



7

# SECRETS

to Successful  
Walking Challenges  
in School Districts



Wellness challenges are familiar in many school districts. Walking challenges, step competitions, and seasonal programs are common ways to support faculty and staff well-being, and most HR, wellness, and benefits teams have implemented some version over the years.

Yet one truth keeps emerging across school systems: launching a walking challenge is easy; designing one that truly engages staff is not.

Across hundreds of district challenges, clear patterns appear in participation, completion rates, and feedback from teachers, administrators, and support staff.

What follows are **7 insights drawn from real implementation experience**. They are intended to help district wellness leaders rethink how walking challenges are framed and delivered — with the goal of engaging more faculty and staff, not just the already motivated.

# 1 “Winning” Motivates a Few — and Discourages the Many

Friendly competition can add energy to a walking challenge. But when the entire experience centers on winning, most participants quietly disengage.

School staff know their schedules and energy levels vary widely. When success is defined primarily by rankings or top performers, many participants assume early on that they cannot keep up.

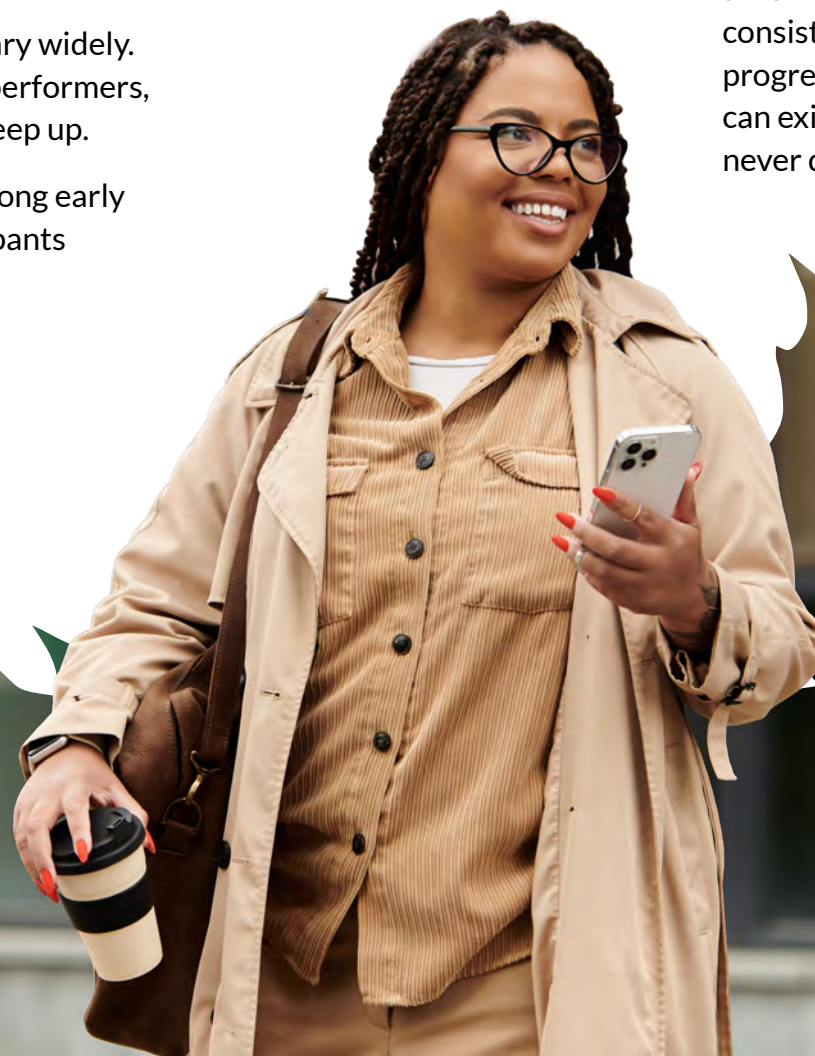
Challenges that emphasize leaderboards often see strong early sign-ups, followed by declining engagement as participants realize they are unlikely to finish near the top.

## **Why it matters:**

When success is defined in a way that only a few people can achieve, participation naturally drops.

## **How to apply:**

Frame walking challenges around participation, consistency, and shared progress. Leaderboards can exist, but they should never define success.



