



Row as One to a Healthy Horizon

Weld RE-1 School District: A Success Story



Colorado Healthy Schools Landscape

School districts, nonprofit organizations, and funders across Colorado have worked together to connect school communities with tools and resources to create healthy school environments. Through these coordinated and concerted efforts, Colorado schools have intentionally and thoughtfully committed to integrate health and wellness into their everyday culture and practices. This important focus on health and wellness in schools has resulted in numerous benefits to students including, increased attendance, improved classroom performance, stronger student engagement, and a reduction in stress, for both students and staff.

With support from philanthropy, including generous support from The Colorado Health Foundation, as well as several funding streams from the Colorado Department of Education, Colorado school districts received multi-year grants to focus on health and wellness. Many districts used a portion of the funds they

received to create District Wellness Coordinator positions. District Wellness Coordinators play a pivotal role at the district level in promoting healthy school environments by coordinating policies, programs, and practices, identifying and understanding areas for improvement, as well as supporting schools to implement best practices and create environments conducive to making healthy lifestyle choices.

Simultaneous to the funds provided to support District Wellness Coordinator positions and local initiatives, The Colorado Health Foundation also funded state-wide organizations to support school districts as they worked to change systems and cultures. These funded state-wide organizations coordinated efforts and leveraged their specific expertise to offer a wide range of learning opportunities for District Wellness Coordinators, including trainings, workshops, webinars, networking events, and individual technical assistance.

This commitment from various sectors to create a unified and collaborative approach to support Colorado school districts became known colloquially as the "Healthy Schools Community."

The learning opportunities for the Healthy Schools Community were grounded in the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model. The WSCC model is a framework designed to guide all school stakeholders to collaboratively address health behaviors and create environments that promote health and wellness for students and staff. Districts and schools use the WSCC model to re-think and re-structure the way they approach learning and health. From the onset, there was a strong emphasis on planning for sustainability to ensure that the funding and efforts would have a long-lasting impact on the health and wellness of students.

Partnership between RMC Health, North Colorado Health Alliance and Weld RE-1 School District

RMC Health provides professional learning and capacity-building that empowers champions for healthy young people, so students of every background can live their best lives. RMC Health was honored to be one of the state-wide organizations to receive funding from The Colorado Health Foundation to provide support to school districts engaged in healthy schools work. RMC Health's support focused on developing the capacity of individual District Wellness Coordinators to lead health and wellness efforts at the district level and to support school level efforts. RMC Health provided professional learning opportunities including training, technical assistance, and resource development, emphasizing best practices for health and learning, as well as promoting systems thinking to ensure sustainability.

Additionally, in collaboration with other state-wide organizations, RMC Health coordinated and facilitated two ongoing opportunities to create a shared sense of purpose, connect District Wellness Coordinators on a regular basis, and provide skill-building learning to accelerate their work:

- 1** Healthy Schools Coordinator Meetings: biannual, in-person professional development events consisting of various learning formats/sessions, including keynote, roundtable, presentations, workshops, and peer-to-peer case studies
- 2** Coordinator Learning Communities: bimonthly, virtual events to increase statewide engagement and resource sharing on specific topics identified by District Wellness Coordinators

RMC Health was able to support a unique partnership with North Colorado Health Alliance (NCHA) and Weld RE-1 School District (Weld RE-1). NCHA and Weld RE-1 have a long history of partnership, dating back to 2013 with NCHA's Community Care

Corps, a program funded by The Colorado Health Foundation to assess community barriers to health. One of the communities that was part of that assessment was the Highway 85 corridor from Greeley to Ft Lupton, which includes Weld RE-1. In 2013, as communities were struggling to get information and resources amidst historic flooding that destroyed homes, businesses, and schools, NCHA emerged as a valuable partner in identifying and securing relief resources for schools. In 2016, when The Colorado Health Foundation released a funding opportunity to support school health and wellness, NCHA reached out to multiple school districts to explore a partnership to apply for the grant. Without hesitation, Weld RE-1 signed on to partner in pursuit of the grant. NCHA and Weld RE-1 were awarded multiple years of funding.



Weld RE-1 is a rural school district in Northern Colorado, and serves the towns of Gilcrest, LaSalle, and Platteville. The district serves nearly 2000 students across three elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Although staff and students are separated by many miles they are united as the Valley Vikings.

The focus of NCHA and Weld RE-1's work was to provide resources, support, and expertise for planning and implementing wellness initiatives and wellness policies at the district and school level. With the grant funds, NCHA hired a half-time Wellness Coordinator to lead the Healthy Schools project and support the district. Annie Baker, based on her longstanding relationship with the districts in Weld County through her previous Community Care Corps work in the community, was asked to serve as the District Wellness Coordinator.

