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Helping Teachers Get Healthier

Wellness matters for educators and schools

By Anastasia Snelling and Maura Stevenson

Early in this millennium, public school systems began to expand programs to improve students' health and to reduce childhood obesity. That public schools should advance healthy habits among children is simply good common sense. Federally subsidized healthy school breakfasts and lunches, physical education, and related health-promoting activities should be a regular part of the school day.

But consider what or, more to the point, who is missing in these initiatives: the well-being of the millions of teachers, those into whose hands we entrust the care and safety of our children. Why this slight? Shouldn't those we expect to serve as exemplars be helped to better health? And why not in the school, where students can see them practicing what they teach?

Schools are routinely asked to do more with less, but building a healthy school environment for students and for teachers should be a priority if schools are to fulfill their overall mission.

School districts can take advantage of proven strategies and programs of work-site health promotion. Some tweaking of them here and there to promote the health of teachers would pay dividends. A healthier teacher workforce translates into less absenteeism, higher retention rates, and improved productivity. It is also safe to claim that healthier teachers are happier teachers and thus better equipped to handle the demands and stress of teaching.

It is well established that Americans are plagued with health problems and an obesity epidemic. There is no reason to assume that teachers' health is any better than that of the general population. Currently, **chronic disease accounts for 75 percent of health-care expenditures**, and behavior contributes to the onset and progression of many of these chronic conditions.

The medical costs for care alone are reason for concern. Moreover, the costs associated with absenteeism, lost productivity, and low morale must be considered as well. Such costs affect any organization's productivity and bottom line.

By investing in the health of teachers, school districts will potentially achieve three goals: controlling some of the aforementioned costs, maximizing the full potential of teachers, and demonstrating a commitment to the well-being and safety of teachers and those in their charge.

Promoting an active, healthy lifestyle for teachers might be accomplished through time for a walk at lunchtime, a pedometer challenge, a special membership at the local YMCA, or a yoga session before the school day begins. Many schools have athletic facilities that could be made available for teachers' use. Promoting good nutrition might come from school food-service departments, which are already revising lunch menus to satisfy the federal

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

Of paramount importance to any employer is the need to manage stress, which takes its toll on physical and mental health. Teachers are expected to function as social workers, counselors, and co-parents, and now we hear suggestions that teachers should come to school armed just in case the unthinkable happens. No doubt the level of stress will increase in the post-Sandy Hook era as school professionals weigh strategies to protect their students and themselves. Exercise is an effective method of combating stress that comes with a plethora of other benefits as well.

District and state governments spend time and resources to recruit, train, and promote teachers; sadly, 46 percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years. The loss of a high-energy workforce with the latest training has a potentially devastating impact on school effectiveness.

It is imperative that school systems consider innovative approaches for investing in employee-wellness programs to improve teacher health and well-being. Small and large companies, the federal government, and the nation's armed forces have learned that a physically and emotionally fit workforce is essential to building a productive team and accomplishing an organization's mission. It is time for schools to consider an investment in the health and well-being of teachers, administrators, and staff members as one strategy to improve schools.

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