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COMMENTARY

District Wellness Coordinators: A Healthy Investment

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PUBLISHED: April 14, 2015

Research has long shown that healthy children are better learners and school programming that targets students' health can encourage long-term wellness and promote academic success. Yet, in a constrained fiscal climate, many California school districts have dramatically reduced funding for health and wellness staff and programming for students. School counselors and nurses are expected to serve more students than ever, physical education requirements are not being met in many California schools, and teacher wellness is all but ignored.

This may be shortsighted. Our research provides the first evidence indicating that when district-level wellness coordinators become involved in school health, there can be increased integration of wellness programs within and across schools, reaching more students equitably and leveraging existing resources.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention promotes their Coordinated School Health (CSH) model as a strategy for improving student health and capacity for learning. It calls for well-planned coordination of several wellness components, including nutrition, physical education, health services, and mental health, and emphasizes the role of a wellness coordinator as the agent through which the components are transformed into a systematic approach to school health.

In our qualitative implementation study we conducted and analyzed over 100 interviews and focus groups in eight schools across four school districts in Silicon Valley. All four districts were participating in a local school health initiative funded by a regional healthcare district. Using the CSH model, the initiative was designed to increase student access to health and wellness education and programming through improved coordination and effective use of resources. Each school district hired a wellness coordinator to oversee the CSH model, a position that did not previously exist in these districts.

Our findings indicate that wellness coordinators raise awareness of health and wellness among staff and teachers. They expose district and school staff to positive health and wellness messaging, raising awareness among those best positioned to inform students. By providing resources to staff, developing informal champions at each school, and engaging staff in dialogue, district wellness coordinators bring new attention to health and wellness.

We also found that wellness coordinators support integration of health and wellness into school culture and instruction. They build capacity to intentionally address multiple CSH components through one program or activity (e.g., incorporating elements of mental health into a physical education program), support integration of multiple CSH components into existing classroom curriculum (e.g., making connections to nutrition in a math lesson), and promote alignment of a single CSH component across

grade levels and schools to ensure consistent, equitable, and developmentally relevant delivery of wellness education and activities (e.g., delivering age-appropriate health curriculum to all grade levels, rather than to just one).

Finally, our study indicates that wellness coordinators can leverage limited resources. Wellness coordinators have the advantage of viewing school and district wellness efforts with a broad lens, helping use resources efficiently, avoiding duplication of efforts, and identifying areas where staff could share and implement best practices. Wellness coordinators also build collaborative relationships with local community partners to expand existing programs and secure new resources.

District wellness coordinators are critical to successful Coordinated School Health efforts. Through intentional and strategic collaboration with key stakeholders, they advance CSH goals of integrating health and wellness programs within and across schools, reaching more students equitably and leveraging resources. Our study suggests that school districts with limited resources may consider a district-level wellness coordinator a worthy investment.

The full study is in Lisa Westrich, Monika Sanchez, and Karen Strobel, "Coordinated School Health and the Contribution of a District Wellness Coordinator", Journal of School Health, Volume 85, Issue 4, pages 260–266, April 2015.

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