EMPLOYEE WELLNESS: Evidence-Informed Practice Brief

WHAT DO WE MEAN?

*Employee Wellness* focuses on the health and well-being of school employees to promote a positive school environment for all school personnel and students. Employee wellness includes not only promoting the health of teachers but all school employees including bus drivers, food service workers, custodial staff, and administrative employees. A comprehensive approach to employee wellness includes both prevention and intervention activities. To address the health and wellness needs of adults in schools, employee wellness approaches must consider both risk factors and health conditions that affect school staff.

In the workplace, schools can promote physical activity among employees, provide resources for employees to manage stress, and create an overall environment that encourages healthy habits and discourages unhealthy behaviors, such as tobacco use. Healthy People 2010 outlines elements of comprehensive worksite health promotion programs that are also consistent with the WSCC conceptualization of employee wellness. One component is health education, which involves teaching the skills necessary to implement healthy changes in the daily lives of employees. Another component is a supportive workplace environment, which includes social and physical support to promote positive health behaviors. In addition, the employee health promotion program should be combined with employee health benefits and other programs, such as employee assistance programs and other forms of psychological support. Lastly, health promotion programs within the workplace should establish partnerships with health insurance programs to conduct health risk screening, which is paired with follow-up services as needed.

Promotion of employee wellness can take many different forms in school environments. One method of health promotion includes health-related programs that address behavior change. Employee wellness may also be affected by school policies; for example, policies prohibiting tobacco use on school property and grounds may impact school employees’ health behavior. In addition, environmental supports—such as providing healthy food and beverage options and offering time for physical activity breaks—may also influence the health and wellness of employees. These supports can also help employees transfer the skills learned in a school-based program into everyday lifestyles.
WHY IS IT RELEVANT TO SCHOOL OUTCOMES?

Employee Outcomes

School employee diet, exercise, and sleep patterns are associated with absenteeism, job satisfaction, and productivity in the workplace.\textsuperscript{11,19} Mental and physical health challenges, such as obesity, smoking, and depression, can negatively impact teachers’ ability to be productive at work.\textsuperscript{1} Stress is a major barrier to employee wellness and is considered one of the primary reasons teachers leave the field, with 46 percent of teachers indicating that they experience high daily stress in their positions.\textsuperscript{10} There is evidence to suggest that workplace stress is related to a variety of negative health outcomes.\textsuperscript{13,20,30} School employee stress has also been found to be related to mental health distress and depression.\textsuperscript{31} In addition, teachers who report being more stressed have shown lower self-efficacy, meaning they question their ability to be successful in their position\textsuperscript{16} and may also be less satisfied with their profession.\textsuperscript{16,20}

Student Outcomes

Employee wellness may also indirectly impact student outcomes. Previous research has documented associations between teacher stress, classroom organization, and student motivation as early as kindergarten, and this student motivation was associated with reading ability.\textsuperscript{22} Other studies have also documented relationships between teacher burnout,\textsuperscript{3} turnover,\textsuperscript{29} and negative student outcomes, including school climate, student grades, and standardized testing scores.\textsuperscript{3,29} When school employees experienced improvements in physical and emotional well-being, this may have positive effects on students.\textsuperscript{3}

Financial Outcomes

In addition to benefits to school employees and their students, employee wellness also presents financial benefits for the larger system.\textsuperscript{15} When employees and the overall school environment are healthier, health insurance premiums and staff turnover may be reduced.\textsuperscript{15} Given that employees who are healthy tend to be more productive and have fewer absences,\textsuperscript{1} schools can save money that would otherwise be allocated to pay substitute staff.\textsuperscript{5,7,11,15,32} In addition, successful employer-sponsored wellness programs have shown to lead to a return on investment (up to $6 for every dollar spent on prevention programs over a two- to five-year period), increased productivity, reduced worker’s compensation, and reduced need for health care utilization by employees.\textsuperscript{7,15,23}
# PROMOTING EMPLOYEE WELLNESS: EVIDENCE IN ACTION

The strategies provided here summarize a review of available evidence and best practice recommendations for Employee Wellness.* Strategies are grouped by resource demand needed for implementation (e.g., funding, time, physical space, training, materials). Although few studies focused on school employee wellness exist to date, evidence on promoting wellness of employees in other fields can inform recommendations for promoting school employee health.

## Level 1: Low resource demand

### Establish an employee wellness committee
- The employee wellness committee should include teaching staff and representatives from other positions such as bus drivers, administrative staff, and food service employees.
- The employee wellness committee should solicit input from employees to ensure that activities match interest and align with health-related needs and also disseminate information about available programming to all employees to encourage participation.
- The committee can also work at the organizational level to proactively identify and respond to common workplace stressors which is associated with improved employee physical and mental health.\(^5\)

### Support positive workplace climate
- School climate and culture impacts not only student outcomes but also employee outcomes such as burnout, job satisfaction, and commitment to position\(^12\)--with studies demonstrating that collaboration and culture among employees is also associated with student and teacher outcomes.\(^28,34,35\)
- School administrators can implement supports such as professional learning communities\(^36\) to promote positive relationships and collaboration among staff.

