



PARTNERS IN LEARNING: CREATING A CULTURE OF HEALTH



Purpose of Project

The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO), in collaboration with workplace wellness experts, sought companies from a variety of industries, business types and sizes to participate in a case-study project. These case studies focus on employers who have developed a healthy culture in the workplace, one designed with elements that support employee health and well-being. The case studies were developed based on HERO's **definition and elements** of a culture of health.

Overview

Since 1996, *Partners in Learning* has served as a model childcare program with two centers in Rowan County, North Carolina. These centers provide services for all children, including those with special needs. One of the priorities for *Partners in Learning* is to develop a comprehensive, community-based, family-centered childcare system to enrich the lives of children, including those with disabilities and their families. *Partners in Learning* is a Model Inclusive Childcare Center with a 5-Star rated, nationally accredited program providing care for over 200 children aged 6 weeks through 5 years. During the summer months, childcare is extended to include children through 12 years of age. The organization provides childcare services to children via on-site childcare centers across the community as well as in their homes.

The 5-Star rating is the highest license attainable in North Carolina and was established in 1999 to better define the quality of childcare in the state and to provide a reference for parents when choosing childcare. Only 14% of all childcare centers in North Carolina hold a 5-Star license.

Partners in Learning is staffed by 32 full-time and 10–15 part-time employees. The full-time positions have a low turnover rate with the majority of the staff having more than 5 years' tenure.

Key Elements of Culture of Health

External Community Connection and Altruism

In 2008, *Partners in Learning* collaborated with their local health department to implement a wellness program called the "Knapsack Program." The focus of the 6-month program was a healthy nutrition campaign for children at the childcare center.

Observing the value of the Knapsack Program, a local nonprofit community health organization, Prevention Partners, approached *Partners in Learning* to assist them in developing their own internal wellness program to serve the health and wellness needs of their staff and children. The primary focus of this wellness initiative was on nutrition and healthy eating. The alignment with Prevention Partners provided additional momentum to expand a child nutrition wellness program to serve children and staff. In collaboration with Prevention Partners, the *Partners in Learning* wellness program started in 2010 with the

formation of the wellness committee. The committee formed their first policy in 2012, which outlined the expectation for staff members to eat the *Partnership in Learning* healthy food options that were also served to the students. Additionally, staff were encouraged to have healthy drinks like water in the classroom, yet were allowed to have sugary drinks and non-school-provided food in the staff break room.

Organizational Resource Allocation and Commitment

The wellness program for staff has continued to develop, building upon the initial nutrition campaign and wellness policy. Since 2012, the program has been overseen by a wellness coordinator and certified health coach. The initial funding for these positions was paid for by a grant fund which was available from 2012 through 2014. Besides providing funding for staffing, the grant also provided for the delivery of services to include quarterly measurements of body weight, blood pressure, and active and resting pulse rate. Local healthcare providers conducted additional biometrics and health measures to include blood pressure, blood glucose, and tobacco status. Through the annual biometric screenings, staff members were identified with health issues to include prediabetes, high blood pressure, and smoking. In addition to health screening, the health coach meets annually with each staff member to go over their personal health results and help guide the staff member in identifying goals to achieve better health. The wellness coordinator helps staff members throughout the year by supporting them in reaching goals.

Partners in Learning allows staff to dedicate some work time to focus on their goals (e.g., contact the smoking

cessation quit line while at work, or take approved time off for a smoking cessation class). Staff are also offered reimbursement to fitness centers if they meet attendance criteria of going to the gym at least 12 times a month and if they complete a local beginner running class. The wellness coordinator helps the staff member along the way to reach goals, keeps all the measures, and provides a report to the committee.

Partners in Learning also has a wellness committee consisting of the director, wellness coordinator/coach/trainer, dietitian, health department employee over health and wellness, and three staff members. The dietitian helps to make changes to the school menu, including the ingredient content (sodium, fat, calories).



When *Partners in Learning* reduced the caloric and non-nutritive value of the meals for the children, the changes also benefited their staff. The wellness policy for staff members was amended to remove external food sources in the classroom. Therefore, staff are provided the same nutritious food options that children have available. The benefits of this policy included that staff stopped eating multiple

meals for lunch, and their food options were much healthier.

