

Championing Staff Wellness

School Employee Wellness Grants, Baltimore County Public Schools

Introduction

Healthy, happy school employees deliver high-quality education and foster supportive environments for students that promote academic success. Schools are recognizing their role in providing healthy workplaces that enable staff to thrive. To support school employee wellness, Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit and the Kaiser Permanente Labor Management Partnership launched the School Employee Wellness grant program in partnership with the teachers' union, the Teachers Association of Baltimore County (TABCO). The grant program brought union, school district, and school stakeholders together to promote staff wellness in Baltimore County Public Schools. This case study summarizes staff wellness activities and accomplishments led by Wellness Champions in eight schools that were awarded School Employee Wellness grants.

Baltimore County Public Schools School Employee Wellness Grantees

- Arbutus Elementary
- Chapel Hill Elementary
- Hereford Middle
- Lansdowne Elementary
- Parkville Middle
- Patapsco High School and Center for the Arts
- Pot Spring Elementary
- Villa Cresta Elementary

Activities Supported by School Employee Wellness Grants

- Stress reduction activities (5 schools)
- Staff breakroom renovation (4 schools)
- Physical activity opportunities (3 schools)
- Health food preparation equipment and nutrition education (2 schools)

Taking Action on Staff Health and Wellness

Wellness Champions at the schools designed and implemented a range of activities aimed at improving school employee wellness. Over half of the schools focused on providing stress reduction activities for staff, such as afterschool yoga classes and integrating stress reduction activities into staff meetings. Four schools renovated their staff break rooms to create a welcoming space to promote staff well-being. A number of schools introduced staff physical activity opportunities such as a walking club, new exercise equipment, and increased access to the existing school gym/weight room. Other schools installed kitchen equipment to promote healthy eating among staff in conjunction with nutrition education. For example, one school launched a “recipe makeover” program that taught staff to use low-salt and low-sugar ingredients; this school also purchased a blender for staff to prepare healthy smoothies in their break room.

Staff Break Room Makeover

One Wellness Champion described the school’s former break room as “outdated” and a place for people to give away “stuff they did not want anymore”. After renovating the break room with comfortable, modern furniture, fresh paint, and harmonious decor, the room was transformed into a welcoming space where staff could come together to relax and interact with their co-workers over lunch.

The teachers’ union identified and supported school Wellness Champions who then took the lead to implement the projects in collaboration with a variety of partners including other teachers, union representatives, school leadership and administrative staff. Union leadership offered supports such as hosting meetings and providing technical assistance and problem solving.

“The staff who have participated have felt more relaxed and refreshed by the meditation. One teacher stated, ‘I was so relaxed and couldn’t believe that I could let my mind rest!’”
 -School Wellness Champion

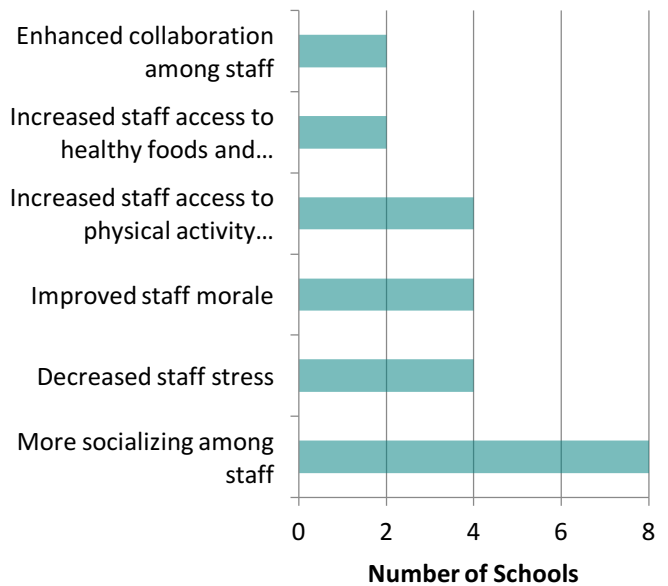
Accomplishments & Impacts

Wellness Champions reported that positive improvements in staff physical, mental, and socioemotional health resulted from their staff wellness efforts. All schools noted that renovated breakrooms and wellness classes enhanced interaction, camaraderie and collaboration (Figure 1) among staff. Staff wellness interventions that aimed to reduce stress – either through group classes or staff break room renovations – were successful in improving staff morale and decreasing self-reported stress. Yoga and meditation class participants reported feeling more relaxed and refreshed; one teacher described how relaxation techniques learned at school helped him apply healthier coping strategies at home. Half of the Wellness Champions reported increased staff access to physical opportunities before, during, and after the school day, either through exercise

“Our staff can now access equipment and activities that helps them to be active and interact with each other in a healthy way. We have been able to see faculty members that we simply do not interact with on a regular basis through the course of a day.”
 -School Wellness Champion

classes and activities or access to upgraded equipment on their school campus.

Figure 1. School Employee Wellness Grant Accomplishments (n=8)



Challenges & Solutions

Wellness Champions faced initial challenges implementing their staff wellness interventions involving logistics, participant outreach and engagement, and facilitating group decision-making processes. Most Wellness Champions faced hurdles navigating district administrative processes, such as obtaining appropriate approval for facility upgrades. Through problem solving and persistence, Wellness Champions were able to overcome these challenges to engage staff and encourage participation.

Wellness Champions stayed in regular communication with their staff partners to share updates around administrative hurdles and to collectively problem solve possible solutions. This included delegating roles, such as assigning someone to contact a district

administrative lead to clarify questions and report back to the team.

Advice to Other Schools

The School Employee Wellness grants generated lessons learned that can benefit other schools interested in improving staff wellness:

- **Survey staff to gauge interest and build buy-in:** A key to success for many of the schools was a survey early in the planning process to assess staff interests and priorities, build buy-in, and ensure that the project was responsive to staff needs and preferences.
- **Build a core planning team:** Smooth implementation relied on the active participation of not only the Wellness

“I implemented a staff survey to get opinions on what theme, type of furniture, and other decorations they would like best [for the staff room renovation]. I found several options online for ... furniture and sent those options to a focus group of staff members for a vote.”
-School Wellness Champion

Champion, but also a core group of individuals who were interested and passionate about staff wellness.

- **Regular, consistent communication:** Frequent email reminders and regular communications were helpful to reach and engage a significant number of staff. Communications conveyed information on wellness activities and offered opportunities for staff to become involved.

Conclusion

School Employee Wellness grants made small investments in improving the school environment, yielding concrete changes to increase staff physical activity and healthy eating and decrease staff stress. These projects allowed Wellness Champions and other staff to build skills around planning, collaboration, facilitation, and problem solving. The School Employee Wellness grant experience demonstrates that investing in building staff wellness leadership has a positive impact on staff health habits and social emotional health and enables schools to continue to address staff wellness.

The School Employee Wellness grants were funded by the Kaiser Permanente Office of Labor Management Partnership. This case study was developed based on findings from a grantee survey.

Prepared by Ad Lucem Consulting | <http://www.adlucemconsulting.com>