Because Annie did not work directly in schools and was not involved in the intricacies of district operations, Annie welcomed every learning opportunity provided by state-wide partners, including the Wellness Coordinator meetings and Coordinator Learning Communities (eventually even presenting at a Coordinator Learning Community session).

RMC Health and NCHA also partnered to provide specific and tailored supports for Weld RE-1's initiatives, including delivering two full-day in-person trainings:

- 1** A full-day, in-person training designed to help school health team leaders complete and document a step-by-step process to implement school-wide health and wellness initiatives
- 2** A full-day, in-person simulation designed to help school health teams understand how people approach change, how to address resistance to change, and apply systems thinking to their health and wellness work in their own school*

*With financial support from the Colorado Department of Education's Health and Wellness Unit, three other districts that NCHA supports joined the simulation: Weld RE-4, Weld RE5J, and Weld RE-8.



3

“It is overwhelming to step into this position and needing to learn everything from ground zero....I attended every training that RMC Health offered.”

- Annie Baker, NCHA Wellness Coordinator

The training, “gave me some great ideas for moving forward. It helped me feel like I am able to narrow my goals and objectives and make meaningful change.” - Annie Baker

The simulation taught me to “never stop the work, build relationships, and when you have success keep going” and “the value of talking and communicating, as well as gathering data and information is important to facilitate change.” - Annie Baker

Weld RE-1's School District and School-Level Infrastructure

Weld RE-1 has implemented a comprehensive program to support the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of students. The district's Comprehensive Health and Wellness Plan has four goals:

- 1 Create a comprehensive learning environment for developing and practicing lifelong wellness behaviors**
- 2 Implement and promote nutrition education and proper dietary habits**
- 3 Provide opportunities for standards based physical education programs and physical movement**
- 4 Support mental health services**

Annie, as NCHA's Wellness Coordinator, is actively involved at the district level with the Nutrition and Physical Activity Advisory Council (NPAAC), which serves as Weld Re-1's wellness committee that plans and monitors the progress of the health and wellness initiatives for the district. The NPAAC is a group of 25 to 30 stakeholders. The group made an effort to ensure that at least half of the membership was community partners, including local universities, local public health, community health organizations, and counseling and behavioral health organizations. The Superintendent, Chief Innovation Officer, District Nurse, Director of Nutrition Services, Principals, school wellness team members, parents, and students also serve on the NPAAC.

"The community partnerships have been the key to revitalizing health and wellness in Weld RE-1!"

says, Annie. A smaller district health advisory team consisting of the Wellness Coordinator, Superintendent, Chief Innovation Officer, a community member/parent, and the district nurse meet in-between the NPAAC meetings to set the

agenda and monitor progress toward the district's four goals.

At the school level, all six schools in Weld RE-1 have active school wellness teams. Weld RE-1 is unique in that the school-level wellness champions are not all health or physical education teachers, as is often the case in many schools. Rather, the district put out a wide call for staff members who are passionate about health and a diverse group responded, including reading instructional coaches, choir directors, school secretaries, and art teachers. These wellness champions made a two-year commitment to serve in a leadership role in their school. School wellness teams use Smart Source data (local school health and wellness data) to prioritize their needs and write a School Health Improvement Plan (SHIP). Each school receives \$500 from the district to support the strategies outlined in their plan, as well as incentives for participating in Smart Source data collection. The district has even codified school wellness teams in their District Wellness Policy.

The Superintendent of the district makes health and wellness a top priority, continuing the efforts of his predecessor. The prior superintendent had a saying,

"We are planting seeds for a lifetime of wellness' and that captures the district culture,"

says Annie. The support of the district leadership is exceptional and is visible at both the district and school level. School level leadership, taking its cue from the district, is equally supportive and enthusiastic. In Weld RE-1 leaders walk the talk. A school wellness team member commented,

"Our district administration is in full support of our efforts to improve all facets of health & wellness. We have a committee that is comprised of community, staff, administration and county partners to help us in

trainings and sustainability of our programs. Without the backing of administration, it would be very difficult to move forward with our health and wellness efforts."

With an emphasis on best practices and policy, Weld RE-1 is creating sustainable health and wellness programs. Health and wellness programs have been embedded into school routines, community partners are committed to ongoing support, and students, staff, and parents are actively engaged in promoting a culture of health within each school.