After *Partners in Learning* started the wellness program, many staff improved their health. Many overweight, sedentary employees became healthier by improving their eating habits and running in races. The average employee weight decreased from 200 pounds in 2014 to 184 pounds in 2016, a net improvement of 16 pounds per wellness participant. One staff member who was 50 pounds overweight began running for exercise, eating what was provided in the classroom, and as a result decreased her weight.

Supportive Policies and Built Environment

To more fully support the employees in becoming or staying healthy, *Partners in Learning* has established three additional wellness policies: food and beverage policy, tobacco-free grounds policy, and a wellness and exercise policy.

In 2012, *Partners in Learning* created their first wellness policy and replaced the beverage vending machine, which provided mostly soft drinks, with reusable water bottles and a water cooler for staff. As a result of the new policy, more staff started bringing lunches from home or eating the healthier lunches the children were eating.

As of January 2017, the state of North Carolina began enforcing a law in which the state's instructors are not allowed to bring outside food or drink into the classroom. This law has helped new staff joining the *Partners in Learning* team to adapt to the policy the school has had in place for 5 years.

Partners in Learning introduced a second wellness policy to modify the food served at staff events—removing foods high in calories, fat, and sugar (e.g., cakes and sweetened beverages) and replacing them with healthier foods. When the change occurred, the first staff meeting provided pork loin, salad, and unsweet tea, all with proper calorie portions. These initial changes were difficult for the staff to adapt to, but staff are now familiar with the effort and encourage each other to choose the healthier options. This healthy eating and positive health role modeling has morphed into the classroom with encouragement of healthy eating with the children.

Another policy introduced was the tobacco-free policy. Currently, the childcare centers are tobacco free, which has encouraged many staff members to stop using tobacco. Furthermore, by allowing staff to participate in tobacco cessation programs during company time, the internal environment has changed to one in which

staff feel supported during their efforts to stop using tobacco.

Partners in Learning also has instituted a movement policy. All staff are encouraged to take movement breaks during their break time and during their lunch break. By having a teacher who fills in for lunch breaks, known as a flex teacher, the main teachers are encouraged to use their breaks to get out and move within the neighborhood and on the track, play on the Wii®, exercise on the bike in a breakroom, or use one of the two regular bikes outside. The organization also provides exercise route guides for walking and bicycling that includes distance and estimated time.

These physical activity options became easier over lunch since the teachers have already eaten with the children in their classroom. Movement breaks also encourage social interactions and well-being throughout the workday.



Organizational Leadership and Peer Support

The new policies and built environment implementation have allowed staff to make wiser food choices and build exercise into their daily work life.

Staff have accountability partners within the organization. They pass on clothes to one another when they have lost enough weight, which they refer to as “lost out of” clothing and company-logged apparel. To keep the momentum going, the competitive staff members participate in health challenges. Rewards for the wellness challenges range from fitness trackers to coupons for a free day off.

When the wellness program started, the childcare director was one of the least healthy employees. The director started her wellness journey by working with the wellness coordinator to design a program tailored to help her achieve her personal health goals. As a result, the wellness coordinator contacted the local newspaper. The director was featured on her 1-year wellness journey with positive outcomes, including losing 60 pounds. She went from saying “I will never run,” to now running up to 5 miles four to five times a week and controlling her calories. This is an excellent example of the importance of leadership buy-in and modeling healthy behavior change. *Partners in Learning* shared this great publicity with their staff.