# 2 Shared Goals Work Best When They're Ambitious — and Achievable



Big goals can bring a school community together. Unrealistic ones quietly push people away.

District challenges that set clear collective goals — and show progress toward them — tend to sustain participation longer than programs that feel either trivial or impossible.

When staff feel their steps are contributing to something meaningful, participation becomes more than a personal activity. It becomes a shared effort.

## **Why it matters:**

Faculty and staff want to know their effort counts.

## **How to apply:**

Set a collective goal that stretches the group without overwhelming it. Make progress visible so staff can see the district moving forward together.

# 3

## Communication Is a Participation Strategy, **Not** a Support Function

A walking challenge doesn't succeed simply because it exists. It succeeds when people keep hearing about it.

Districts that communicate regularly — before launch and throughout the challenge — maintain stronger participation. Programs that go quiet quickly fade into the background of busy school schedules.

Teachers and staff rarely disengage because they lack interest. More often, they disengage because their attention shifts to the many demands of the school day.

### **Why it matters:**

Visibility reinforces importance.

### **How to apply:**

Plan communications as intentionally as you plan the challenge itself. Short reminders, updates, and encouragement help keep the challenge present in the daily rhythm of school life.

# 4 Connection Drives Participation More Reliably Than Competition



One of the most consistent patterns in school staff challenges is simple: connection works.

Programs that encourage optional social interaction – teams, building groups, or friendly encouragement between colleagues – see steadier engagement and more positive feedback.

Participants often describe the experience less as a competition and more as something they are doing together with coworkers.

## **Why it matters:**

People are more likely to stay engaged when they feel part of a shared effort.

## **How to apply:**

Create opportunities for connection without making them mandatory. Optional teams, shared milestones, and peer encouragement help build participation naturally.

# 5

## Seeing Your Contribution Matters More Than Beating Others

Participants consistently respond to being able to see how their activity contributes to a larger goal.

District-wide progress indicators help faculty and staff feel connected to something bigger than their individual step count. Even participants who are not competitive often stay engaged when they see the district moving forward together.

### **Why it matters:**

Contribution creates meaning.  
Meaning sustains participation.

### **How to apply:**

Show how individual activity contributes to district-wide progress. Shared progress indicators and milestone updates reinforce that every step counts.



# 6 Timing Matters in School Communities

Walking challenges that connect to a moment in the school year tend to feel more engaging.

Programs that align with the start of the school year, a fall tradition, or another shared moment often feel more natural than programs that appear without context.

In school systems especially, timing can help a challenge feel like part of the culture rather than an extra initiative.

## **Why it matters:**

A shared moment helps people place their effort in something larger.

## **How to apply:**

Align walking challenges with natural points in the school calendar. Let the timing itself help generate interest.



# 7 Stories Extend Engagement Beyond the Numbers

Participants rarely talk about step counts when describing what kept them involved. They talk about people.

Seeing colleagues participate, hearing about small wins, and recognizing shared experiences helps build momentum throughout a challenge.

These stories reinforce the idea that participation is normal, achievable, and shared across the district.

## **Why it matters:**

Stories make participation visible and relatable.

## **How to apply:**

Share short stories and examples from participants during the challenge. Highlight everyday successes and participation across different roles in the district.



# A Final Thought for District Wellness Leaders

The most effective walking challenges in school systems are not the most competitive, complicated, or incentive-heavy.

They are the ones that help teachers, administrators, and support staff feel included, capable, and connected.

As you plan your next challenge, it may be worth asking not how to motivate people to win — but how to design an experience where more people feel they belong, contribute, and succeed in their own way.

Engagement doesn't happen by accident. It's designed.

# A Proven Walking Challenge for School Districts



## WALKT<sup>o</sup>BER™

Walktober helps school districts turn the ideas in this article into action. Designed around participation, shared goals, and connection, it's a simple fall tradition that brings faculty and staff together around movement and well-being. Proven in school systems nationwide.

Learn how *Walktober* works:

<https://HESonline.com/wellness-challenges/walktober/school-regions-and-districts>

Walktober is another *Creating Connection. Thriving Together.*™ solution from HES. View our entire suite of challenges at [HESonline.com/wellness-challenges](https://HESonline.com/wellness-challenges) or call 800.326.2317.