

AT THE TOP
OF THE CLASS

Aaron M. Hardy, MS

The innovative Wellness Program of the Washoe County School District (WCSD) in Reno, Nevada is at the top of its class.

The District's 3,976 teachers, 3,030 staff members, and 312 administrators not only provide an excellent education for 62,000 students, they also participate in what has become an extremely successful wellness incentive program. The Wellness Program, implemented in 1994, was initiated by the District's Group Insurance Committee which governs the District's self-funded health plan. It also received the approval of all the employee associations and the Superintendent's Executive Cabinet as a separate, self-supporting program. Currently operated under the direction of the Risk Management Office, the Wellness Program serves nearly 8,600 employees, retirees, and spouses in over 100 District worksites located in Gerlach, Empire, Incline Village, and Wadsworth, as well as in the Reno/Sparks metropolitan area.

The Healthy People 2010 and HealthierUS government initiatives provide the basic framework, focus, and direction for the WCSD Wellness Program's services and incentives. Emphasis is placed on establishing and maintaining environments that engender happiness, fulfillment, and productivity; and on making good health and lifestyle choices that will ensure a retirement free from unnecessary pain, suffering, disability, financial burdens, or even the possibility of premature death. The success of the WCSD Wellness Program is dependent upon two principles: first, individual responsibility for modifiable risk factors and second, voluntary participation in incentive-driven behavior change programs.

Promoting Individual Responsibility

WCSD's Good Health Incentive Program (GHIP) determines and addresses the high-risk factors of members. This simple program requires a \$40 per month Good Health Incentive Contribution (GHIC) from all District employees, retirees, and covered spouses of members.

For the past twelve years, screenings for blood pressure, tobacco use, and body mass index have been an integral part of the GHIP's efforts to increase health awareness. More importantly, these screenings provide a financial incentive for members to participate in appropriate health actions if the screenings reveal risk factors. These simple actions, as set forth by the Group Insurance Committee,

have immediate and long-term health benefits. Here's how it works. All members are mailed a Good Health Incentive Form in July and are expected to complete the form by December 1. They are given the following options:

1. Complete the form as part of an annual physical. This is the recommended option because it builds a vital patient-physician relationship. Over time, this interaction yields the most cost-effective approach to prevention, early detection, and timely treatment of any chronic disease or condition.
2. Complete the form as part of the scheduled screenings through local health networks and plan providers.
3. Have a registered nurse complete the required components of the form.

If a member completes the form, his or her monthly contribution is reduced \$10 per month, meaning the member now pays only \$30 per month. If the screening reveals that the member is not at risk for high blood pressure, tobacco use, or high body mass index, his or her monthly contribution is reduced to zero. If, however, a member is at risk for any or all of the above-mentioned risk factors, he or she can take part in programs or actions to reduce these risks, and in so doing, reduces his or her contribution by \$10 per month for each health risk addressed. Simplified, this means that members who complete the form and then take action to address identified health risks would contribute nothing to the WCSD Wellness Fund, the same as a member who completed the form and was found to be risk-free. Contributions take effect January 1 of each plan year.

Technology now allows for thousands of forms to be scanned and information updated into the District's payroll system and the Nevada Public Employee Retirement System. GHIP status is available anytime for members to securely view online from August to December. Since its inception in 1994, the GHIP has acquired over \$2 million from employees and retirees which has then been used to support all the WCSD Wellness Program's staffing, expenses, programs, and services. Historical data indicates that about seven to nine percent of the population do not complete the form, and five to seven percent make at least a \$10 per month contribution. This translates into an average of approximately \$2.85 in revenue per member per month.

In 1998 the Department of Health and Human Services audited the GHIP program and found it to be in compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and the Public Health Service Act. The GHIP was awarded the 2001 Outstanding Program of the Year by the Public Risk Management Association and was presented at the 2003 and 2004 Steps To A HealthierUS Summits.