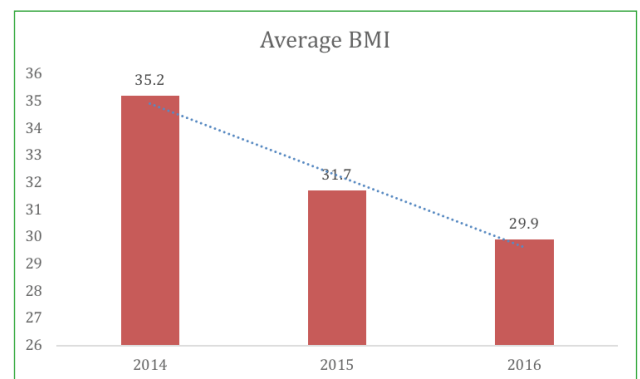
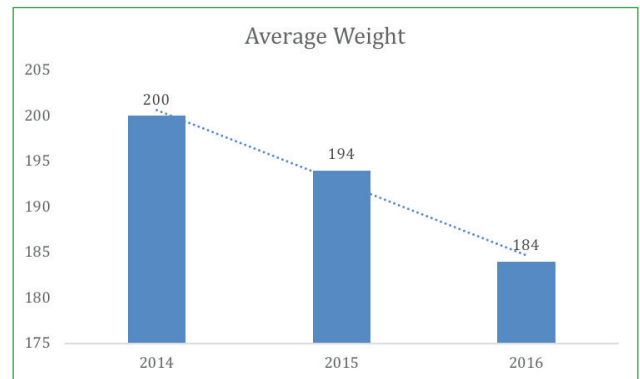
Communication Plan

The communication plan used by *Partners in Learning* is a multipronged approach including the Daily Morning memo to staff, which includes health and wellness tips, along with the staff schedule; center information; email communication on wellness program offerings; face-to-face meetings; wellness flyers with all the information placed in the staff mailboxes; monthly staff meetings, which can include fun activity challenges during the meetings; informational health posters in the restrooms; walking routes; hydration charts; and exercise flyers near places where staff congregate, including the copier and mailboxes.

Results

One of the common observations from the wellness program is hearing or seeing someone who once said they can’t perform “X” and then watching the

staff member overcome obstacles to do so. This is something the *Partners in Learning* staff have seen over and over again. The rest of the staff cheer and support other staff members on their wellness journey. Over the years, *Partners in Learning* has seen great results in weight loss, with activity levels rising.



Summary

At *Partners in Learning*, a focus on healthy living is important to the organization, staff and the children they serve. By participating in health initiatives, the staff can more fully engage in healthy living while modeling healthy behavior for coworkers and children. The results show that their workforce is healthier. The program appears to be working well and is appreciated, resulting in a healthier work environment and culture.

The wellness committee and coordinator continue to provide strategic direction and oversight of the program while observing participants’ overall health improvements.

In October 2016, *Partners in Learning* obtained a new site that added about 15 more employees. This increase has created some challenges because employees at this site were not used to the wellness programming available to all *Partners in Learning* employees. As a result, the policies in place at the original location are slowly being adopted at the new location. The first policy established was the No Outside Food or Drink policy. This policy was a challenge to carry out, but the changing of the state law in January 2017 helped new staff to accept the policy. The rest of the policies will be implemented gradually to allow time for staff to share their input and buy in before the new policy goes into effect.

Exceptional leadership supports a healthy workplace. According to Deborah Howell, M.Ed., director of *Partners in Learning*, “Your choices determine your experiences. This holds true with almost every aspect of life. Healthy lifestyle changes are no different. Encouraging and supporting healthy choices for staff means happier staff, healthier staff, and overall better experiences for children and families we serve.”



Contributors to this Case Study

This case study is a product of the HERO Culture of Health (CoH) Study Committee and its Values of Culture Work Group. The CoH Study Committee was created to establish a widely accepted definition of a healthy culture to build consensus and understanding of its value when supporting the health and well-being of a population. Case study interviews and development of this report were led by HERO staff and members of the CoH Study Committee. HERO would like to extend a special thank you to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for additional support during the editing process.

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The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) is a national nonprofit dedicated to identifying and sharing best practices in the field of workplace health and well-being that improves the health and well-being of workers, their spouses, dependents and retirees.

HERO was established over 20 years ago and is a member-driven organization in which learning opportunities and research are led by committees. HERO's work focuses on sharing best practices, advocating for improvements in the field, and providing practical solutions for employers who share HERO's commitment to health and well-being for employees, families, and communities.