teach about health
- Increased motivation to practice healthy behaviors
- Healthy role models for students

**A HEALTHY START FOR NEW TEACHERS REDUCES STRESS AND ATTRITION**

Rock Hill School District 3 in Rock Hill, South Carolina, provides its 1,200 employees with a well-developed school employee wellness program, because Associate Superintendent and Director of Personnel Rebecca Partlow is a staunch supporter of school employee wellness. In the mid-1990s, Ms. Partlow decided to focus on the well-being of first-year teachers, reasoning that, if they had a healthy social, emotional, and physical start, they would continue to thrive. New teachers are assigned veteran teachers as mentors, an approach that benefits both the new teachers and the mentors, who report that they are revitalized and appreciate the recognition. Monthly staff development meetings for new teachers address not only job-related topics such as academic standards and innovative teaching strategies but personal health topics such as stress management and the importance of nutrition and physical activity. During the year, new teachers meet with guidance counselors to learn how the guidance counselors can support them and their students. The year ends with a retreat to reflect on the year's experience. The district is exploring similar supports for second- and third-year teachers, when attrition is more likely to occur.