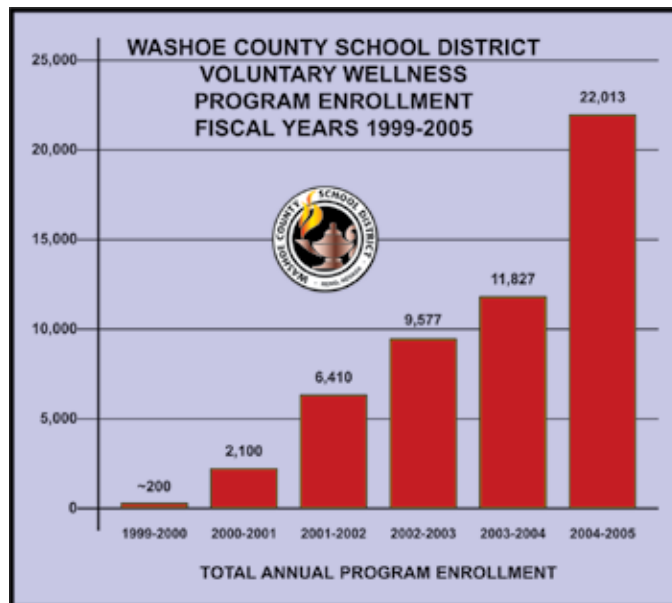
Similar models have been successfully implemented in a local health network and casino. Both have incorporated a financial incentive by increasing medical premiums by \$40 and \$80 respectively per month and then offering a discount to those that complete forms and take necessary health actions if screening reveals risk factors. In either case, as a stand alone revenue program or as a discount incentive added to insurance premiums, participation in both these programs is over 90 percent each year and funds wellness efforts.

Voluntary Participation

With a constant, monthly, and independent revenue source from the GHIP, the WCSD Wellness Program is able to implement significant ongoing incentive-driven behavior change programs structured around specific Healthy People 2010 and HealthierUS objectives. While GHIP identifies risk factors and creates a financial incentive to take necessary health actions, the WCSD Wellness Program's focus and resources are not specifically directed to assist high-risk individuals. Primary prevention is paramount and creates a wellness magnet that draws many members, regardless of risk factors, into the simple day-to-day actions that have a profound effect on the quality and length of life. Creating incentives for healthy behavior adherence through simple four to eight-week online programs implemented throughout the year is an effective and prudent use of wellness funds.

The first online behavior change program in the District, "Brighten Your Smile!" was launched during October 2000 and involved 176 individuals. Four years later 3,091 members participated in the same intervention. The first program to start the new 2005 school year, "Sweat To Health!" set a record of over 2,000 members enrolling the first day of online registration. Voluntary enrollment has increased dramatically over the past five years indicating a significant cultural shift towards health and well-being

(see chart). A very clear message resonates from members: they value the increased accessibility to programs that improve health, prevent disease, and reward individual adherence to healthy lifestyles.



Washoe County School District's program enrollment 1999-2005

Washoe's Online Behavior Change Programs: 2004-2005

There were a number of behavior change programs offered during 2004-2005. In the paragraphs that follow, I have provided a snapshot of each of the programs including the name, the section of the HealthierUS initiative that the program addresses as well as the objective of Healthy People 2010 that is targeted. I also provide a program summary and quantify the number of people who participated. Reports of each program and participant comments can be found online (www.washoe.k12.nv.us/wellness).

✓ Program I: Step To Health!

HealthierUS:

Physical Activity

Healthy People 2010:

22-1, 22-2

Total Participants:

3,743. All participants received a pedometer. This eight-week program tracked the number of steps taken, beginning at 6,000 steps the first week and increasing to 10,000 steps the last four weeks. Those that were compliant were entered into a drawing for a total of \$10,000 in cash awards.

✓ Program 2: Brighten Your Smile!

HealthierUS:

Make Healthy Choices

Healthy People 2010:

21-2d, 21-3, 21-5

Total Participants:

3,091. All participants received a year's supply of dental floss, toothbrushes, and toothpaste. Flossing and brushing were tracked over a month. Those who were compliant were entered into a drawing for one of 100 Sonicare.

