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Texas School Business

Health and wellness center serves staff, families on insurance plan

by Shelley Seale



Superintendent
Karen Rue

It's a common problem in school districts around the country: shrinking resources combined with increasing needs. While districts look for new ways to provide the best education possible for their students, it's also vital to provide quality staff benefits to enhance recruitment and retention — and, ultimately, student success.

At the Northwest ISD Administrative Services Department, the employee benefit that came under scrutiny was health care. The district is different from many in that it self-funds an insurance program. Northwest ISD administration is always seeking ways to control health insurance costs and provide better services to staff members.

Gary Gindt, assistant superintendent for administrative services, says that as his staff assessed the district's existing health plan for areas of improvement, they learned of businesses that were opening their own employee wellness clinics and providing services to their employees at a low cost, or even for free.

"We thought that would be a neat thing to do," Gindt says. "We wanted to investigate it to see if

this was something that was financially feasible for us to do. How can we offer free medical care, free prescriptions, and free lab work to our employees and save money? How can we do it for free when the industry is charging a fortune? Is this even possible?"

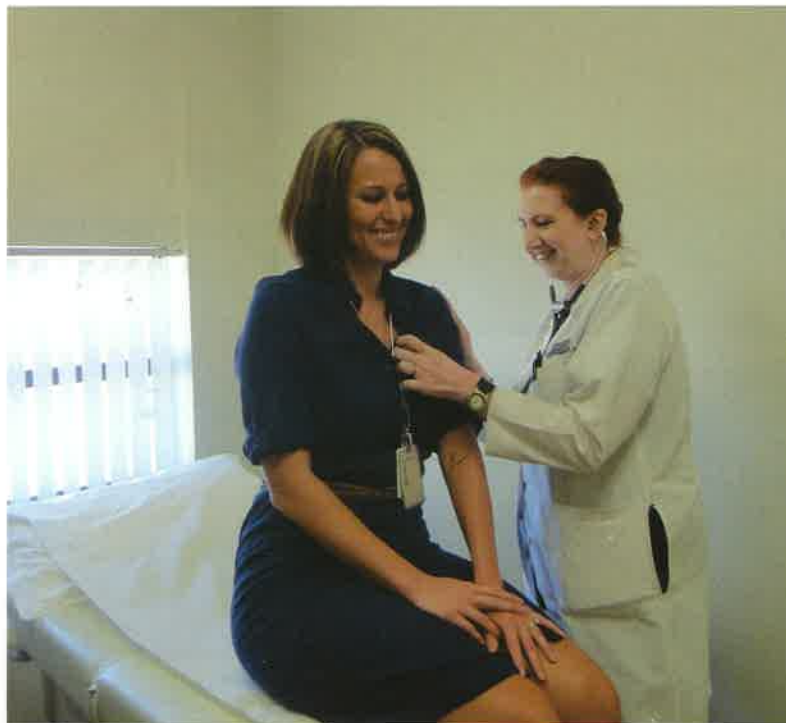
Kitty Poehler, executive director of personnel services, set up meetings to visit and analyze other organizations that were doing this. The team looked at several other entities, including the city of Carrollton, the city of Pasadena and Mesquite ISD.

"In order to sustain the self-funded medical plan, we needed to look for ways to reduce costs, retain employees and treat the whole employee," Poehler says. "We did not want the center to be just an urgent care; we wanted a place that would be an extension of NISD's climate and culture."

During the research process, a vision was created for an employee wellness center designed to serve district employees and their dependents who participated in the district health insurance program. The center would be staffed by a medical doctor, registered nurses, and physician assistants and

provide medical services and specific generic prescriptions to participants at no cost. Employees would be able to access these services throughout the day. Appointments would be scheduled and patients would be seen on schedule to provide employees the opportunity to receive medical services and prescriptions quickly, allowing them to return to their jobs or classrooms without inconveniencing instructional time with students. The district then conducted a survey to determine employee interest in such a clinic.

Gindt says that the investigation revealed to the team that employee wellness clinics do work and that it was a feasible plan.



Northwest ISD employee Briana Nail gets an exam from Dr. Natalie Hull at the NISD Health & Wellness Center.



The district renovated a decommissioned building with approximately \$20,000 in seed money. The center is funded through employee payments into the district's self-funded health insurance program. The wellness center is accessible to staff and their family members who participate in the insurance program. The district was able to break even after the center was in operation for 13 months.

"We discovered that there are ways to save money through your insurance costs, to help your employees' premiums and provide excellent service to them," he says. "At that point, it was a matter of being able to convince everybody within our organization that it was a wise move."

That convincing process entailed getting past some "this is too good to be true" resistance, Gindt admits.

