

Success Story - School District

Midland ISD

Cathy Harris, the health-services supervisor for the Midland Independent School District, knew what she wanted to accomplish when she joined the school district, and she knew it would not be easy.

“Midland ISD had a wellness program before I arrived, but the old program had disappeared,” says Harris. “I began by conducting a needs assessment of our faculty and staff. That was in 1997. I learned that people wanted weight-management and stress-management programs.”

Midland’s new wellness program began modestly in 1998. Harris had received a small grant for teaching videos and materials her school nurses could use for presentations. The idea was to promote wellness, campus by campus, across the 35 schools.

“I didn’t really have to sell the program,” Harris recalls. “It sells itself. One campus had a number of employees with high blood pressure. They found that walking worked to lower their blood pressure, which eliminated their need for medication. One nurse lost 100 pounds on the Weight Watchers program. She wanted to model good health for her kids.”

Still, in a district with 3,300 employees and 21,000 students, success did not come overnight. A major breakthrough came when Harris returned from an American Cancer Society meeting with pedometers for all her nurses. Many teachers and staff who saw the pedometers decided they wanted one for their own.

“We sold over 1,000 pedometers in about a month,” Harris says. “When I saw that level of interest, I approached our PTA and encouraged them to sell pedometers for their fundraiser. They really bought into the idea, and in fact expanded it, designating that year as “The Year of the Healthy Child.” The health-



Lessons learned:

Worksite wellness helps students, faculty and staff

People respond to recognition

Learn to celebrate the individuals your program affects

services department, the PTA, and the physical-education department joined forces to create a comprehensive and coordinated effort. The effort had several components, including healthy eating, but the major thrust in terms of physical activity was a “Walk Across America” campaign.

Walking across America is, according to Harris, a matter of taking 16,083,000 steps. Obviously, teamwork was required. “Half of our campuses participated,” she says. “One campus has walked across America five times. We also get involved with ‘National Walk to School Day’ every fall. For the students who need to come to school on buses, we turn it into ‘walk around school day.’”

To Harris, the benefits of a wellness program are obvious. “Healthy teachers can be role models as well as more effective teachers with lower absentee rates,” she says.

In terms of incentives, Harris says competition between campuses and recognition of individual achievement provide ample motivation for participants. “People respond to recognition,” says Harris. “A certificate from the school board tells someone that people are noticing that they’re doing a good job of staying healthy and being a role model.”

“I try to be a role model,” says Harris. In fact, “role model” is a word she says often. Perhaps it is a fitting word in an educational environment where students are often influenced less by what adults say than what they do.

The connection between health and school performance is obvious to Harris. “The first year we had a nurse on every campus, we became a recognized school district,” says Harris. “Healthier kids and healthier faculty make a difference.”

The program has grown year by year. Still, a significant number of employees stay disengaged. “You learn to celebrate each one you impact,” says Harris. “We’ve reversed the health status for some people at high risk. The best experience of all is hearing kids in elementary schools talking about being healthy and getting healthy as a family. As one boy said, ‘My dad walks with me now.’ That is the kind of success that keeps me going.”

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