

Elevating Education-System Employee Wellness

August 2026 Wellness Newsletter

Oregon's educators are the foundation of the public education system, yet too often they are asked to sustain others while their own needs remain unmet. The wellness of adults in the K-12 system is not peripheral; it is the north star that guides transformational and equity-centered change. Oregon deserves this. As we approach the 2026-2027 school year, to support education-system employee wellness, the ODE [School Wellness, Inclusion Safety & Health Unit](#) will continue to feature a monthly article in the Education Update.

This month's column features: a free 4-part series on strategies to support nervous system regulation, an ODE published white paper on Best Practices for Educator Workforce Well-being and Belonging, and a spotlight on wellness work happening in Willamette Education Service District.

Collective Care: Supporting Ourselves and Each Other

In case you missed it...last May Peace in Schools offered a [free weekly offering](#) to share simple and powerful practices to support your nervous system and help you reconnect – with yourself and each other.

Best Practices for Educator Workforce Well-Being and Belonging: Quality Education Commission Best Practices White Paper Series

When Oregon's educators thrive, students thrive. When the system models care for its people, it teaches care to its children. Adults, children, and the education system itself are bound by shared needs for belonging, safety, and growth.

To help create conditions that foster a culture of belonging and well-being for Oregon's public K-12 education workforce, there needs to be a coordinated collaborative set of efforts to address high levels of stress, fatigue, and burnout. These are conditions that impact well-being and the long-term sustainability of Oregon's educator workforce. An educator's well-being cannot depend on self-care and resilience alone; it must be prioritized and woven into the systems that support teaching and learning. Creating a culture of belonging and well-being for educators leads to professional satisfaction and employee retention. Improved workplace culture generates a ripple effect that enhances students' learning and strengthens school communities.

Interested in reading more? The [Best Practices for Educator Workforce Well-Being and Belonging White Paper](#) is now posted online. This paper outlines the current landscape and needs within Oregon's K-12 educator workforce, and the steps needed to ensure

that the K-12 educator workforce can experience a thriving and supportive workplace that centers improved well-being and belonging. The data helps to tell a story about current efforts that create a reliance on individual self-care when collective and systematic shifts to catalyze the changes needed to improve conditions for Oregon's K-12 educator workforce.

What do you think (or feel) about the information presented in this white paper? Your voice matters; to share your insights, please email Bhagavati at Bhagavati.mullock@ode.oregon.gov

Educator Spotlight: Willamette Education Service District

The Willamette Education Service District (WESD) [Wellness Program](#) is a staff-centered initiative that supports physical and mental health, life enrichment, and resilience. Recognizing that employee well-being is essential to student success. Since 2016, the Wellness Squad has shaped inclusive programming through staff surveys, union input, and site representation, ensuring activities are flexible, accessible, and equitable across diverse roles and locations. Key offerings include wellness spaces, virtual and on-site events, and independent participation options like "Choose Your Own Adventure" activities. In partnership with the Organizational Culture and Development Department and the Data Analysis team, WESD uses demographic data and direct feedback to tailor culturally responsive wellness opportunities for all staff. Through leadership support, continuous improvement, and a culture of belonging, the program reduces burnout, boosts morale, and fosters a healthier, more connected workplace.

20 Minutes of Wellness

WESD offers and supports the use of 20 minutes per week of paid staff time for employees to use towards wellness activities during work hours. Your weekly 20 minutes may be used at one time or split between workdays. Please coordinate this time with your supervisor to ensure that it won't conflict with student contact time or scheduled meetings.

Wellness minutes may not be used for:

- Coming in late to work
- Leaving work early (even for appointments)
- Extending lunches or breaks
- Leaving WESD's campus
- Activities that aren't Wellness-related

Cooking Up Connection Through Wellness

Before breaking for summer, WESD offered a cooking class by Shiloh Ficek, their Nutrition Services manager. In addition to tasting a warm potato and asparagus salad, attendees tried a spring grain bowl and homemade pasta with spring vegetables. Superintendent Dr. Joe Morelock worked as the sous chef, and attendees were encouraged to eat and ask questions about the cooking process.

The cooking class is part of Willamette ESD's employee well-being program, supported in part by a Flourish Grant from Oregon Well-Being Trust. Willamette ESD's first employee well-being grant from the Trust was awarded in 2016, and after the grant ended, the ESD sustained the program.

In addition to multiple cooking classes such as "Bowls of Comfort: Soups, Stews, & Chowders," the wellness team has hosted chili cookoffs, Popcorn Wednesdays, flu shot clinics, and physical activities like pickleball, rock climbing at a gym, snowshoeing, snow tubing, and bowling this year. For those interested in arts and crafts, wellness activities have been held at Board and Brush and Pots & Whatnots. The wellness team also organized a pottery event in McMinnville, a kayak tour in Salem, and a plant swap at their Marion and Yamhill Centers.

Here is a picture of staff at their Rock Boxx event:



By using routinely-collected staff feedback, the WESD wellness team continues to offer relevant, exciting, and supportive well-being opportunities for employees at their many worksites. Their wellness program maintains and prioritizes a culture of well-being.

How are you Elevating Education-System Employee Wellness?

We'd love to continue to hear from you to acknowledge the creative ways school districts, ESDs and communities are elevating employee wellness in their districts. If you are interested in being featured in future communications, please reach out to Bhagavati at ode.healthyschools@ode.oregon.gov.

Need inspiration? If you're struggling to find creative ways to elevate education systems employee wellness, feel free to contact Bhagavati directly. She would be most pleased to find time to connect with you to discuss ways of supporting your endeavors. Email her at Bhagavati.mullock@ode.oregon.gov