

# A guide to School Employees' Well-Being

## BACKGROUND

The public school systems in the United States employ more than 6.7 million people. This large workforce is charged with one of the nation's critical tasks – to prepare young people to become successful and productive citizens. Public school systems are in a unique position; they not only have the ability to influence the actions and beliefs of their employees, but also those of the children they serve.

A recent study by the Commission to Build a Healthier America found a direct correlation between education and health status.<sup>1</sup> Those who have more years of education exhibited better overall health than those with fewer years of education. The commissioners also reported that “education policy is health policy” and by positively influencing the behaviors and knowledge of educators and students, America can expect an overall improvement in health status in the next 10 years.

## WHY TARGETED WELLNESS PROGRAMS FOR EMPLOYEES OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS?

Numerous studies on the health of the workforce indicate that a significant number of workers in the United States have chronic diseases and other health conditions. Many of these conditions are not only preventable, but also interfere with work productivity.<sup>2</sup> By ignoring the health of their employees, school districts put a valuable asset of the nation's schools at risk. This asset has the potential to either improve or diminish students' learning. Consider these facts:

- In the U.S., approximately two-thirds of all deaths of adults aged 25 years and older can be attributed to cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes.<sup>2</sup>
- Mental disorders are the third most limiting health condition in terms of performing major daily activities following cancer and stroke.<sup>2</sup>
- 25 percent of health care expenditures are attributed to modifiable health risks including high stress, tobacco use, body weight, physical activity level and nutritional habits.<sup>3</sup>
- Stress is the one health condition that research has shown to be prominent in teachers. Intense stress leads to low employee morale and high turnover.<sup>2</sup>



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## ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAM

Wellness programs in the workforce have taken a leading role in helping people maintain healthy lifestyles. A well-developed employee wellness program provides individuals with an integrated approach to improving their health, creates an environment that reduces exposure to health threats, and incorporates health promotion into the culture of the school systems. At CIGNA, we believe that by keeping school employees healthy, the school systems will benefit from lower expenses and higher productivity. Investments in the improvement of health reduce the development of chronic health conditions, thereby reducing the total costs for medical, pharmacy, behavioral, dental, vision and disability.

## FOUR STRATEGIES TO IMPLEMENT A SCHOOL EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAM

In order to establish a successful wellness program in the school systems, CIGNA suggests that the following four major steps be implemented:<sup>4</sup>

### 1. LAY THE FOUNDATION

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#### Get the Support of School Leaders

Talk to key individuals (e.g., School Board, Human Resource/Benefits department, stakeholders, bargaining entities, etc.) to learn the issues that are of most concern to the school administration (e.g., health care costs, absenteeism, turnover, disability claims, etc.).

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#### Determine School District Core Beliefs

A Core Beliefs session will help define management's guiding principles related to employee health benefits, such as: their (the employer's) role, the health service partner's (CIGNA's) role, cost and quality, incentives, outside activities and other strategic areas.

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#### Establish a Wellness Committee

Recruit representatives from all areas and levels of the school system. Choose people with a variety of skills, such as event organizers, motivators, data analysts and writers. Choose a leader for the committee who understands management's priorities and the vision of the team, and can integrate the two. The Human Resources/Benefits department should be represented on the wellness committee as they are able to provide information about the benefit plan and resources.



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## Do a Needs Assessment to Guide Your Efforts

A key characteristic of successful wellness programs is that they are set up thoughtfully and logically, with a focus on collecting measurable data to determine what employees are interested in, and areas of opportunity for health improvement.

### Examples of data to include when determining business needs:

- o Health assessments
- o Health screening data
- o Medical/health care claims
- o Organizational assessment
- o Short-term and long-term disability and Workers' Compensation claims
- o Turnover/retention rates
- o Exit interviews

### Data to include when determining what employees want:

- o Online survey questionnaire
- o Patterns of utilization of previous wellness offerings
- o Focus groups with employees from different departments, locations and levels of hierarchy

## 2. PLAN FOR SUCCESS

Now that the necessary information has been collected, the wellness team will need to assess the data, use it to design a strategic plan, and identify measurable goals and objectives.

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### Create a Written Operating Plan

This plan will help develop a set of measurable goals and objectives that can be used to quantify program successes. This plan should include the following:

- o Program goals
- o Specific objectives
- o Implementation strategy, timelines and persons responsible
- o Methods of communication and promotion
- o Budget
- o Evaluation plan



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## Choose Appropriate Activities

There are numerous activities that are appropriate for a school wellness program. The particular environment and culture will determine the methods that are best, and the committee may find that multiple channels may help reach the most employees. The following are some examples of programs that can be offered in school settings:

- o Education, awareness and support programs
- o Preventive health screenings (blood pressure, Body Mass Index, etc.)
- o Lifestyle or behavior change programs
- o Disease management programs
- o Stress management
- o Physical activity
- o Demonstrations (healthy cooking, fitness, relaxation, etc.)
- o Safety and prevention

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## Boost Participation

The key to running a successful wellness program is an effective method of promoting the wellness activities and events. The following examples are important to ensure employee participation at events:

- o Get the active, public support of managers at all levels
- o Implement a strategic incentive program
- o Use multiple means of communication and repeat the message often
- o Make participation easy and convenient
- o Most importantly, make it fun and simple!

## 3. BUILD A CULTURE OF WELL-BEING

Make wellness part of the school system's culture. Creating a healthier workplace can be a challenge. These steps are keys to success:

- Top management should prominently proclaim that health is an important value and responsibility for the organization and its employees.
- Hold managers at all levels accountable for facilitating a healthy work setting and reward them for success.
- Implement and enforce policies that support healthy practices.
- Implement policies that reduce stress and increase job satisfaction where feasible.
- Provide opportunities for exercise during breaks, and before and after work, such as a walking or jogging path and lunchtime walking or running groups.
- Thoroughly orient new employees to all aspects of the wellness program.



## 4. EVALUATE

A sign of a successful wellness program is its ability to adjust to the changing needs of the target audience. Periodic, objective evaluation of the wellness program is an important aspect of a successful program. It is also the time for the committee to not only look at the methods that were the most or least successful, but also a time to determine the most effective way to utilize resources, reach more employees and measure the impact of wellness on health and health care spending.

### SUMMARY

A Guide to School Employees' Well-Being is a tool that can be valuable in developing a school employee wellness program and building a culture of health and well-being.

### Establishing the Wellness Program Includes:

- Laying the Foundation
  - Get the support of senior management
  - Determine school district core beliefs
  - Establish a wellness committee
  - Perform a needs assessment
- Planning for Success
  - Create a written operating plan
  - Choose appropriate activities
  - Boost participation
- Building a Culture of Well-Being
- Consistently Evaluating and Improving the Program

Visit the well at [www.CIGNA.com/sites/healthpromotion/index.html](http://www.CIGNA.com/sites/healthpromotion/index.html) for additional tools and resources for Building a Culture of Well-Being.

### Resources:

1. Commission to Build a Healthier America Briefing. 15, May 2009. Washington, DC.
2. Directors of Health Promotion and Education (2007). *School Employee Wellness: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation's Schools*. Retrieved on April 1st, 2010 from [www.schoolempwell.org](http://www.schoolempwell.org)
3. CIGNA Corporation (2008). Prohofsky, J. *Creating a Culture of Wellness. How to Motivate Employees to Change Even if They Aren't Sure How*. Retrieved on April 23rd, 2010.
4. CIGNA Corporation (2010). *The Well – Source of health information for you and your employees*. Retrieved on April 30th, 2010 from <http://www.cigna.com/sites/healthpromotion/index.html>.

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