## Level 2: Moderate resource demand

### Implement environmental modifications to support healthy lifestyle habits
- Environmental changes are conceptualized as naturally occurring components of the school environment to support employee health (as opposed to wellness programs that employees opt into).\(^9\) Research has documented relationships between environmental changes and improved employee dietary habits.\(^9,21\)
- Environmental modifications include access to free drinking water, healthy food and beverage options in the cafeteria and vending machines, opportunities for physical activity breaks, and policy changes (e.g., requiring healthy options for meetings or celebrations, anti-tobacco policies).\(^8,23\)

### Encourage participation in online wellness promotion
- Research has documented the effectiveness of online wellness interventions for promoting cardiovascular health; these programs are most likely to be effective when paired with environmental modifications (see above) or face-to-face interventions.\(^2\)
- School leadership can provide different online health promotion options such as access to health education, health monitoring tools, and/or social networks to support health behavior change.

## Level 3: High resource demand

### Provide supports to prevent and respond to employee mental health needs
- Research has demonstrated that programs targeting mental health are most effective when they utilize cognitive-behavioral strategies—such as reframing interpretations and responses to stress\(^14,17,26\)—or relaxation techniques.\(^17\)
- Mental health supports may include workplace stress management programs,\(^17,26\) resilience training,\(^27\) or treatment in response mental health need such as depression or anxiety.\(^14\)
- Schools can also consider online program delivery options which have been associated with improved mental health outcomes; online programs may reduce barriers to accessing services and resources needed to implement.\(^6\)

### Provide coaching and ongoing professional development
- Teacher stress is highly prevalent and is associated with poor mental health outcomes and turnover; many teachers report that their greatest concern is managing student behavior.\(^24\)
- Administrators can provide coaching and professional development related to identified areas of need (e.g., classroom management) to facilitate improved implementation of strategies\(^18,25,33\) and reduced teacher stress.\(^18\)

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\(^*\)For more information about the systematic review process we used to identify evidence-based practices, please refer to our overview brief which can be found here.
**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

*Creating a Workplace Wellness Committee: A Toolkit for Employers*
Cigna  
https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/resources/6663.pdf  
This document was developed in 2013 and provides step by step instructions on how employers can develop employee wellness initiatives that will reflect employees’ health interests and needs.

*Health Promotion for Staff*
Alliance for a Healthier Generation  
https://www.healthiergeneration.org/take_action/schools/employee_wellness/  
This page includes resources that are helpful for schools looking to develop employee wellness programs including guides for worksite health-risk assessments and sample employee wellness interest surveys.

*Healthy Workforce 2010 and Beyond*
Partnership for Prevention  
https://www.uschamber.com/healthy-workforce-2010-and-beyond  
This 2009 document outlines the importance of supporting employee health and the essential components of a comprehensive employee wellness program.

*Guide to School Employees’ Well-Being*
Cigna  
This document was developed in 2011 and describes the need to provide school employee health supports and four steps to take to create employee wellness programs in schools.

*Staff as Healthy Role Models*
Action for Healthy Kids  
http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/game-on/find-challenges/1514  
This webpage offers a list of tips and suggestions related to how teachers and staff can develop healthy habits to improve their own health and also model healthy lifestyles to students.

*Teachers Take 5*
Alliance for a Healthier Generation  
https://schools.healthiergeneration.org/teachers_take_5/  
This resource includes suggestions and resources for how teachers can take five minutes to improve their social, emotional, and physical health through healthy eating, yoga breaks, breathing activities, and connecting with others.

*Teacher Stress and Health*
Penn State University & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
https://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue_briefs/2016/rwjf430428  
This 2016 document describes the prevalence and impact of teacher stress and evidence-based strategies to prevent and respond to these stressors.

*Thriving Schools Case Studies*
Kaiser Permanente  
https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/get-inspired/case-studies/  
This page provides detailed information about schools that have successfully implemented employee wellness programs with their staff.

*Weekly Ways School Staff Can Be Healthy Role Models*
Michigan Nutrition Standards  
This document was developed in 2012 and includes suggestions for each month of the school year for how school employees can promote healthy habits at school.
employee health behavior. Journal of Research, 8, 55-60.
25Reinke, W. M., Stormont, M., Herman, K. C., Puri, R., & Goel, N. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher perceptions of needs,


