

Wellness Initiative: Road Map for District Staff Health and Support

A New Jersey district developed a comprehensive road map for supporting staff wellness through the pandemic and beyond.

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COURTESY OF POINT PLEASANT BEACH SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

Point Pleasant Beach School District staff participate in the First Friday AM Group Walk on the beach 90 minutes before school begins. Staff members receive district “swag” for participating in wellness activities.

Educators’ job stress is rising at unhealthy rates. Even before the pandemic, a 2014 Gallup survey found that 46% of teachers in K–12 settings reported high levels of daily stress, a rate similar to nurses (46%) and physicians (45%), and the highest stress levels among the 14 professional categories included in the survey.

When the global COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March 2020, professional survival in schools required a total reinvention of lessons and content delivery. Students needed more social and emotional support than

ever, and the adults faced the nearly impossible challenge of burying their own fear and anxieties each day simply to do their jobs.

As the pandemic has receded, the previous stressors have been compounded by pressure to recoup lost learning while addressing a growing list of social concerns. What was a gathering storm has materialized into a wellness crisis among educators.

As school leaders, it is our responsibility to address this crisis. Social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives for students have been considered a best practice

for years. Districts have been making excellent progress with students on their SEL journeys, teaching conflict de-escalation strategies and practicing meditation and positive self-talk, but we have neglected our most important resource and left our staff members to manage their stress and exhaustion in isolation.

In his book *Leaders Eat Last*, ethnographer Simon Sinek writes: “Stress and anxiety at work have less to do with the work we do and more to do with weak management and leadership. When we know there are people at work who care about how we feel, our stress levels decrease.” For our classrooms to operate at the highest level, meeting the needs of all our students, staff members must feel good and feel supported in their work.

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In September 2019, just months before the pandemic closed schools, the Point Pleasant Beach School District in New Jersey launched a staff health and wellness initiative, its commitment to supporting employees’ overall health and wellness. What we learned from the seven months before the pandemic and the years over which the initiative has matured can be a road map for holistically supporting staff through these extraordinary times.

Core Tenets

Our initiative was built on a set of core tenets. The first of these tenets states that the initiative must be offered either free or at a low cost to staff and must be self-sustaining for the district. Its low-risk activities must be adaptable to all levels of fitness and experience.

It must be inclusive, meaning it should suit marathoners and senior citizens, experienced athletes and folks joining the wellness train for the first time. Finally, it must include local partners with whom staff members might later extend their wellness journeys.

Where We Began

We first identified low-risk activities that would attract the most participants. Walking was a natural first selection. Located only blocks from the Atlantic Ocean, our district has access to a long stretch of boardwalk that is an inviting workout space. An after-school yoga group begun by a few staff members became our official yoga



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Wellness Wednesdays include a variety of activities, including lunchtime walks.

activity. We determined that wellness education should be a third event category, so we began contacting local providers who might be interested in presenting to our staff members.

With these core activity categories in place, we developed a monthly calendar of events that remains the basis of our initiative. Each monthly schedule includes a First Friday AM Group Walk, held on the boardwalk 90 minutes before school. Because mornings are a challenge for staff members who travel or have young children, a Third Thursday PM Group Walk also takes place each month, 45 minutes after dismissal. We encourage participants to pick their pace, their partner, and their distance.

Wellness Wednesdays throughout the month include lunchtime walks, after-school yoga sessions, and wellness education events. This monthly schedule encourages participation. We share an activity calendar and update it regularly throughout the year.

Encouraging Wellness

When we announced the staff health and wellness initiative as the concluding item of our 2019 opening day keynote for staff, we made it clear that this new effort

was our attempt to recognize and mitigate some of everyone's pressure and anxiety. Our announcement elicited smiles from the audience, but enthusiasm was muted. Listeners grew more animated, however, when we announced the additional incentives for participation.

Our state health insurance provider offers a 1% insurance premium rebate if 25% of our staff completes the NJWELL personal wellness program. Our school board agreed to support the initiative by dividing any earned premium rebate 50-50, with 50% going back to participating staff members who earned the rebate and 50% being used to support the wellness program throughout the year. This rebate would be in addition to the \$500 available to families directly from NJWELL.

