



Educator Well-Being

Employee Assistance Programs Provide Counseling and Referrals for all Types of Work and Life Concerns



By Christine Van Dusen

Almost every week, Dawn Meyers encountered educators who needed help: A woman who was being abused by her husband, another whose son had died, another who was struggling with alcohol addiction. Each time, Meyers — a former social worker who is now associate superintendent of policy and school support services in the Clarke County School District — referred these teachers and staff to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Offered as part of the district's insurance plan, the EAP provides employees with free and confidential mental-health counseling.

"It's so easy and seamless when you have an EAP," Meyers said. "You can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself. The EAP helps you do that."

Student poverty, gun violence, budget cuts, standardized testing, disruptive behavior, parental pressure, weather disasters — with all of these issues swirling around education, being a teacher today is stressful and sometimes overwhelming, to put it mildly. And that takes a toll on the mental health of the country's educators.

So Georgia's school districts are increasingly offering EAPs to help employees cope with everything from family issues, to emotional, financial and legal challenges.

Employee assistance programs are effective, and employees who use them miss work less frequently, according to a study from the OMNI Institute, the University of Colorado at Boulder and the Colorado State Employee Assistance Program. "EAPs are a first entry point for millions of employees and dependents seeking short-term counseling and specialized referrals for all types of work-and-life concerns," the report states.

Another study, this one from Beacon Health Options, found that EAPs can decrease absenteeism by 55 percent and increase productivity by 63 percent. To be sure, there can be some perceived barriers. Some educators feel ashamed about having personal challenges or mental-health concerns, and believe there is a stigma associated with psychological counseling, particularly for those who work with children. And some educators worry that the counseling sessions won't be private because the EAP is offered through their employers. Meyers has heard these concerns before.

"But honestly, it's the easiest thing in the world," she said. "You don't have to spend time figuring out insurance or pay a lot for an appointment. All of that might stop someone from getting help. With an EAP, you can get back in the

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Teaching Is Emotionally Taxing

The United States has not paid enough attention to the mental wellbeing of K-12 faculty, according to Jared Scherz, Ph.D., M.Ed., ACS, co-founder of TeacherCoach, a consulting firm that offers personal and professional development for educators and school districts.

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Education, Scherz said, is one of the most emotionally taxing professions. "Teachers are highly imbalanced between what they give and receive," he said. "Educators often feel devalued by the system, administrators, students and parents, and by not having their opinion considered or provided sufficient resources to do their work. Without proper mental health for educators, there is no possible way to improve student outcomes."



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Teachers who are more in tune with their emotional health are better able to serve as behavioral models for students, he said. "Teaching empathy, a tolerance for distress and constructive differencing can't occur when teachers are unwell," he said.

Scherz has seen an increasing number of districts around the country offering EAPs as an antidote. "The reason why EAPs are being offered is because absenteeism, turnover, recruitment, job stress and illness are all at alarming levels," he said. "The EAP is an attempt to help the problem."

He recognizes that some educators could be hesitant to use the program. But that can be countered by better communication and awareness of what the EAP is, how it works, and the good it can do, Scherz said. "Schools need to take the next step," he added.

Confidential and Free of Charge

Some in Georgia are doing just that. Henry County Schools, for example, began offering the benefit in July.

"We had been wanting to offer an EAP for many years, but with budgets being so tight it was not until we could determine a funding source that we were able to move forward with the idea," said Valerie Suessmith, assistant superintendent for human resources at Henry County Schools.

The district funds its EAP with federal Title II



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funds that have been earmarked for recruiting, preparing, training and developing teachers and school administrators. “I can’t imagine a better tool for teacher recruitment and retention than one that keeps you healthy, mentally,” Suessmith said.

A key part of making this EAP a success, she said, will be making sure the district’s educators understand how it works. “We want our employees to understand that this is a completely confidential and free-of-charge service,” she said. “Nobody at the central level is saying, ‘15 teachers from XYZ elementary school used it last month.’ That’s not how it works.”

The program also includes legal consultations, retirement planning, prenatal programs, elder care and life-events services, she said. The district is now expanding its program to include the family members of employees. The program provides up to eight sessions per issue, per family member.

“In terms of funding, we’ll have to figure out how to continue to fund it if we can’t keep doing Title II after the one-year contract is up. But I’m sure we will find funding somewhere,” Suessmith said. “The scope and breadth of our EAP should have a direct impact on the health and well-being of our employees, which should directly impact their effectiveness on the job and overall job satisfaction.”

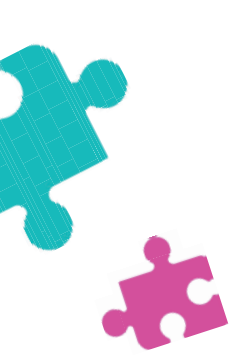
‘Stronger, Happier Employees’

The Madison County School District instituted an EAP a few years ago to give staff members a way to address issues affecting them outside of work “so they can be stronger, happier employees,” said Bonnie Knight, assistant superintendent. “This will ultimately benefit our students and schools.”

Teachers need to be able to build strong, caring relationships in order for students to succeed, said Donna Bulla, director of human resources. “If teachers have good mental health, they are better equipped to build those relationships and will hopefully be happier and more content in their positions.”

Bulla takes care to remind teachers and staff that asking for help is taking a positive approach. “Mental healthcare issues are not always black and white,” she said. “Teachers need to feel comfortable using these supports without judgment.” These supports help educators feel better, perform better and model better for their students — and that’s incredibly important in the high-pressure and high-stakes world of K-12 education.”

“We can’t help students or solve any problem in education without attending to the well-being of educators,” Scherz concluded. ■



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