

# Take a chance on **WELLNESS**

Educators across Texas focus on leading healthy lifestyles

Story by Kate Johanns · Photos by Erica Friloux



A+ Teacher Fitness trainers  
Andrea Lindzey and Cene Hale  
lead an after-school workout  
session for faculty members  
at Austin ISD's Mills Elementary.

### 3:15 p.m., Mills Elementary

gymnasium, Austin ISD. A dozen teachers and other faculty members gather here each Monday, Wednesday and Friday to sweat.

“Let’s warm up! Jog around the gym!” yells their trainer.

The teachers jog.

“Jumping jacks! One minute!” the trainer shouts. “Hurry up! Let’s go!”

The teachers jump. A CD player blares the Beatles’ cover of “Johnny B. Goode.”

“Squats!”

The teachers squat.

“Are we burning yet?”

Burning, yes. These Austin ISD teachers are burning calories and burning off stress. The commitment they’ve made to one another—gathering three times a week for a physical regimen many would consider torturous—reflects a growing commitment to employee wellness in schools and other workplaces across America. In the midst of a national debate on how best to deal with rising health care costs, individuals and organizations are looking within themselves to find solutions for leading healthy lifestyles.

They’re turning to customized programs, like the one at Austin ISD’s Mills Elementary, which was developed and facilitated by A+ Teacher Fitness, an Austin-area company that provides “training tailored to teachers.” They’re working with their health insurance companies to provide gym memberships and wellness incentives, like those available to Northside (20) ISD employees through their Humana health insurance benefits. And they’re finding solutions in one another by organizing their own fitness initiatives, like the “Biggest Loser” challenge conducted by 19 staff members at McKinney ISD’s Johnson Middle School.

### DOLLARS AND SENSE

School employees represent a sizable chunk of the workforce—more than 4 percent of all working citizens in the

United States, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. The well-being of Texas’ own more than 630,000 public school employees is addressed in statute. Chapter 28 of the Texas Education Code requires each independent school district to have a school health advisory council (SHAC) primarily composed of parents. Although the SHAC’s role is strictly advisory in nature, such councils provide input to the local school board on the eight components of a coordinated school health program: health instruction, a healthy school environment, health services, physical education, school counseling, food service, involvement with parents and the community, and health promotion for faculty and staff.

In recognition of the importance of the employee component, a national association of state health department directors has produced a free online guide that offers tips and tools for developing school employee wellness programs. Made available at [www.schoolempwell.org](http://www.schoolempwell.org) by the Directors of Health Promotion and Education (DHPE), *School Employee Wellness: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation’s Schools* cites the following benefits of employee wellness programs:

- Reduced health costs—For every \$1 a work site spends on wellness programs, an average of \$3.50 is saved in health care costs, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistic referenced in the guide. One Nevada school district estimated it saved \$15.60 for every dollar spent on the wellness programs it began offering in 2001.

### *What makes a good wellness program great?*

The Directors of Health Promotion and Education, a national association of state health department directors, has identified eight components of comprehensive and successful school employee wellness programs:

1. Education and activities that are focused on awareness and lifestyle changes.
2. Safe, supportive social and physical environments.
3. Integration of the program into the school or district structure.
4. Links to related programs, such as employee assistance programs, emergency care and work-life balance programs.
5. Work site health screenings.
6. Individual follow-ups to support behavior change.
7. Education and resources to help employees make health care decisions.
8. Evaluation of the program to make it more effective.

Source: *School Employee Wellness: A Guide for Protecting the Assets of Our Nation’s Schools*, available at [www.schoolempwell.org](http://www.schoolempwell.org).

- Lower absenteeism—Also according to the CDC, employees who participate in wellness programs have lower absenteeism. To demonstrate the cost benefit of a school employee wellness program, *School Employee Wellness* offers this formula for the total cost of absenteeism: the number of sick days taken times the cost of a substitute teacher plus total administrative costs for obtaining subs.
- Improved workplace safety—Wellness programs help staff members identify unsafe and unhealthy workplace conditions that reduce productivity.

The DHPE emphasizes another benefit of school employee wellness programs: educators who are positive wellness role models. Judging from the numerous little faces peeking through a doorway into the Mills Elementary gymnasium, students are incredibly curious about their teachers’ lifestyles.

