



How to Develop Your Teacher Wellness Strategy

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Being healthy requires a multi-faceted approach. No surprise here! But in a practical sense that means that for you to be healthy, there are many influences other than your lifestyle choices, that have an impact on your well-being.

To be healthy, we are not expected to know everything about everything. For example, as a fire safety measure, we may know that all rooms are required to have two exits but we can be sure that there are many other rules, regulations and guidelines in the Occupational Health & Safety Act, Labour Law and Public Health Agency that are in place to protect our health and safety, without us even knowing they exist.

Understand Wellness

From a logical perspective we accept that health involves more than eating nutritiously and getting some 'exercise'. But do we really understand, and accept, that much of being healthy is beyond our personal lifestyle choices?

In a very simplistic sense, we can say that being healthy is physically having a fit body and mentally feeling good. To achieve that, we must be motivated and able to find the: time, finances, space, resources, supports and access to the things that keep us feeling well. This introduces a comprehensive realm of wellness which includes the emotional, spiritual, financial, social, intellectual, mental and physical dimensions of each person's being. Yes, we definitely make choices which impact our health in each of these dimensions, but additional factors influence how well we feel and function in each dimension. These factors are not subject to personal choice in the same way. We may choose to leave a chemically toxic community or an unhealthy workplace but, due to issues such as income and family, we do not always feel free to make such choices.

Know What Influences Your Health

The influences on our health, officially called the "Determinants of Health", fall into several categories. We are given a biological predisposition through

our genes; we react to a variety of exposures in our physical environment; we respond according to our lifestyle choices; we emotionally experience life in a culture and society which presents social values, norms and advantages; we have the ability to manipulate our environment through our knowledge, skills and resources; and we learn to create what we need to mitigate the impact of factors beyond our control!

The following descriptions highlight how our health is determined by where and how we live, in the body that we have been given.

Genetically we receive a set of data that sets the stage for our physical well-being. On this spectrum of possibilities, where we end up is determined by our actions and our environment. For example, a family history of heart disease does not mean that you will succumb to a heart attack at 45. Instead, with a healthy lifestyle and appropriate medical care, you may celebrate your 100th birthday!

Cultural factors play a role in the behaviours we choose. Statistically we have higher rates of heart disease than the Canadian average. Our traditional diet, high in salt and fat, which is not generally accompanied by the physical work standards of our previous generations, has led to a negative impact on our overall health status.

Our *income, education* and a *safe, healthy work environment* impact our potential for being well. A stable, adequate income allows access to good food, medical treatment, services and facilities; health knowledge encourages better choices. Mold, lighting, and rodents aren't the only threats to our health in our physical work facility! We are affected by the social and professional atmosphere and the adherence to policies and regulations (e.g. Respectful Workplace, Occupational Health & Safety); and, the practices, attitudes and support of leaders in a guidance, directive or supervisory role. Our health becomes seriously threatened if we function in a physically and/or psychologically disrespectful work environment.

Availing of *services* and *resources* which support our personal and professional well-being, is invaluable.

Whether it's being able to obtain medical diagnostic and treatment support or accessing professional development opportunities, each is important to ongoing wellness and to our sense of control and stability.

Social networks and *status* serve to enhance the effect of other factors on our well-being. We derive a sense of belonging, meaning and value through our interactions with, and contributions to, the world around us. Having a supportive social network increases our access to positive resources and affirms our personal value. Lack of support and recognition brings the opposite results.

Lifestyle Choices include our personal practices and the skills we develop. We are affected by the habits and behaviours in which we engage for: sleep, relaxation, time management, coping skills, communication, conflict, financial budgeting, nutrition, physical activity, and the seemingly endless list of other personal choice areas!

By knowing what determines our health as a population, and the factors that have the greatest personal impact, we are able to plan for building and maintaining optimal health conditions for ourselves and for those around us.

