

what's working

wellness champions

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**



Kara Hager
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As a 33-year staff member at Pinellas Technical College in St. Petersburg, Florida, Jane Schultz knows the people she works with pretty well.

She knew that some of her colleagues are sedentary and wanted to start exercising but were a little scared. Others were concerned about gaining weight around the holidays. As the designated employee wellness champion for her worksite, Schultz has used that personal knowledge—along with information garnered from an annual survey—to tailor wellness-related activities to the staff.

That kind of familiarity is an asset Pinellas County Schools (PCS) leaders say Schultz and a network of district employee wellness champions use to create effective employee wellness programs at their worksites. The school district is the seventh largest public school district in Florida and employs 17,000 people. The network of employee wellness champions includes more than 140 people covering most district worksites.

“I like to call it the legs of our program, because they’re the ones actually working at the worksite. They know the culture best, and they know their employees,” said Kara Hager, the district’s employee wellness coordinator. “They’re the ones determining what wellness programs their staff would be interested in doing, what issues there are and what staff interests are.”

The school district offers a multifaceted wellness program that started about 12 years ago. Elements include:

- Vitality wellness program provided by health insurer Humana. Services include health assessments, biometric screenings, flu shots and an online portal that allows plan members to earn points for completing wellness activities. About 20% of staff participate.
- Wellness challenges. Past examples include financial wellness, stress management, hy-

dration and walking/steps programs, to mention a few.

- Districtwide smoking-cessation program
- Prediabetes program in partnership with the local YMCA. So far about 120 people have participated, losing more than 1,000 pounds for an average loss of 5.3% of total body weight.
- Districtwide kickball league. In spring 2016, 33 teams participated.
- Membership discounts at a chain of gyms.

The employee wellness champions, however, are “the biggest part of our program and how we implement everything,” Hager said.

Employee wellness champions receive up to a \$450 annual stipend for organizing and promoting programs at their worksites. Each champion has a wellness budget ranging from \$300 to \$800 and the discretion to decide how to spend it.

Most of the worksites are schools and 65-70% of staff are teachers, but other sites include school bus compounds, the administration building and a maintenance employee worksite.

The wellness champion program started with 30 to 40 people when the district first implemented its wellness program.

“Being such a large organization with over 17,000 employees and 140 worksites and with a wide geographical area, too, it was really difficult to impact a wide range of people with just a small team in the administration building,” Hager explained. “That’s why it was critical to expand our program beyond just a small team at a central location.”

Champions are nominated by a worksite supervisor (leader), usually the school principal, and must submit an application. Each worksite has one wellness champion, and about 75% continue in the role year after year.

The program has changed over the years, said Dawn Handley, employee wellness project coordinator. “The employee wellness champions now have an opportunity to increase their stipends based on

the number of programs they hold at their worksite. We encourage them to offer activities that are innovative and to increase participation in the program.”

In addition to on-site exercise classes and lunch-and-learns, employee wellness champions have arranged for their school’s art or music teacher to hold a class for staff with activities such as making pottery, participating in a drum circle or making ornaments from recycled materials. Those activities can not only reduce stress but also build community among the staff, Hager and Handley said.

Some schools hosted a master gardener from the local county extension service to teach gardening to staff, who then started and maintained a garden.

The employee wellness champions are aware of the challenges and schedules of the jobs within their worksites and can schedule programs around them. “We try to offer a variety of programs that touch on a lot of our more expensive chronic conditions,” Handley said. “I think part of the uniqueness of the PCS Employee Wellness Program is our employee wellness champions and being able to deliver these programs in a form that school district staff really prefer.”

For example, bus compound employees who have sedentary jobs have an exercise program during midmorning downtime. Employees in the administrative building who spend a lot of time at their desks might be more receptive to a walking program than classroom teachers, who spend much of the day on their feet, Handley said.

As a health and fitness enthusiast, Schultz was already informally coor-



Pinellas County, Florida teachers participate in a drum circle.

dinating wellness activities at Pinellas Technical College when the district-wide program started. She has been the designated wellness champion ever since but stepped down for the coming school year because she plans to retire in the spring.

One of the programs she started was a virtual walking program. Anyone can join the program, but Schultz said usually about 25 participate regularly.

Last year’s goal was to walk around the world. Participants submitted their miles online each month, and Schultz reported their progress. Walkers received wellness-related incentives and prizes each month.

For example, by the fifth month of last year’s program, Schultz reported that participants had reached Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory of Canada. The prize winner received an exercise kit and mat.

Schultz has organized on-site exercise classes like Zumba and yoga and usually held two or three lunch-and-learns on topics such as nutrition and stress. Those who attended received a nutritious lunch provided by the col-

lege’s culinary program and were eligible for door prizes.

She also scheduled screenings or other health events, such as blood pressure checks, skin cancer screenings and flu shots, which the district pays for. Salad days were another popular and regular event. Staff brought in salad ingredients to share, and everyone ate lunch together. “It not only gives us a healthy lunch, it also promotes camaraderie with the staff,” Schultz said.

She believes her personal connection with her co-workers has made the district’s wellness program more effective. Staff also is more likely to open an e-mail from someone they know than a mass e-mail from the district, she noted.

“I think it’s important to have that familiar face,” she said, mentioning that some colleagues have approached her looking for advice on health issues, and she has referred them to district resources.

“Definitely, it helps to know the staff, along with a great districtwide program, with excellent support and terrific resources.”