✓ Program 3: Maintain - Don't Gain!

HealthierUS:

Physical Activity, Make Healthy Choices

Healthy People 2010:

19-1, 19-2, 22-1, 22-2

Total Participants:

3,143. Participants weighed themselves before Thanksgiving and again after the New Year. Random acts of kindness were promoted each day to increase the holiday mood. Those that lost or maintained their weight received a sports fleece blanket and a chance to win one of 25 \$250 REI gift certificates.

✓ Program 4: The Cure!

HealthierUS:

Physical Activity, Nutrition, Make Healthy Choices

Healthy People 2010:

19-1, 19-2, 22-1, 22-2

Total Participants:

2,514. As a part of this seven-week program, all participants received a copy of *The Culprit And The Cure* and were asked to read two chapters each week, set and track two online personal wellness goals each week, and take brief weekly online quizzes. Drawing for 50 \$100 cash awards was based on adherence to personal wellness goals and quiz scores.

✓ Program 5: Calories Count!

HealthierUS:

Nutrition, Make Healthy Choices



✓ Program 5: Calories Count! (Continued)

Healthy People 2010:

19-1, 19-2, 19-5, 19-6, 19-16

Total Participants:

1,930. All participants received a copy of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Fruit and vegetable intake was tracked with the requirement to learn the caloric content of a different food each day. Those that were compliant were entered into a drawing to receive one of 250 Tanita scales.

✓ Program 6: Laughter - The Best Medicine!

HealthierUS:

Make Healthy Choices

Healthy People 2010:

18 - Mental Health

Total Participants:

2,142. All participants received a journal to record the positive and humorous experiences they had during the month. The only requirement was to laugh each day. Those who were compliant were entered into a drawing to receive one of 10 \$100 cash awards.

✓ Program 7: Fitness Challenge 2005: Mount Everest

HealthierUS:

Physical Activity, Nutrition, Make Healthy Choices

Healthy People 2010:

22-1, 22-2, 22-3, 22-13, 19-1, 19-2, 19-5, 19-6, 19-16

✓ Program 7: Fitness Challenge 2005: Mount Everest (Continued)

Total Participants:

1,471; 196 teams. Members formed teams and moved up Mount Everest based on their team's compliance to fruit and vegetable intake, exercise, and sleep. Teams that reached the summit received \$100 gift certificates to a restaurant of their choice and a chance to win a \$1,000 team award.

✓ Program 8: Spring To Health!

HealthierUS:

Physical Activity

Healthy People 2010:

22-1, 22-2, 22-3, 22-13

Total Participants:

3,653. All participants received a fitness ball. Stretching and exercising were tracked during the month. Compliant individuals were entered into a drawing to receive one of 50 \$100 cash awards.

Tell Em' What You Told Em'

What is the secret behind such involvement in primary prevention? Communication; communication; and communication. A simple and powerful internet interface registers, engages, tracks, and evaluates each eligible participating member. Bimonthly, full-color newsletters mailed to the home addresses of members act as invitations to participate. Customized, personal e-mails provide direct access to online registration.

This accessible and ongoing communication platform facilitates the achievement of the main goals of a worksite health promotion program which include a reduction of healthcare costs, decreased absenteeism, increased worker productivity, and improved worker morale.

Show Me The Money!

Many wellness programs are under constant pressure to prove that what they do saves money. After the collection of six years of healthcare and absenteeism data since 1997, the WCSD Wellness Program realized a \$15.60 return on investment for every dollar spent during 2001 and 2002 through a 20 percent reduction in absenteeism (Prev Med. 2005 Feb; 40(2)131-7). The 2003 data analysis showed that wellness participants are 26 percent more likely to be in the lowest quartile of healthcare costs. The most recent

Introducing...



Aaron Hardy, the orchestrator of Washoe County School District's award-winning program, has founded a new company...Integrated Health & Wellness. IHW is introducing a number of new flexible, online behavior change applications into the marketplace.