## A-PLUS FOR EFFORT

The thrice-weekly sweat sessions at Austin ISD’s Mills Elementary as well as two Hays CISD campuses are the result of a partnership formed by Drex Earle, Ph.D., the associate publisher and editor-in-chief of *Austin Fit* magazine, and Cody Butler, the founder of HEAT, an Austin fitness boot camp and personal training service. In early 2009, Earle and Butler founded A+ Teacher Fitness after identifying a need in the educator population for health and fitness resources. Educators are close to their hearts; Butler’s mom has taught physical education in southeast Texas for nearly 35 years.

“We wanted to take fitness to educators,” Earle says. “We wanted something that really speaks to educators and meets their needs.”

The business partners conducted focus groups to find out what Austin-area teachers and principals did to stay in shape and what fitness programs were available to them.

“We found that, as we suspected, there was a lot for students after school, but for teachers, there just wasn’t much out there,” Earle says. “I didn’t realize how difficult a teacher’s day is until I did those focus groups. They’re getting up at six in the morning, they’re dealing with kids all day, and they barely have time to eat.

You know they’re exhausted at the end of the day. This is a business for us, but there’s also a big element of giving back to teachers because they do so much.”

The focus group results showed that most fitness initiatives occurring on campus were informal; a group of teachers might gather after school to do a workout video. Educators reported a lack of motivation to hit the gym after the last bell. With this in mind, Butler and Earle began developing a formula for a pilot program to test their concept. They needed to be able to take the fitness class on campus rather than ask the educators to travel off-site. They needed to keep program costs low, as the focus group participants had reported letting gym memberships go when strapped for cash. And they needed to keep the program exclusive to faculty members on a particular campus—a key difference between A+ Teacher Fitness and other fitness boot camp companies that use school facilities but allow anyone to participate.

“My master’s is in counseling, so when I put together a lot of these programs,

I really focus on the group dynamics,” Butler says. “Your accountability, your reliability and the group camaraderie are so much stronger when you’re already working with a population. The teachers are working on the same time schedule and issues throughout the day. We’re putting the issue of ‘How do I live a healthier lifestyle?’ in front of them, and they’re [addressing] it with their friends and co-workers. It’s a much easier journey than doing it with strangers.”

After a successful pilot in spring 2009, A+ Teacher Fitness has expanded to five sessions on three campuses this fall, and the co-founders plan to expand their company as their demand and resources permit.

A+ Teacher Fitness participants pay \$200 for a six-week session, which includes three workouts a week led by personal trainers (typically junior-, senior- and master’s-level physiology students from Austin-area universities). Classes have no more than 12 participants per trainer and include circuit training and games that provide a challenging cardiovascular workout.

In addition, A+ Teacher Fitness trainers discuss nutrition with participants and help them track their progress through fitness assessments and strength tests.



The workouts led by A+ Teacher Fitness trainers are primarily focused on circuit training. Participants develop strength and flexibility through exercises that incorporate resistance bands, free weights and their own body weights. Learn more at [www.aplusteacherfitness.com](http://www.aplusteacherfitness.com).



In addition to circuit training, the A+ Teacher Fitness program includes a cardiovascular component. “We’ve invented our own crazy little soccer games and basketball games,” co-founder Cody Butler says.

“We get a lot of calls on a weekly basis just asking general questions, like ‘What can I do outside of camp?’ or ‘How should I prepare my diet a little bit better?’” Butler says. “We’re really trying to give them personalized attention, which is what this population needs. They’re giving so much of their time to the community. In order for this program to be successful, we’ve got to develop something where [educators] feel like they’re taken care of and their needs are met.”

## EVERY STEP COUNTS

To meet the needs of its employees, Northside (20) ISD in San Antonio turned to its health insurance provider. One of the largest school districts in Texas, with more than 90,000 students and nearly 13,000 employees, Northside provides its own health insurance rather than participating in TRS-ActiveCare. The district’s current provider is Humana.

In 2006, the district surveyed its employees to gauge interest in a health insurance benefit that incorporated a gym membership.

“We had seen articles about two or three other organizations—not school districts but some corporations—that had incorporated a gym or health club membership as motivation for their employees to become more cognizant of their health,” says Jim Miller, assistant

superintendent of human resources.

“Our response in the survey was very positive. About 64 percent of employees surveyed said they would be more likely to participate in a health club membership if it was a part of their health plan.”