Create a Comprehensive Strategy

To ensure a comprehensive wellness approach and increase its presence on the school's radar, link your Teacher Wellness Strategy with other committees and resources. Administrative support is critical. Common natural fits are with: School Development, Climate & Culture, Safe & Caring Schools, Respectful Workplace, Leadership at Work and health or social committees. Your Strategy fits well under the umbrella of a committee currently addressing Teacher Wellness. Although your EAP Wellness Coordinators are an ideal first contact for planning for an effective strategy; additional links include NLTA School Representatives and Branch Presidents, Regional Wellness Coalitions, and local Community Health personnel (nutritionists and health promotion consultants).

Define the Committee Structure and Mandate

A dedicated Chair and several committee members with a vision for health and a clearly defined mandate start the strategy off with the desired results in mind!

Collect & Analyze Data

There are many sources and types of data that should be collected prior to beginning the specific details of planning your Wellness Strategy.

- Gather information on health from many sources, so that the committee understands the components which influence health. *(cont'd on page 14)*

- Present (or have a health professional present) those concepts to teachers so they see that “health” is much more than a physical and mental issue and they make the connection between facets of their physical and psychological environments and their ability to be well.
- Seek input from the staff. With an ultimate goal of enhancing staff well-being, if you want staff buy-in, they need to believe that being involved is worth the effort they contribute.
- When you have collected the information, review it to look for: health themes; priority issues; potential short-term and essential long-term objectives.

Now you are ready to start the detailed process of planning, writing, communicating, implementing and evaluating your Teacher Wellness Strategy.

Plan Your Wellness Strategy

The following planning tips add to the likelihood that staff will: become and stay involved; experience personal success; increase their sense of well-being; and, support continued strategy development and revisions to meet ongoing or newly identified health needs. Use your “teacher role”. Just as you would plan and prepare to introduce a complex concept to your class, also prepare so that your Strategy contains the essentials and is built on principles that respect the participants.

- Use all interested and available expertise in program planning, health information and marketing. You want a strategy that is set up for success! Take the time to do it right.
- Base the strategy components on the information collected from staff.
- Include both proactive, preventive and reactive, interventive components. To be most effective and to most efficiently use resources, a strategy must address the issues at hand, while also including initiatives which anticipate negative potential. Without advanced planning, the energy and resources of the strategy will be used to continuously “put out fires”. By introducing policies and having supports (awareness, education, skills), in place, real progress can be made in creating a healthy workplace and staff.
- Be sure that all components form a unified ‘big picture’ that fits your school and staff, meets the identified needs and has room to grow.
- Plan short-term initiatives which provide positive feedback. This keeps staff involved by enabling them to experience initial success.
- Build in the long-term components with appropriate objectives that lead the strategy to achieve its mandate.
- Put a protocol and structure in place to encourage

staff feedback and allow for ongoing revisions. As the strategy is implemented, unanticipated changes may occur at a rate which make the original plan less appropriate.

- Promote and celebrate your collective Strategy! Each component, every success, every necessary modification and each designated milestone should be noted and communicated to all staff. If things happen without general awareness, staff quickly feel that this strategy belongs to someone else and disengagement likely results.
- Don’t cross the finish line! The strategy should be a permanent entity with regular revisions and a renewed mandate and goals. Reviews can be done annually, or as necessary. Sometimes the review process will be a rubber-stamping of the current plan; other times, it will be a complete revision of the goals, objectives and methods, in order to move with the current progress and to meet the changing needs of the staff.

Implement your Teacher Wellness Strategy

- Market the plan! Show how it incorporates the information provided by staff and will benefit all staff through the realization of various objectives. Indicate how reasonable participation can be attained and positive results achieved.
- Have a Wellness Strategy corner on the staff bulletin board. Keep it up-to-date with plans, activities and invitations for input. Remove outdated notices and regularly add new material to encourage staff to frequently check the board for personally relevant news.
- Openly review the progress, invite feedback and modify plans. Although it has specific goals and clear objectives, the Strategy should be a flexible document with evolving initiatives that are staff directed.

Through the EAP Wellness Program, schools throughout the province have been assisted in developing their unique wellness strategies or initiatives. You can take advantage of the planning and resources available to you by contacting an EAP Coordinator. Your Wellness Strategy can start you on a path to strong planning and effective implementation of a program designed to enhance the quality of teachers’ lives.

.....
Claudette Coombs is a coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Judy Beranger (ext. 265).