"Everybody was excited about it, but they wanted to make sure it wasn't something where we would spend a lot of money, then have to make it up later by increasing the premiums," he says. "If we lost this endeavor, it would cost us about a million dollars a year to operate our own employee clinic. Worst-case scenario, if no one shows up to use the clinic, we've just burned up a million dollars of our employees' health insurance money, which would negatively impact the future."

The wellness center would be funded from employee payments into the self-funded health insurance program, with no funding coming out of the district budget. After several meetings, members of the insurance committee began to feel confident in the funding mechanism and were prepared to make a recommendation to the board of trustees. The school board had many questions, but fortunately one trustee with experience in the health care industry verified the soundness of the concept. The board approved the NISD Employee Health & Wellness Center, approved the use of a portion of a decommissioned building and provided approximately \$20,000 in seed money to help renovate the facility.

The wellness center services are open to employees and their dependents who are on the health insurance program. Once established, it took Northwest ISD 13 months to break even — which

was far sooner than the projection of a two-year break-even point. Gindt says the district was able to do this because the employees adapted to the new program and quickly began taking advantage of the services it offered.

"Communication was a major piece of this," says Gindt, adding that the district took care in communicating the education piece of how the center would work, how it could help employees on a personal level and how it could help them as consumers of the district's health insurance program."

According to the district's research on health care costs, the most expensive place for employees to go to receive health care services is the hospital emergency room.

"We had a lot of employees who had been going to the emergency room for their medical care, and that cost barrier is higher than anywhere else," Gindt says. "Helping the employees to see that they are the owners of our health insurance — that they can help the system and help themselves at the same time — created a situation where everybody wins."

The multitude of quick-care clinics opening up and succeeding across Dallas-Fort Worth gave the district's research committee hope that a wellness center was something the employees would utilize. Employees can continue to see their personal physicians and use the district wellness center for only certain health care needs. Also, the center makes a practice of collaborating and communicating with area providers.

"Participants have the choice to have the best of both worlds; they can continue the relationship with a current provider along with utilizing the cen-

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ter as they deem appropriate," Poehler says. "The center allows employees the ability to access medication and care at zero cost, [with] no insurance paperwork required."

Encouraging more preventative care and promoting a healthy lifestyle are also important goals of the wellness center.

"Many people, including myself, are changing the way we use medical care," Gindt says. "One of the things that hammers us is the cost of medical conditions because people don't go to the doctor early enough to get treatment. If you're taking care of yourself, you're going to be healthier, which is going to save us money in the long run."

Since the wellness center was established, there have been significant improvements in employee preventative health care and early treatment of medical issues. Employees are taking a more proactive approach to their health care with positive results. Persons covered under the district's health plan are encouraged to get a free annual health assessment, which includes a general exam and blood tests to monitor cholesterol and other benchmarks. Everyone who completes the assessment receives a \$25/month reduction in their insurance premiums. Gindt says that before the premium reduction incentive was offered, about 30 percent of insureds were scheduling annual health assessments. This year — the first year of offering the incentive — that percentage has risen to around 78 percent. While the details on each assessment go directly to the individual, the district does receive general information, such as the number of employees suffering from high cholesterol or health-threatening levels of obesity, for example. This enables the district to customize its educational and preventative programs to address specific issues for a healthier workforce.

District employee Mike Conklin and his family have visited the center for their health care needs.

"Each visit has been a positive experience. It has been very easy to schedule an appointment, and we have always been able to get right in to see Dr. Hull with little to no wait," Conklin says. "It has been a great concept, and I hope it is a resource we will continue to have in the future."

Each appointment and/or prescription reduces the cost to the district insurance plan and ultimately to the employees. The NISD Health & Wellness Center also has had a positive influence in the areas of employee recruitment, retention and student performance.

"The wellness center provides invaluable services to our employees," says Superintendent Karen Rue. "Staff members have the opportunity to address medical needs quickly and with confidence in our

'We did not want the center to be just an urgent care; we wanted a place that would be an extension of NISD's climate and culture.'

Kitty Poehler, executive director of personnel services

clinic's medical staff. The peace of mind in knowing that you can take care of your health needs without having to clear your schedule for a day is amazing. In Northwest ISD, we care about our teachers and their health."

Poehler says that the benefits of the center fulfill the district's No. 1 priority: Kids come first.

"As a parent, I have the ability to take my child to the center without being charged leave time," she says. "But, more importantly, I get to be a mom and a professional. I don't have to make a choice between my job and family."

SHELLEY SEALE is a freelancer journalist and author of "The Weight of Silence" and "How to Travel for Free (or Pretty Damn Near It)."



An employee checks in at the NISD Health and Wellness Center.