So Northside, through Humana, began offering Spectrum Athletic Club memberships to its employees. Actual participation is close to the interest level indicated by the survey. During the quarter that ended in June 2009, 55 percent of employees took advantage of the gym memberships, and the district’s goal is to increase that number to 57 percent.

As part of their Spectrum Athletic Club memberships, Northside employees receive pedometers and track their activity through the Virgin HealthMiles program. Steps add up to HealthMiles, which turn into cash incentives or gift cards. During 2008, Northside employees earned more than \$250,000 in Virgin HealthMile incentives.

“A lot of people wait until the end of the year to cash it in so they can get a gift card for the holidays,” Miller says.

In addition to the Spectrum memberships and the Virgin HealthMiles program, Northside offers its employees several other health and wellness opportunities. The district employs a benefits communications specialist, and one of her duties is to maintain a wellness

blog and a wellness Web site housed on the district’s Intranet. The Web site contains resources such as healthy recipes (often recipes demonstrated by Texas grocer H-E-B during cooking classes held at Northside facilities) or information related to monthly wellness activities (such as those coordinated by the American Diabetes Association and other health organizations). A committee made up of representatives from each campus and district work site meets bimonthly to hear presentations on wellness benefits, and committee members share what they’ve learned with colleagues. The district tries to impart health information through every means it can, according to Mark Hardison, the coordinator of employee benefits.

Hardison identifies several positive outcomes from Northside’s wellness initiatives.

“We have, we believe, healthier employees,” he says. “I wish I could tell you that the blood pressure of X number of people has decreased or that we’ve lost X number of pounds, but unfortunately we haven’t been able to pinpoint that. But what we are seeing from some of the self-assessments that people are doing through Spectrum and Virgin HealthMiles is that people are participating and people are benefiting by being in better shape and in better health. Of course, if you’ve got



The exercises included in the A+ Teacher Fitness regimen are scalable based on a participant's fitness level. "We've found that the majority of this population is not familiar with how to work out and the proper form," co-founder Drex Earle says. "That said, we do have some [participants] who are marathon runners."

people who are in better shape and in better health, then they're at work more frequently."

They're also happier with their work environment, Hardison says.

"Our employees see the wellness program and all of its components—whether it's the gym membership, Virgin HealthMiles, the classes or the information—as a benefit for them," he says.

Last but not least, Northside students benefit when their teachers pay attention to their health.

"I can't tell you how many times we have people from the campus level come to us and say their kids are asking about their pedometers," Hardison says. "Schools can also set up their own challenges. Maybe the reading department challenges the math department. So the teachers are talking about that, and the kids hear about it. They want to know what's going on, and they get excited about it also."

## BIGGEST WINNERS

At the end of the day, no matter how many wellness resources are available, an individual has to decide to make the most of them—and that's hard work. Ask ATPE member Darla Sessom, who won a spring 2009 "Biggest Loser" challenge at McKinney ISD's Johnson Middle School.

"I started out walking, then walk/jogging, then jogging, and then I got up to running between three to five miles a day," Sessom says. "Nutritionally, I stopped eating out. I made myself go to the grocery store and purchase foods that I knew would be easy to prepare but healthful for me to eat."

As a result, Sessom lost 23.4 percent of her body weight between Feb. 1 and June 5. Together, the 19 participants in the Johnson challenge lost 293 pounds.

English department chair Delicia Pennington, inspired by the hit NBC-TV show *The Biggest Loser*, organized the program. Nineteen staff members contributed \$50 each to a pool, and the participant who lost the largest percentage of his body weight won the \$950 pot. The school nurse conducted confidential weekly weigh-ins, but participants posted their weight loss each week in a document stored on the school's shared drive.