Prize money announcements got the room moving, and we added that we would award prizes throughout the program and at a culminating year-end raffle. We concluded the session by inviting all staff members to gather the next morning for a prework walk on the boardwalk. We had an outstanding turnout for this inaugural event, and an opening day walk has become an annual tradition.

When we can, we replace staff meetings with wellness events.

We track participation and offer swag incentives (funded by the initiative) for consistent participation. For example, staff members who complete three walks earn a pair of school-branded socks. At 15 participation credits, they earn a winter beanie; at 25 a Road ID bracelet; and at 35 a customized school-branded swag item. Every 10 participation credits earn a raffle ticket. Typical raffle prizes include an Apple Watch, AirPods, running shoes, yoga outfits, equipment bags, water bottles, Bluetooth speakers, and running headlamps. Every ticket holder is guaranteed a prize.

Each December, if we have reached the NJWELL participation goal, the administrative team dresses as Santa's elves and delivers staff members their share of the premium rebate. In our first year, that meant checks for over \$450 each to 27 staff members. We have reached the target in each year of our initiative.



Activities are based on the core tenet that they must be free or low-cost and self-sustaining for the district.

Our first year of wellness was a fabulous success; 89% of staff participated in one or more activities. Despite the disruption caused by the pandemic, our 2021 wellness calendar included more than 50 events, and our top participant completed more than 40 events.

Walks remain our most popular offering; participation crosses all segments of the organization. A typical First Friday AM Group Walk may include custodial personnel, teachers, child study team members, secretaries, and administrators. Some walkers carry coffee, some come in pairs, and everyone brings a smile.

These moments of collegial wellness provide all of us with an opportunity to engage in fun school and nonschool chatter. We discuss kids, sick parents, upcoming weddings, and new puppies. Occasionally, we share something about school that is on our minds.

From a school leadership perspective, these conversations are invaluable. With each conversation, we grow closer and learn what our staff members need to succeed and feel supported.

To share our commitment to healthy classrooms, we document each wellness event on social media and create dedicated hashtags. We began using the hashtag BeachAt OurBest and later added new hashtags for each special pop-up event, like #FebruaryFrenzy, and the pandemic-themed #SpringMeOut. Parents, students, and colleagues cheered for staff with "like" tweets.

Lessons Learned

We launched this initiative with few concrete details, but with a strong sense that it was an important thing to do for our staff. We probably underestimated the motivating power of school-themed swag. Our socks were an immediate hit, and we often find ourselves searching for



The district's first year of wellness was a rousing success, with 89% of staff participating in one or more activities, such as walking, hot yoga or healthy activities they complete on their own.

and designing swag as eager staff members near each achievement tier.

Though a majority of wellness events take place outside school hours, staff members remind us to offer some events during our contractual day and for second-shift employees. When we can, we replace staff meetings with wellness events. We regularly add “pop-up” wellness challenges to our calendar, some of which can be completed at home.

Although we want to foster the collegiality and the motivation that come from working out as a group, we also acknowledge that some staff members cannot attend our events. Celebrating the healthy activities that they complete on their own follows through on our inclusivity tenet.

We embrace ideas brought to us by enthusiastic staff members. A favorite event, March Madness, puts the entire district staff into teams and arranges competitive brackets for weekly wellness minutes. Good-natured fun includes debating whether bricklaying, leaf-raking, or time on a desk treadmill counts.

Staff members have made their own contacts with local businesses to organize healthy luncheons and Wellness Wednesday events with personal trainers, alternative medicine practitioners, and therapists. Sharing ownership of the initiative has helped us build broad support.

Our wellness journey has changed the way we approach our meetings. Our opening days have included faculty breakfasts cooked by the administration, group meditation, chair yoga, and “speed dating” to meet new staff members. We are applying a wellness approach to most facets of our operations.

Although we are certainly flying this wellness plane as we build it, our success confirms that our initiative meets a need. From a leadership standpoint, prioritizing staff

wellness, acknowledging their stress, and participating in a solution build trust in the organization and those who lead it.

This initiative gives district leadership new opportunities to connect with staff members from every role in our organization. The hallway conversations passionately debating the difficulty of our latest hot yoga session or the snap of the wind during the most recent AM Group Walk are too numerous to count.

Those conversations—combined with those of staff members who have discovered a new path to wellness via their participation in our events—suggest that it is not whether all schools should begin a wellness initiative, but why they have yet to do so.

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