Occupational Injuries in Schools

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Introduction

The educational services industry is a large sector of the U.S. industry with approximately 12.6 million workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 2013), with about 5.5 million employed in primary and secondary schools (BLS, 2013). Educational workers spend a significant amount of time in school buildings and in direct contact with students. Nationally, those employed in elementary and secondary schools within local government incurred 251,100 recordable workplace injuries and amassed a 5.2 per 100 full-time equivalent (FTE) incident rate (BLS 2013). In Minnesota, data show an incidence rate of 3.6 per 100 FTE in educational services within local government. This rate, with the exception of a dip in 2010 to 2.8, has remained virtually unchanged for the past five years, but is lower than the national average (Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, 2013).

The economic and personal impact of workplace injuries on employees and their family can be profound. The indirect costs of these injuries also increasingly impact the employer and public as well. Uncontrolled injuries and workers’ compensation costs can be detrimental to school district staff morale and confidence and further affect existing risk of occupational stress and burnout from the job (Wegner, Berger, Poschadel, Manuwald & Baur, 2011; Yang, Wang, Ge, Hu & Chi, 2011; Verdonk, Hooftman, van Veldhoven, Boelens & Koppes, 2010; Bauer et al., 2007). Injuries have serious consequences on district budgets, distract time and energy from the district’s educational mission, and negatively impact the taxpayers and children of the communities in which they are located.

A large number of studies have addressed etiology and prevention of child and student injuries in schools, yet the study of employee occupational injury needs continued focus. Injury to teachers has been explored, but risk to non-licensed and support staff such as educational aids, transportation employees, and food service workers, need further investigation. Another employment group, custodial employees, has been suggested to be at high risk of injury and suffer disproportionate injury burden within schools (Village, Koehoorn, Hossain & Ostry, 2009; Koehoorn, Ostry, Hossain & Village, 2011).

Assaults or violence against staff (Wei, et al., 2013; Tiesman, Konda, Hendricks, Mercer & Amandus, 2013; Ervasti, et al., 2012; Nachreiner, et. al, 2012; Gerberich, et al., 2011; Levin, et al., 2006) and musculoskeletal injuries (Erick & Smith, 2011) are of particular concern, but most
studies have only examined teachers’ injury experience with these issues. A sizable number of factors may lend to an increased risk in school districts for all employees including, but not limited to; an influx of students with a greater range of mental, behavioral, and physical diagnosis and providing special education services for these students (adults) up to age twenty-one (Tiesman et al., 2013; Ervasti, et al., 2012); an aging workforce; aging school buildings and infrastructure; budget, staffing, and resource allocations (Sage, et al., 2010).

Research and Analysis

Methods
SFM is the largest provider of workers’ compensation in Minnesota and has a sizable book of school district business. SFM is committed to being the workers’ compensation experts and a safety company that assists policyholders in preventing injuries. Injury data from policyholder school districts from the 2009-2010 through the 2013-2014 school years were collected and analyzed. It was paired with data from the Minnesota Department of Education so that the underlying staff population in the districts could be used to determine rates of injury and relative risk of injury among staff groups. There were approximately 8000 claims and 164,000 full time equivalents (FTE) included in analysis.

Results

• Women accounted for seventy-five percent of the population and experienced a lower rate of injury than males.
• Injury rates increased as age increased, with a large jump in age groups over fifty.
• School districts in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, as well as those more focused on special education populations, had higher rates of injury.
• Food service, facilities, and transportation employees had the highest rates of injury among all employee groups.
• Special education teachers had the highest rate of injury among licensed employees, although still much lower than other non-licensed groups.
• Slips and falls, struck by, and stains accounted for the highest percentage of injuries.
• Approximately twenty-five prevent of injuries in school districts are student related.
• The largest percentage of student related claims are a result of students with escalated behavior injuring staff.

Loss Prevention Solutions

Play With Purpose
Participation in physical activities increases risk to the teacher, para or coach. Engaging in play or coaching beyond instruction can and does lead to serious injuries to staff. Promotion of a Play With Purpose Program reminds staff to demonstrate or teach skills vs active playing, demonstrate appropriate level of competition and sportsmanship, focus on teaching, and being responsible for their own safety. When participation is necessary, know your limits, warm-up and stretch out, and wear proper clothing and footwear.
Winter Slip and Fall Prevention
School districts have many buildings and large areas of property to upkeep and to maintain for daily student, staff, parent, visitor, and guest traffic. Slips and falls are a leading cause of injury, but winter slips and falls in Minnesota can cause particularly severe and frequent claims during cold months. Recognizing this injury-generating source, SFM established a grant system for school districts that matches funds for winter slip and fall reduction projects, equipment, or products. They also created a ‘Walk like a Penguin” winter slip and fall reduction campaign with a cute and cuddly penguin featured on the materials. This campaign is particularly embraced in schools.

Supervisor Initiated Training (SITs)
A SIT is as mall, informal educational sessions delivered to staff by supervisors, similar to a toolbox talk that might be used on a construction jobsite. They focus on a few key points, use personal examples, use actual equipment or demonstration whenever possible, and conclude with asking questions and getting feedback from staff. It takes less than three minutes and reminds staff about key safety messages and procedures. They are organized in a matrix to correspond with timely topics for each department within a school and each month of the school year. Topics include lifting for custodians, not standing on desks or chairs for teachers, avoiding cuts for food service, and transferring students for special education.

Get Up and Move
Many positions within school districts can be considered sedentary and would benefit from increased movement during the day. Movement has many positive physical effects and can help reduce the risk of injury. A program specifically encourages increasing your activity during the day and is geared to help a supervisor start up a movement and stretching program. There are paper and electronic resources and also stretching posters so employees can learn about the benefits of increased activity and do stretches on their own when they have time or before physical exertion.

Get Fit and Exercise
Joint weakness and instability can occur when employees are deconditioned or as they age. This increases the risk of injury. Some employees want to take the next step after stretching and adding more movement into their day, or there are specific employee groups that have more physically demanding jobs and could benefit from strengthening exercises. This is a specific program targeting different joints which exercises and progressively more challenging activities to build joint strength and stability. The resources are formatted in a way that individual supervisors at different locations can get the program started with staff and modify it for their needs. It is designed to use common objects, such as water bottles, to add weight as resistance.

Training in Stations
Employees learn best from hands-on education and training that directly impacts their daily activities. We focus on interactive training where employees decide the topics for staff training each year and then also lead a rotation of mini-hands-on-education stations for their fellow-employees. All participants have the chance to do the activity and receive encouragement and feedback from their peer leaders. A large quantity of focused education and training can be done in a short amount of time.
Other Solutions

- Designated personnel to report claims and act as a claim contact
- Work Injury Hotline
- Work Comp 101 with all supervisors
- Creative early return to work and transitional duty
- Principal training
- Focus on Major Loss Source, not compliance

Bibliography


Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. (2013). Survey of Occupational Injury and Illnesses