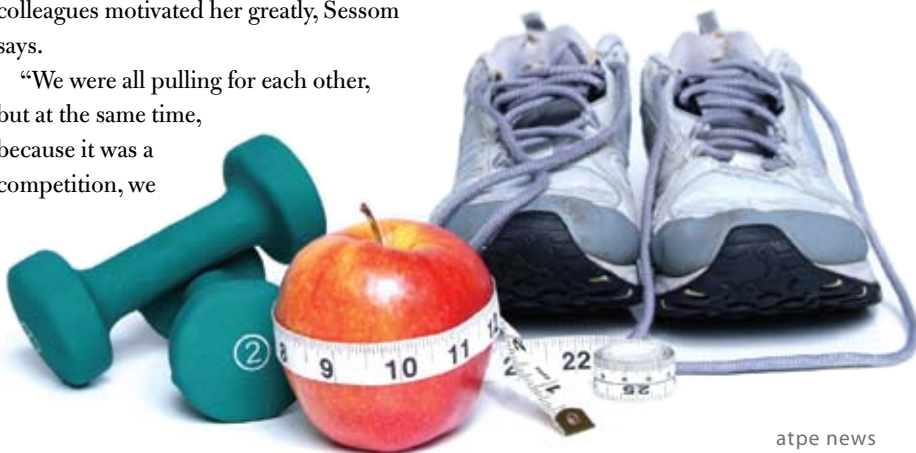
Taking part in a challenge with colleagues motivated her greatly, Sessom says.

"We were all pulling for each other, but at the same time, because it was a competition, we

all wanted to win, too," she says. "Delicia would send out notes of encouragement to all of us and tips for eating healthy and getting exercise. When it got to the very end, I really didn't care if I won the money because I really felt like we were all winners for losing weight and reaching a higher level of fitness."

## 4 P.M., MILLS ELEMENTARY

As the Mills Elementary educators wrap their resistance bands around their legs and begin a leg exercise called the penguin, trainer Andrea Lindzey calls out, "Come on! You can do this!" The workout mix switches from the Beatles to ABBA. "Take a chance on me" sings the Swedish pop group, and that's really what these Austin ISD educators and their counterparts in Northside (20) ISD, McKinney ISD and all across Texas are doing—taking a chance on themselves. 🍀



## A 12-month wellness calendar

One way to introduce wellness information into the workplace environment is to tie it to calendar-based initiatives coordinated by national health organizations. Your workplace efforts will be complemented by media coverage of the health issues. The following is a sampling of wellness observances; find a complete list at [www.nationalwellness.org](http://www.nationalwellness.org).

January

Cervical Health  
Awareness Month  
[www.nccc-online.org](http://www.nccc-online.org)

February

Heart Month  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

March

National Colorectal  
Awareness Month  
[www.preventcancer.org/colorectal](http://www.preventcancer.org/colorectal)

April

National Alcohol  
Awareness Month  
<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/seasonal/aprilalcohol>

May

Skin Cancer  
Awareness Month  
[www.skincancer.org](http://www.skincancer.org)

June

National Safety Month  
[www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org)

July

Eye Injury  
Prevention Month  
[www.foh.dhhs.gov/Public/NYCU/eyeinjury.asp](http://www.foh.dhhs.gov/Public/NYCU/eyeinjury.asp)

August

National Immunization  
Awareness Month  
[www.cdc.gov/vaccines](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines)

September

Prostate Health Month  
[www.menshealthnetwork.org](http://www.menshealthnetwork.org)

October

National Breast Cancer  
Awareness Month  
[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

November

American Diabetes  
Month  
[www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)

December

International AIDS  
Awareness Month  
[www.aidsalliance.org](http://www.aidsalliance.org)

## Staying healthy at school

The H1N1 flu virus has turned everyone's attention to cleanliness and healthful practices at home and in the workplace. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that educators follow these practices at all times, not just during a flu pandemic:

- Teach students to cover their mouths and noses with a tissue when they cough and sneeze. Make sure tissues are easily accessible. Teach students to cover coughs and sneezes with their elbows, not their hands, if tissues aren't available.
- Provide students the time and supplies they need to wash their hands as often as necessary.
- Be a good role model by practicing good hand hygiene and covering your own coughs and sneezes.
- Clean surfaces and items that have frequent hand contact, such as desks, doorknobs, keyboards, and pens and pencils.
- Send sick students to the school nurse for further evaluation.
- Stay home when you're sick! The CDC recommends that you stay home until at least 24 hours after you have a fever or signs of a fever without the use of fever-reducing medicine.
- If you are at high risk for complications from the flu (for instance, if you are pregnant or have diabetes or asthma), speak with your doctor as soon as possible when you feel ill.
- Have a plan for child care should your own children get sick.

Source: [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/toolkit/teacherfactsheet.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/toolkit/teacherfactsheet.htm)

Find wellness  
program resources at  
[www.schoolmpwell.org](http://www.schoolmpwell.org)