"When the funding ends, [wellness in] Weld RE-1 will keep going!"

says Annie. In honor of the district mascot, the Valley Vikings, the district awards "Oars of Excellence" as a way to recognize those that demonstrate health and wellness. The Pete Mirich Elementary School Wellness Team, under the leadership of Jennifer Rauch, has received the Oar of Excellence twice in four years for their innovative wellness work.

"We made wellness fun!"

says Annie. The district truly upholds and embodies its motto, Row as one to a Healthy Horizon.

Oar of Excellence



As a result of the work of the NPAAC and school wellness teams, the following initiatives have been established in Weld RE-1:



Implementation of the Integrated Nutrition Education Program at all elementary schools. This program provides healthy ingredients and resources to every classroom for students to prepare and taste test a new healthy snack, varying from once a month, to once a quarter, depending on each school.



Creation of a Memorandum of Understanding between Sunrise Community Health and Salud Family Health. Both organizations serve the district by arranging free dental screenings and supplying sealant for every student.



Implementation of the Walking Classroom program in elementary schools and in middle schools. This program incorporates the benefits of walking with instructional topics to increase students' focus, engagement, and emotional well-being.



Installation of hydration stations in all schools to promote and increase students' overall water consumption.



Execution of whole school movement at the start of every school day (in 3 out of 6 schools) to promote physical activity and build community between students and staff.



Dissemination of resources to staff, students, and parents on the benefits of healthy eating and physical activity.



Facilitation of Youth Mental Health First Aid trainings for staff, families, and communities to learn how to help and recognize an adolescent who is experiencing a mental health crisis.



Promotion of school-based community gardens, including providing garden curriculum to schools, and a plan to integrate walking trails throughout the gardens.



Utilization of heart rate monitors in physical education classes, incentivizing 100% participation in physical education class.

School Showcase:

Platteville Elementary School

Platteville Elementary School (PES) serves approximately 400 students in grades PreK-5 in the town of Platteville. Platteville Elementary School earned the Governor's Distinguished Improvement award in 2019 for exceptional student growth. In addition to academic excellence, Platteville has made tremendous strides in integrating health and wellness into the everyday routines of the school. The current five-member school wellness team at PES has been in place since 2018. The team's focus began with healthy snacks for celebrations and then expanded further to include physical activity and staff wellness.



Efforts on behalf of the school wellness team to increase physical activity include:



Utilize the "Mighty Runner" at the primary level, an interactive running adventure game that combines physical and digital play where students control the game with their feet.



Debut new exercise/game equipment for moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during indoor recess.



Implement the Walking Classroom program by utilizing kits with audio podcasts aligned to curriculum content for 20-30 minute walks.



Track physical activity goals with heart rate monitors and send reports home to parents on their child's progress.

Efforts on behalf of the school wellness team to increase healthy eating include:



Manage a school-based community garden team with 40 volunteer families.



Implement the Integrated Nutrition Education Program quarterly.



Raise awareness for healthy snacks at classroom parties.



Create opportunities for staff wellness, resulting in a 46% increase in staff wellness score on the Smart Source inventory.

The school wellness team has reached a common understanding and commitment with all staff members in regards to the importance of the wellness team and implementing changes. Emily Bridges, a kindergarten teacher and the school wellness team leader, says, "Our kids love the things that we have changed!"

The school is currently working with the ground crews on their physical environment to create more opportunities for movement, planning to purchase more playground equipment, and will be

offering professional development for recess supervisors.

Lastly, the team is working on ways to create dedicated movement time at the beginning of every school day.

Emily credits Annie, the District Wellness Coordinator, with helping her traverse this path and embed health and wellness into PES.

"Annie is amazing! As a newer wellness committee leader, I was lost. She has literally held my hand through the past 2 years and has assisted us in implementing various wellness activities in our building. I could not have done any of this without her!"
- Emily Bridges, School Wellness Team Leader.

School Showcase:

North Valley Middle School

North Valley Middle School (NVMS) serves approximately 200 students in grades 6-8 in the town of LaSalle. North Valley Middle School was an early adopter, forming its school wellness team in 2016. The school wellness team is led by the reading instructor, Heather Flesner, and includes an instructional coach, art teacher, PE teacher, para-educator for special education, school secretary, and a parent. The school wellness team initially prioritized physical activity and student movement, and recently incorporated social/emotional wellness, eating healthy, and staff wellness.



Program/initiative highlights include:



Conduct an annual Viking Day Challenge: a full day, all school, event including a Ninja Warrior course and wellness stations.



Schedule an all-school movement break each day and schedule extra physical activities during state testing.



Provide customized movement boxes for each classroom teacher to use during brain breaks.



