How to create healthier school employees

California Coast Credit Union congratulates Ivan Hernandez from Chula Vista who won $1,000 in the Grand Prize round of the Cal Coast Superhero Video Contest. Ivan’s video also received the most votes in April and won $500 for himself and Otay Ranch High School, bringing the total awarded to Ivan and his school to $1,500. “I am honored to receive an award that benefits me as well as other students at my school, and it’s important that I help give back because the school deserves it.”

What’s that expression, the journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step? Superintendent Francisco Escobedo, Ed.D., began “walking meetings” with members of his cabinet and other district staff when he became superintendent in 2010. They walk the corners of the ESSC or the neighborhood, sometimes en-countering other staff on walks, from clerks to coordinators.

“It sends the message that it is not just OK, it is important,” Dr. Escobedo said. “I congratulate them for taking the time to take care of themselves. I want to make sure they know that they matter. They matter not just because they are my employees, they matter because they are people who have a life outside of work. It is so important that they take time out of their busy schedules to care for themselves so they have a work-life balance.”

Dr. Escobedo had met with American Heart Association representatives. “With rising employee health care costs and employee wellness also a concern, I was asking them questions about other ways we could promote fitness and wellness? They said walking meetings,” Dr. Escobedo recalled. “I thought that was a great idea. I’d also read about Apple founder Steve Jobs and his walking meetings. So with my executive directors, when I had one-on-one meetings with them, I’d say ‘Hey, let’s take a walk.’ At first it was shocking. They weren’t prepared. Now, they know. Some of them even have an extra set of shoes.”

When employees model behavior that promotes walking and exercise, it resonates with students and parents in CVESD’s Safe Routes to School program.

“When staff members are involved in walking and other wellness activities, parents and students notice that too,” said CVESD Program Manager Melissa Minas. “Communities feel empowered to improve the environment for walking and biking in their communities, and develop lines of communication with our local agencies to implement efforts to support safer surroundings and adopt healthier lifestyles.”

Three pilot schools — Vista Square, Castle Park and Loma Verde — launched exercise classes last year for staff members. This year there are about 40 participants in the district’s Early Childhood Department Live Well San Diego! program, attending fitness classes that are offered Monday, Wednesday and Thursday.

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