



Getting Strategic: Employee Wellness at Emporia Public Schools

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Dr. Andy Koenigs, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources at Derby Public Schools in Kansas, believes that it is. When he was at Emporia Public Schools, he led the charge to implement a wellness program in the district for the first time. Within the first two years, he saw the program bring incredible results across the organization.

- Lower absenteeism
- Increased retention
- Easier recruiting
- Healthier employees
- Cost savings

Why Employee Wellness?

Wellness programs are very popular in corporate America, but we're only just seeing them begin to gain traction in school districts. Part of this may be due simply to resources: wellness programs require funding and staffing — two resources which tend to be at a premium in school districts. But Dr. Koenigs feels strongly that districts should consider allocating some resources to starting a wellness program.

Here's why.

1. According to Gallup, teachers have the second most stressful job, behind medical professionals like nurses and doctors.

"That really was startling to us. When we looked at our employees and asked them about their levels of stress in the assessment, it was true. Many of them felt stressed. So, we felt this was one way to address that."

– Dr. Andy Koenigs

2. Health insurance costs are rising, and investing in wellness can lead to savings.

"We had struggled in our district with some health insurance cost increases, so we were looking at some ways that we could decrease our healthcare costs or at least manage them a little bit better... We know that a lot of businesses and corporations were doing employee wellness initiatives, but very few school districts had taken up this initiatives with employees, and it intrigued us to see if it actually would decrease our healthcare costs as well."

3. Teacher shortages make it increasingly crucial to find new ways to recruit and retain educators.

"When I arrived at Emporia about five years ago, the charge that was given to me as the Associate Superintendent for Human Resources was retention and recruitment. Emporia is a middle-sized school district in the middle of east central Kansas. It's not an easy place to recruit people and so we started looking at ways that we could engage employees and let people know that we care about them as employees. And it kept coming back to things that really related well to a comprehensive wellness program."

How Emporia Succeeded with Employee Wellness

At Emporia, the wellness program began with a committee of interested employees from across the district. Teachers, classified staff, bus drivers, food service personnel and others all came together to see what they could create. First, the committee researched as many wellness programs as they could. But most of the material they found was centered on corporate America — not specifically for school districts.

So, they asked themselves what employees really wanted from a wellness program, and conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of all staff. They asked questions such as:

- “What should be the components of our employee wellness program?”
- “Would you participate?”
- “What would you find beneficial?”
- “What are some of those offerings that you would like to see?”

They found that employees really wanted a well-rounded program that touched on physical health, mental well-being, financial fitness and healthy eating. So, the committee developed a holistic program that matched the results of the needs assessment.

Convincing District Leaders

Before the program could be put in place, district leadership needed to buy into the idea and funding needed to be allocated. Dr. Koenigs spent a lot of time talking to district leaders about the importance of investing in employee wellness, and was able to secure a budget of \$20,000 for the first year.

“The first year we had to come up with the money ourselves. It took a lot of talking from me to convince our leadership and our highest-level leaders that this investment is going to be worth it. If we look at the cost of turnover, this \$20,000, which was our initial investment, would probably be more than made up with if we could save a few dollars on turnover. I think finding \$20,000 in a million-dollar budget is not that hard if you make it a priority. It’s always just a matter of priorities.”

Offering Incentives

The research the wellness committee had conducted led them to see that the most successful programs were voluntary, but offered incentives for employees to participate. So, the Emporia wellness program was set up with three levels of incentives with increasing requirements such as completing a health risk assessment or biometric screening, or going to a health fair.

The first level was simple: do three things and receive a T-shirt and water bottle. At levels two and three, employees could receive bigger rewards like Fitbits. The most popular reward, however, was allowing employees to convert one of their personal days into a wellness day.

After the program started to really take off, the community began to take notice. Local companies and employers wanted to participate, and offered grand prizes that could be won in a back-to-school meeting in the fall.

Encouraging Employee Participation

The wellness program was rolled out at the first back-to-school assembly of the year, which all of the district employees attended. The committee had a table where employees could sign up for the program and get a silicon band that showed off their participation. Of the 1,000 employees at the assembly, over 560 people signed up for the new wellness program.

To keep participation high, each building had a wellness program representative who acted as the program’s cheerleaders. Each representative was responsible for getting their building’s employees excited about the program and providing updates on what was happening every month.

“We communicated, communicated, communicated. I just don’t think you can over communicate a new program. Sometimes we felt we were repeating ourselves, but that first year we really did have to explicitly continue to remind folks, here are the requirements, here’s what you need to do. I think you need to have a lot of people in place, you need to have enough resources and support to do that, and some dedicated folks.”

Tracking Impact

To ensure that the wellness program was making a difference and was worth the investment, Dr. Koenigs used a variety of tools to track its impact.

“It’s not really hard to collect the data with the right software and instruments.”

- The district's health risk assessment company provided group data.
- Their health insurance company showed the district's usage and claims rates.
- Simple Google forms allowed the district to survey staff members for feedback and track satisfaction with the wellness program.
- Frontline Education's Absence Management system provided an easy way to track employee absence rates and find trends.

Dr. Koenigs said:

"We did see some improvements in our overall numbers about numbers of employees that were at high risk for serious medical conditions, those that were at medium risk and low risk. Our numbers as a group improved through the health risk assessment. Even our blood sugar levels as a group went down. We still had some work to do on healthy eating habits, we still had some work to do on some issues with skin cancer, but overall, we felt we moved the needle on a couple areas that were really important to us."

The Results of the Wellness Program

Of the 567 employees who registered, over half completed the first level of incentives, and 190 people completed every requirement of the wellness program.

Even without participation from every employee, the district saw measurable results across the board. Not only were employees healthier and more engaged, but absenteeism and healthcare costs fell — giving the district a significant return on their investment.