Online Programs Gain Momentum

Since nearly 75 percent of all Americans now have access to the internet at home, effective wellness programs must maximize the use of internet design, implementation, tracking and evaluation. A powerful and flexible internet interface, developed by Integrated Health & Wellness (IHW), moves the behavior change process from the traditional "one-on-one" to a much more cost-effective "one-on-thousands" without difficult and costly administrative barriers.

The Company We Keep

Over fifty successful online-behavior change programs have been implemented at Brigham Young University, The Builders Association of Northern Nevada, and the Washoe County School District. With the growing need for more effective adult health and wellness measures, web integration is the initial, and most important key to sustainable and successful long-term wellness programming.

How IHW Can Help Your Organization

The proven wellness programs in the Washoe County School District can easily be reproduced in a variety of settings targeting adults. If any of the following applies to your company or organization, IHW can effectively build an on-going wellness communication platform which engages members in quarterly or bimonthly behavior change programs:

- Do most employees have access to the internet and company e-mail?
- Are Members located in a large geographical area?
- Does a functioning company website already exist?
- Is there little or no significant participation in wellness initiatives?

Contact IHW For More Info...

If you'd like to learn more, contact Aaron Hardy directly via email at <http://www.integrated-hw.com/contact.shtml>.

Show Me The Money! (Continued)

analysis from 2001 through 2004 indicated a 7 percent reduction in the average dollar claim and fewer overall claims for wellness participants.

Good wellness programs usually take three to five years before they have an impact on healthcare costs. The financial position of the District's self-funded health plan has never been better. For the past 15 months, its balance has been in the black and has steadily increased to over \$10 million. Add to that, no rate increase for 2006 and everyone is smiling. The WCSD Wellness Program has further secured its funding through a new fixed cost of \$2.00 per member per month which will be part of the District paid premium in 2006. This revenue in addition to the contributions made through the GHIP will ensure financial stability as this program continues to rapidly expand.

Aside from the documented financial impact the WCSD Wellness Program has, it is evident that this cutting-edge program has played an important role in bringing the District together through the common thread of health. This has proven to be the most powerful catalyst in improving morale and productivity. Many teachers, bus drivers, retirees, custodians, librarians, principals and school nurses, now realize that wellness is worth their every effort today. The WCSD Wellness Program is uniquely positioned both financially and internally to maintain the involvement of members in programs and activities that will continue to have a profound effect on the quality of their lives and the quality of life in the communities where they reside. Wellness works! ★

Log On And Learn

IHW extends an invitation to test drive its unique, interactive web-based wellness programming through a one-program agreement entitled "The Cure!" This successful 7-week program is based on *The Culprit And The Cure* and includes business day e-mails, online goal setting, and weekly quizzes. A complete demo with one-program rates and options is available at: www.integrated-hw.com/thecure.

ABOUT: Aaron M. Hardy, MS

Aaron M. Hardy is the Wellness Coordinator for the Washoe County School District. The program he currently coordinates has received numerous national recognitions including exposure at the first and second Steps to a HealthierUS Summits in 2003 and 2004 and the 2001 Outstanding Program of the Year Award from the Public Risk Management Association. He began his wellness career in 1993 by losing over 100 lbs of unhealthy weight through proper nutrition and physical activity. He now is the president and founder of **Integrated Health & Wellness** which provides organizations with bimonthly or quarterly online behavior change programs and methods to secure funding for wellness efforts.

Aaron earned a bachelor's degree in physical education at Brigham Young University in 1997 and went on to receive his master's in health promotion, 2000. He is married to Gina R. Hardy and they are parents of three healthy boys, Kaden, Ethan and Trevor.



All information ©Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA) 2005. WELCOA provides worksite wellness products, services, and information to thousands of organizations nationwide. For more information visit www.welcoa.org.

Suggested Citation: Hardy, A. (2005). *At The Top Of The Class*. WELCOA's *Absolute Advantage* Magazine, 5(1), 14-20.