

# Leading by Example: Health Promotion Programs for School Staff

*Health promotion programs for school staff are an overlooked and underused resource that can reduce overweight and obesity among teachers and other staff members.*

By Patrick C. Herbert, M.S., and David K. Lohrmann, Ph.D., CHES, FASHA

**F**aculty and staff at Musselman High School in Inwood, West Virginia, recently lost a combined 791 pounds in four months as part of a “Biggest Loser” competition to improve their health. This quest for better health is an integrated part of the positive school culture established by health-conscious educators who are committed to addressing the needs of the school staff as well as the students.

Since the efforts of school employees like those at Musselman are vital to addressing critical child and ado-

lescent health problems, including obesity, school leaders should consider offering programs that promote staff health.

A health promotion program for staff can reduce staff absenteeism, increase productivity, reduce costs associated with health care and disability, and foster a climate that promotes good health schoolwide (Eaton, Marx, and Bowie 2007).

Students spend an average of six hours a day in school surrounded by adults whose actions can influence them





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profoundly. All school employees, from bus drivers to food service workers, security officers, and custodians have an impact on children. Health promotion programs for school staff can make vital connections between the health of staff and the health of students.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends implementing health promotion programs for school staff as one of 10 strategies to help reduce obesity in children and adolescents:

1. Address physical activity and nutrition through a coordinated school health program.
2. Maintain an active school health council and designate a school health coordinator.
3. Assess the school's health policies and programs and develop a plan for improvement.
4. Strengthen the school's nutrition and physical activity policies.
5. Implement a high-quality health promotion program for school staff.
6. Implement a high-quality course of study in health education.
7. Implement a high-quality course of study in physical education.
8. Increase opportunities for students to engage in physical activity.

9. Implement a quality school meals program.
10. Ensure that students have appealing, healthy choices in foods and beverages offered outside of the school meals program (Wechsler and others 2004).

Staff health promotion programs often include employee assistance programs. These programs, available in private business for years, have made their way into the education field to help teachers and other staff with issues related to physical and mental health, substance abuse, stress, marital issues, and financial problems. Such assistance programs give school employees another resource to

help combat problems that could affect their teaching and their students, including obesity.

### Overcoming Obstacles

School-site health promotion programs for staff are rare in U.S. school systems, due in part to lack of trained personnel, program coordination, sustainability, leadership, and resources.

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### HEALTH IS A MONEY ISSUE

“The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity,” published in 2001 by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, reported that obesity costs \$117 billion nationally. Much of that cost is passed on to employers, including school systems, in the form of health care costs.

One study found that obese employees missed up to five days more per year than their normal-weight peers (Hertz and others 2004). Applied to the teaching field, frequent absenteeism requires more substitute teachers, which can increase a school system’s financial costs.

### HEALTH IS A STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ISSUE

Frequent teacher absences can have a negative effect on student learning, especially among low-income students, due to lack of continuity.

“Presenteeism” is different from absenteeism. Employees go to work when they are sick and as a result do not perform to their potential. In the classrooms, teachers who are sick, overweight, or lead sedentary

lifestyles do not have the energy to give students the attention or motivation they need to learn.

Related to student achievement, health affects the morale of employees, and thus the school's learning climate. Schools that offer health promotion programs report a perceived improvement in morale, positive attitudes, and general well-being among teachers and other staff members (Allegrante and Michela 1990). Schools with high teacher morale were found to elevate student achievement (Black 2001).

Given that half of newly hired teachers leave the profession within their first five years, health promotion programs may play a role in teacher retention. Schools that use health promotion programs benefit not only from retaining their current employees but also from attracting new employees. Health promotion programs can go a long way toward earning staff loyalty.

### Theory into Practice

An award-winning example of an effective and innovative staff wellness plan is the program that Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada, implemented in 1994. It received the U.S. Secretary of Health's Innovation in Prevention Award in 2006.

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The goals behind this plan were to create healthier employees, give students better role models, and reduce health care expenses through incentives to employees. The program was implemented by the district's health plan and received approval from the teachers and staff unions.

All school employees are required to contribute \$40 per month from their paychecks to the Good Health Incentive Contribution. Employees can reduce the amount of this contribution by taking advantage of a yearly health screening. If the employee is deemed to be in good health and participates in healthy activities, he or she pays nothing into the program. If risk factors related to body mass index, tobacco, or high blood pressure are found, the employees can reduce their contributions by \$10 for each risk reduction program in which they enroll.

Many of Washoe County School District's behavior change programs are available online so the employees

can track their data and participate from home. Some of the programs also provide cash rewards and gift certificates for participation.

Implementation of the program reduced employee absenteeism by 20% and saved \$15.60 for every dollar spent on the program (Aldana and others 2005).

### The Evidence Is Clear

Even in tough economic times, a school staff wellness program makes sense. In addition to increasing the overall wellness of staff, boosting morale, increasing productivity, improving academic achievement, providing healthy role models for children, and reducing overweight and obesity, schools can control associated costs just like any other company.

Based on the evidence from Washoe County, there is every reason to believe that what has worked in private industry will also work in public schools.

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