Healthier Employees

By focusing on overall wellness, the program led to healthier, happier employees. And at the end of the first year, the district surveyed employees and found that as a result of the program:

- 63 percent of employees exercised more regularly
- 49 percent said they changed their eating habits
- 31 percent of employees reported losing weight

Additionally, every class they offered on healthy eating was full.

Because the district's health insurance company shows their usage and claims rates, Dr. Koenigs could see claims (especially high-cost claims) starting to go down just one year after launching the wellness program. The district also found measurable evidence of the wellness program's success in their health risk assessment, as their numbers as a group improved overall.

Increased Engagement and Retention

Employee wellness and engagement go hand-in-hand. As you might expect, happy, engaged employees tend to be more effective and stay in their positions longer. In fact, Emporia's wellness program led to a two percent reduction in turnover after the second year.

"We've had some outstanding results with retaining our first-year teachers. It went up from 69% to 86% just in Year 1."

And after requesting feedback from staff, Emporia Public Schools found that employees were extremely satisfied with the wellness program and viewed it as an affirmation that they were valued by the district.



"We had some success stories from employees that had lost 20 pounds, we had people that had gone off their blood pressure medication, people who had lowered their cholesterol, people who really felt they had lower levels of stress... I think our highest weight loss was 60 pounds. Some of the success stories were just incredible."

– Dr. Andy Koenigs

"What we heard was that they felt like we valued them as an employee, that we cared enough to care about their health to offer such a program."

District leaders had predicted that the younger teachers would be the ones most engaged in the new program. And new teachers — those most at risk for attrition — were very enthusiastic about wellness and wanted to participate. However, the district was surprised to find that veteran teachers closest to retirement participated the most and were the second most engaged employee group. Upon further reflection, they realized that those employees were beginning to have health concerns and experiencing more problems with their blood sugar levels, weight and activity levels.

Reduced Absenteeism

Because Emporia uses Frontline's absence management system, district leaders clearly tracked the impact of the wellness program on employee absence rates. During the first two years of the program, the data showed that employees were noticeably healthier and took fewer days off.

- Total absenteeism rates decreased by 16 percent
- Absences due to medical appointments decreased by 22 percent
- Absences due to illness decreased by 30 percent

Healthier Students

Although the wellness program was designed only for staff, it had the unexpected benefit of influencing student health as well. The students began to notice their teachers' commitment to wellness, and saw that health was something to be celebrated.

"As soon as someone would earn a Fitbit, we would surprise them in their classroom in front of the students and let the students know why that teacher had earned their Fitbit. They were always so glad to get it so we made it a big deal. It was like Publishers Clearing House."

As teachers began modeling healthy behaviors, students took the initiative to adopt some aspects of wellness as well. For

example, as teachers were encouraged to drink more water and cut down on caffeine and sugary drinks like sodas and energy drinks, they began carrying around refillable water bottles. Students followed suit, bringing water bottles to school and filling them up themselves.

Better Recruiting

Like many districts in Kansas, the teacher shortage has affected Emporia's recruitment efforts. But Dr. Koenigs challenged himself to see the shortage as an opportunity. He took the reins in making Emporia a place that teachers want to be, and turned the wellness program into a powerful statement that the district cares about its staff.

The district now includes their wellness program as one of their "Top 10 Reasons to Work for Emporia" and includes it in all of their marketing materials. They have found that the program has been one of the major selling points in their recruiting strategy, especially for Millennials who are particularly attracted to employers who offer additional benefits. It's also a fantastic way to set the district apart, as very few districts have an employee wellness program in place.

"I think it has turned the tide and we have seen a nice bump in teacher applications and people wanting to come to Emporia."

Cost Savings

After the first year, Emporia was able to secure a \$50,000 grant from their health insurance company for the wellness program. In addition, the district was able to save on substitute wages by reducing absenteeism due to illness by 30 percent. Those are just the cost savings that are simplest to measure. By improving employee retention, the district is also better positioned to save on recruiting costs and recoup its investments in its employees.

Finally, because the district was able to find grants for many aspects of the wellness program, they were able to provide better incentives and amenities in their schools without needing to find additional funding. Local companies began donating grand prizes that could be won in a drawing, and the district added fifteen water bottle filling stations to their schools through a grant.

Advice to Other Districts

Want to start an employee wellness program in your own district? Dr. Koenigs has some advice.

1. Research other programs, see what you like, spend the time, take your time to look at all the options and then decide what fits best in your context.
2. You have to truly believe, model and be enthusiastic about the program yourself. You have to be the head cheerleader for the program and be enthusiastic in order for employees to get fired up about it as well.
3. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Give the wellness program its own account on social media, and leverage smartphone apps if possible.
4. Don't make it mandatory or make people feel forced to comply. A wellness program should always be voluntary.

About Frontline Education

Frontline Education is an integrated insights partner serving more than 12,000 K-12 organizations and millions of educators, administrators and support personnel in their efforts to develop the next generation of learners. With more than 20 years of experience serving the front line of education, Frontline Education provides actionable intelligence and insights that enable informed decisions and drive engagement across school systems. Bringing together the best education software solutions into one unified platform, Frontline is pioneering a human capital management approach that meets the unique needs of education. The Frontline Insights Platform makes it possible to efficiently and effectively manage the administrative needs of the education community with solutions including Frontline Recruiting & Hiring, Frontline Absence & Time, Frontline Professional Growth and Frontline Special Ed & Interventions.



At Frontline, we're serious about helping K-12 leaders get strategic about human capital management. And while we don't offer a product to manage wellness programs, we're happy to help you track the impact of your human capital management strategy on employee absences with Frontline Absence & Time.



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