



# Willamette Education Service District

## Doing What's Right for Staff through the Employee Wellness Program

### Background

The Willamette Education Service District is a far-reaching agency that provides educational services related to special education, technology, school improvement and administrative services. The district, which has its headquarters office in Salem, Oregon, has more than 450 employees who serve 21 school districts and 84,000-plus students. Those employees are dispersed across four WESD sites and approximately 150 schools within the district's boundaries. The school districts served range in size from small, rural districts like the Amity School District, to larger ones like Salem-Keizer Public Schools.

### The Challenge

Working in education is not easy. And working in an Education Service District is no exception. At WESD, employees face heavy workloads, providing no fewer than 45 different services to educators and students within its boundaries. Its Special Education Services Department works with some of the most challenging students in the region. And the funding swings that impact all of education across Oregon also add to already elevated stress levels. Looking to counter some of these influences and show employees they were valued, the district launched an employee wellness program in 2015. While well-intentioned, the program stumbled early when its wellness coach resigned before the program was properly developed. The program also lacked good communication, focus and coordination.

### What They Did

At the direction of the superintendent, who believed it was important and even a moral responsibility to support staff, WESD's human resources team began looking for resources to fuel a more formal and focused employee wellness program. In that search, they discovered the OEA Choice Trust School Employee Wellness Grant.

Starting out, WESD's plan for its employee wellness program centered around three pillars that would each be a primary focus for a single year: physical wellness, emotional wellness and life enrichment. They hired a part-time wellness coordinator, formed a wellness committee and sought wellness champions at each site. That latter task proved to be difficult, not only because of how dispersed WESD employees are but also because employees were wary of taking on additional responsibilities even with the promise of a modest stipend. The result has been that, as WESD's employee wellness program has evolved, it's transitioned to a more centralized form of leadership.

The program started slowly, with the wellness committee convening multiple times throughout the first year and holding wellness activities like Wednesday exercise sessions, potlucks and reading groups. The team also developed a newsletter to help communicate with employees about the program and encourage increased participation. Community partnerships led to onsite flu shot clinics with Hi-School Pharmacy, Moda Health and Rite Aid, a nutrition presentation from Natural Grocers and participation in the Healthy Team Healthy U program with Oregon Health and Science University. Close to half (49%) of

employees had participated in a wellness challenge or activity by the end of the first year.

In the following years, the program continued to expand to appeal to more employees. Annual kickoff events at the start of the school year set a tone of wellness, and increased communications — monthly newsletters, emails, reminder texts and a dedicated web page — have helped increase employee participation rates. Additional activities and features have included self-defense training, wellness hikes and classes, 20 minutes of paid wellness time per week, walking breaks, mindfulness training and access to the Nike and Columbia employee stores. In addition, the employee wellness program has added water filling stations, wellness corners with massage chairs and blood pressure cuffs, and a wellness library stocked with games, adult coloring books and a “shout out board” where people can share messages to boost morale and spread kindness.

In addition, the WESD employee wellness program implemented the six steps of OEA Choice Trust’s Blueprint for School Employee Wellness to help ensure the program succeeds.

## Outcomes / Impact

Though WESD’s employee wellness program had its fits and starts early, it has settled into a steady rhythm and has become a regular fixture for the district’s 450-plus employees.

According to survey results after the first year of the program, 84% of responding staff members had knowledge of the district’s wellness committee. By the end of year three, that percentage had risen to 96%. The end of year three — the year for which the most recent data are available — also showed that participation in the wellness program had hit 72%, up from 49% in the first year. Additionally, a majority of respondents to a year-end survey said the wellness program and its activities create camaraderie and that their physical or mental health has improved.

“Thank you for making an effort to better our mental and physical health,” one employee responded.

WESD’s employee wellness program coordinates scores of activities throughout the school year at different times and locations to try and accommodate as many employees as possible. Its wellness corners, water stations and other features are used regularly. And as employee buy-in has expanded, the leadership structure is gradually becoming more diffuse and localized by site.

## Continuation / Sustainability

As WESD approaches the end of its grant cycles with OEA Choice Trust, the district has sharpened its ongoing focus on keeping the employee wellness program sustainable into the future. It has done so in part by investing grant dollars in amenities, such as the water filling stations and massage chairs, that will outlive the grant.

Continually broadening the employee wellness program’s offerings to include everything from 20 minutes of paid weekly wellness time to macramé classes, an escape room outing and regular walking challenges, is helping to engage employees and increase buy-in. The current employee engagement specialist who oversees the employee wellness program believes in the power of good data: collecting it and using it to make data-driven decisions that will help the program succeed for years to come.

On top of all that, WESD itself has committed to providing funding for the employee wellness program beyond the life of the OEA Choice Trust grant.

“We have asked our employees to do more with less,” said the superintendent. “Along with that ask, we have to do all we can to support them. It’s the right thing to do.”

### About Us

OEA Choice Trust is the only organization dedicated to workplace wellness for all Oregon public school employees. We offer free expertise; best practices and proven strategies based on national worksite wellness research and our own experience across Oregon; and grant funding to help schools create employee wellness programs that support their employees’ specific goals. Together with teachers, administrators and school staff, we are building a culture of wellness in Oregon schools. Please join us.

### Our Vision and Mission

All Oregon public school employees are healthy, resilient and engaged as champions for healthy school environments and vital communities. As a result, they are fulfilled in their work, model well-being for students and are better equipped to foster student success. We provide expertise and resources to help Oregon public school employees create comprehensive and flexible well-being programs to build a culture of wellness that becomes the norm. We prioritize quality service and partnerships that support a journey to wellness.