

Winning By Losing



TOPIC: EMPLOYEE WELLNESS

DISTRICT: BETHUNE R-5

LOCATION: BETHUNE, COLO.

INTRODUCTION

In tiny Bethune, about 20 miles from the Colorado-Kansas border, the school district is focused on losing weight, eating right and modeling good habits for students. The staff is seeing results both on and off the scale.

OUR STORY

Every Friday morning, teachers and staff members make their way to the scales in athletic director Troy Hauxwell's office. It's the weekly weigh-in for the Bethune School District's voluntary Biggest Loser competition, modeled after the popular television reality show. Hauxwell records the employees' weights on a computer spreadsheet, making sure to high-five those who have lost a few pounds. Since the contest began in 2009, participating employees have lost a total of 464 pounds. Not bad for a district that has just 27 staffers.

"It's shocking to me," says Superintendent Shila Adolf, who has lost 25 pounds.

Bethune's Biggest Loser contest is just one part of a larger health and wellness program initiated by Adolf in 2009 and supported by a two-year, \$20,000 grant from the Colorado Legacy Foundation (CLF).



did you know...

... since 2000, employment-based health insurance premiums have increased 87 percent? Studies have shown that for every dollar spent on workplace wellness, a savings of between \$1.49 and almost \$5 is realized.

When she became superintendent four years ago, Adolf set a goal of improving the food being served in the cafeteria. She looked at the numbers: Of the district's 140 preK-12 students, 73 percent qualified for free or reduced-price meals, and 98 percent were eating both breakfast and lunch at school every day.

"Many of our kids were eating their best meals here at school," Adolf says. "I felt that we really needed to make those meals healthy. I didn't think we were doing the best for our kids nutritionally."

Improving Bethune's food service program became the focus of Adolf's CLF grant, but she also wanted to include an employee wellness component. She thought most employees—herself included—could stand to lose a few pounds, but she also hoped to

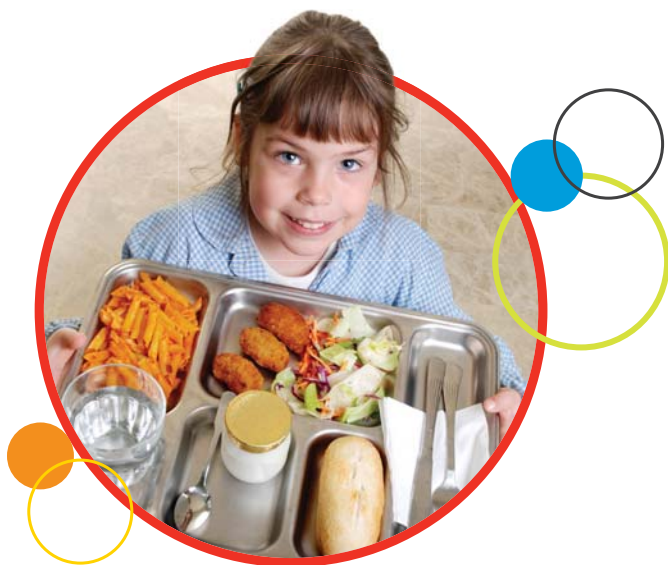
create an atmosphere where people enjoyed coming to work every day. She hoped that would help attract and keep employees, which is no small consideration in a town the size of Bethune.

Adolf cites another reason for including employees in any health and wellness program: “You want them to be positive about all the changes going on.” Students look up to their teachers as role models. It’s hard to convince students to stop drinking soda pop when their teachers are bringing Big Gulps to school.

SOLUTIONS

The biggest changes are in the school cafeteria where french fries have been replaced by fresh fruit and vegetables, and items like lentil soup and fish tacos are now common. Soda pop and chocolate milk have been eliminated. After attending a culinary boot camp sponsored by LiveWell Colorado, the district’s two cooks are making more meals from scratch, using fewer frozen items and processed meats. Students are not allowed to bring fast food to school, and snacks have been eliminated. Second helpings are allowed only for fruit and vegetables but not for main entrees.

Because many district employees eat meals in the cafeteria, they are also benefiting from the healthier menu choices. But Adolf wanted to include some



did you know...

... the new federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 changes school meal standards by adding more fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free and low-fat milk to school meals?

components to specifically address employee wellness. She used some of the grant money to purchase pedometers for all staff members, and she waived the \$150-a-year fee to use the community weight room, which is located at the school and open 24 hours a day. “There’s not a night here where you don’t see somebody there working out,” she says. Every staff member was given a copy of the book *The CalorieKing Calorie, Fat & Carbohydrate Counter*. Grant money was also used to purchase Zumba Fitness DVDs for after-school workout sessions.

Then there’s the Biggest Loser contest, which was suggested by Bethune teacher Tyson Weisshaar.

“My wife and I watch ‘The Biggest Loser’ nearly every week,” says Weisshaar, who teaches high school and preschool health and physical education and also coaches football and track. “I decided to create our own version of the show.”

Here’s how it works: Participants are divided into teams of four. There are three rounds during the school year: fall, winter and spring. Weisshaar and Hauxwell help create weekly exercise and dietary plans for staff members. At the end of each round, Weisshaar tabulates the total weight loss and gives out prizes for the “biggest losers.” Prizes include gift cards to Safeway and a local vitamin store.