Implement the Walking Classroom program and use of audio podcast kits, as well as provide flexible seating for students.



Host Healthy Lunchroom Fridays including, taste testing and fruit and veggies challenges.



Organize a step challenge and a "Biggest Loser" weight loss challenge for staff.



Create a monthly wellness calendar including events (health assemblies and cafeteria taste tests), staff challenges, and student challenges.



Offer a wellness-related book study for staff.

The school wellness team thoughtfully plans wellness activities at the school, which have been enthusiastically received by staff and students. "We just have an awesome team that works really well together, is enthusiastic and wants this area to be a focal point that we promote health and wellness in everyone at this school! Lots of great ideas have been talked about and many new ideas will be implemented!" says one member of the school wellness team. "Staff and students feel more involved and connected as a result of these activities and programs," remarks another team member.

The support from the school's principal, Mark Avery, has been the momentum for new ideas. He allocates instructional time for the Viking Challenge Day, which is huge says Heather Flesner, school wellness team leader. He is a proponent of movement in the classroom and worked with the electives committee to create a mandatory sixth grade health and physical education class. He also attends the school and district wellness meetings. In addition, the support from Annie, the District Wellness Coordinator, is invaluable. "Annie is an important component of this work and contributor to all the things the

school has been able to do," says Heather. Heather says what makes NVMS a success is everyone has the same vision.

"All the staff are willing to make health and wellness a priority and work toward the betterment of kids."

- Heather Flesner, School Wellness Team Leader.

North Valley Middle School strives to incorporate this vision into every aspect of the school day for the benefit of their students and staff.

School Showcase:

Gilcrest Elementary School

Gilcrest Elementary School (GES) serves approximately 170 students in grades PreK-5 in the town of Gilcrest. Gilcrest Elementary School developed their school wellness team in 2014 after the Principal and Assistant Principal attended a school wellness training at Red Hawk Elementary and were inspired to bring school wellness to Gilcrest. Gilcrest Elementary School was the first school in the district to strategically integrate health and wellness into its structures and routines to address its achievement gap. The emphasis on health and wellness resulted in positive academic gains for students. Gilcrest Elementary School received the Governor's Distinguished Improvement Award for exceptional student growth in 2017 and 2018.



Physical activity and movement play a pivotal role in the school day and the school's culture:

-  Conduct whole school movement breaks: 10 minutes at 8AM and 10 minutes at 2PM.
-  Incorporate brain breaks in classrooms.
-  Track steps to reach National Parks.
-  Participate in Healthy Kids 5210+ Challenge and Healthy Kids Jump Rope Challenge.
-  Implement the Walking Classroom program and use of audio podcast kits.
-  Conduct races and runs such as Little Vike Loop-a-Thon and Spring Fun Run.
-  Implement Recess Before Lunch.
-  Participate in University of Northern Colorado's evaluation research on moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA).
-  Welcome the community to a newly built Frisbee golf course.
-  Utilize Easy Scanners for students to log their loops around the hallways and the outdoor grounds.

Healthy eating and nutrition is an equally important focus at GES:

-  Implement Breakfast in the Classroom.
-  Utilize Seed Grow Rack to grow vegetables.
-  Implement Integrated Nutrition Education Program every month across grade levels.
-  Recipient of a Colorado Department of Education grant for a fruit and vegetable program to increase children's exposure to and consumption of a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables during the school day.
-  Installation of water stations.
-  Installation of a salad bar in the cafeteria.

The school wellness team leader, Teresa Moran, explained the support she has received from her school's leadership and from the District Wellness Coordinator has been vital to the team's progress. The work at the district level, especially on the district wellness policy, as well as the support from NCHA, has made all the difference, says Teresa. Financially, the funds available through the The Colorado Health Foundation grant have been extremely helpful for purchasing the equipment and materials. Another significant support has been the District Wellness Retreat and the professional development RMC Health provided for the district's school wellness teams.

Through these opportunities the GES wellness team has increased their capacity to successfully implement their School Health Improvement Plan.

As a result of the school's commitment to these efforts, students are consciously choosing to be physical active and there are high levels of engagement in the programs and activities that the school offers. The school also recognizes staff and students through Healthy Kids Kindness Heroes, a program through UC Health where students and staff nominate other students and staff to be recognized as a Kindness Hero. To ensure sustainability, many of the activities are integrated into the school's daily schedule.

"The school is a gem with amazing staff who keep persevering and take care of our kids. We are doing this work, and we are doing it for our kids and we know it will help them in many ways other than just here (at school)."

- Teresa Moran, School Wellness Team Leader