RESULTS

During Round One, Weisshaar, 27, went from 217 to 190, his college football weight. Hauxwell, 37, went from 180 to 165—which he hasn't weighed since he started teaching in Bethune 14 years ago. Staff participation has ranged from a low of 41 percent to a high of 85 percent, depending on the round.

One challenge has been to come up with new rules for each round. After all, continued weight loss isn't necessarily a good thing. For example, in Round Two Weisshaar used a point system instead of simply adding up the total number of pounds lost. Participants earned two team points each week for losing any weight, one point for maintaining the same weight and zero points for gaining weight. At the end of the round, the team with the most points won first prize. (In other rounds, Weisshaar has calculated body fat percentages as well.)

Weisshaar has also experimented with changing the mix of team members. For Round One, he simply randomly assigned employees to different teams. But recently, he created teams of colleagues: coaches on one team, elementary school teachers on another, classified staff (janitors and maintenance workers) on yet another. The idea was to help build a sense of camaraderie while encouraging exercise, better nutrition and weight loss.

Adolf concedes that it hasn't been easy trying to change the culture of a small-town school district. Resistance to changes in the cafeteria menu proved the biggest hurdle. Initially, the district's two cooks—one of whom is Adolf's mother-in-law—were uncertain how to actually go about making healthier meals. They needed clear instructions and specific recipes, and they got them from the culinary boot camp.



did you know...

... studies have shown that children like new food items only after being exposed to them at least 10 times?



WHAT'S NEXT

“My food service people went from being totally disgruntled to being totally positive about the whole initiative after attending that boot camp,” Adolf says. “It made a huge difference. And when people tell me they can’t change their lunch program, I tell them, ‘I changed mine with my mother-in-law!’ That shows anyone can do it.”

Adolf says that some students initially complained about the whole-food options in the cafeteria, but the grumbling has since subsided. And by analyzing serving trays, the district determined that 87 percent of students choose fresh fruit and vegetables over canned offerings when given the choice.

“I think overall, the students are healthier,” Adolf says. “We’re seeing fewer sick days. Now whether it’s because of the food, that’s hard to say; but their attitudes are better.”

The Biggest Loser contest has been largely embraced, and now some employees want to take it a step further by adding a mental health component to the wellness program. To address that, Adolf has brought in a therapist to talk about how teachers can better handle stress.

“We’re in year two,” she says, “and people are now starting to get on board. I wish we had one more year to really make it sustainable.” Not that she intends to go back to the way things were before. Adolf is confident that the district’s new emphasis on healthier food choices will continue. The school board “is really invested in the changes we’ve made,” she says. Adolf intends to seek additional funds to make sure fruit and vegetables continue to be served in the cafeteria, and she hopes to see the Biggest Loser remain in effect, even if prizes have to be curtailed when the grant runs out.

“I think we’ve managed to create a healthier atmosphere,” she says. “Healthy bodies equal healthy minds equal better attitudes.”

ABOUT US

District: *Bethune R-5*

Location: *Bethune, Colo.*

Number of students: *140*

Percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch:

73 percent



BEFORE AND AFTER

Before: Processed meats. French fries in school meals. Seconds on main entrees. Chocolate milk. Students allowed to bring fast food and soda to school.

After: Fresh fruit and vegetables and whole-grain items in school meals. Regular milk. No seconds allowed for main entrees. No fast food or soda allowed in school. Pedometers for all employees. Biggest Loser contest for staff.

DOING IT FOR FREE

In the first year of the CLF grant, the Bethune School District spent more than \$6,000 to add fresh fruit and vegetables to the school menu. By contrast, the Biggest Loser contest was relatively inexpensive: just \$250 to pay for prizes.

ADVICE

How do you change school culture in a small, rural district? It's not easy. Superintendent Shila Adolf offers these suggestions:

- Use different strategies to raise awareness. “Communication is a huge factor.” Adolf explained to parents and staff members what to expect and used the district’s monthly newsletter to talk about why she wanted to take chocolate milk off the school menu.
- Just do it! “Have a backbone.”
- Support your staff. Professional development is essential, especially when it comes to training cooks to use new recipes with healthier ingredients.
- Involve stakeholders. “Create a health and wellness team. . . . Recognize that change is a process.”

MORE HELP

Alliance for a Healthier Generation—Employee Wellness

www.healthiergeneration.org/schools.aspx?id=2262

Get practical strategies for developing an employee wellness plan and school employee wellness criteria.

Colorado Association of School Boards’ BEST Health Benefits Plan

www.casb.org/services/health-benefits

Learn about this partially self-funded trust, established in 2004 to offer a stable, long-term, statewide medical plan designed to meet the business objectives and challenges of school districts, including the reduction of claims through risk-management assessments and wellness/prevention programs.

Colorado Legacy Foundation’s Best Practices Guide in Health and Wellness for Colorado School Districts

www.colegacy.org/guide_2009/default.php

Find data; best practices for school districts; and action steps for administrators, school board members, parents and the community. Topics include health education, nutrition, physical activity, school health services, workplace wellness and bullying prevention.

LiveWell Colorado

www.livewellcolorado.org

Explore LiveWell Colorado’s website for the latest research about healthy habits and strategies to reduce obesity. This nonprofit organization is committed to reducing obesity in Colorado by promoting healthy eating and active living.

Just do it!
“Have a backbone.”

- Shila Adolf, Superintendent, Bethune School District



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