



# The Wellness Impact:

Enhancing  
Academic Success  
through  
Healthy School  
Environments

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report addresses why schools play a more important role than ever in helping forge the nation's future. It illuminates the vital importance of improved nutrition and increased physical activity in creating an environment that enriches students' readiness to learn.

### Overview

In the 12 years since U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher sounded the alarm about the nation's epidemic of childhood obesity in his Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity, real progress has ensued. The federal school wellness mandate became law in 2006 and the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act that strengthened and modified that mandate followed in 2010.

In the past decade, there's been real progress in building awareness for and driving positive changes in school wellness. Today, schools are a focal point for addressing the urgent need for improved nutrition and physical activity — and the academic success they enable. And the economic costs of creating healthier schools pale in comparison to the price tag for inaction.

Because of continual research and study, we are learning more and more about the opportunities possible to create a culture of wellness within our schools as well as the persistent hurdles and inequities that thwart it. For instance, we're learning more about the human brain and its connection to school wellness. Specifically, we're discovering the measurable neurophysiological role that nutrition and physical activity may play in improving academic achievement for all — not just some — children.

That kind of knowledge is highlighted throughout this report, which makes these key points:

### Schools have an indisputable role in ensuring the healthy environment that learning requires.

A wide variety of research continues to demonstrate the positive correlation between health and learning *and* that they are mutually reinforcing. The benefits that can arise from proper nutrition and physical activity are a prerequisite to optimal learning and to avoiding and preventing chronic diseases. Since a broad range of critical societal conditions — from workforce preparedness to military readiness — depend on the effectiveness of our schools on the well-being front, neglecting wellness there runs the risk of incurring substantial real and hidden costs.

### Neuroscience illuminates the effects of nutrition and physical activity on learning.

The brain is malleable when responding to biological and environmental factors, which proves an important attribute for learning. Research indicates the quality of foods children eat impacts cognition — with poor nutrition linked with absenteeism, hunger symptoms and psychosocial problems. Brain-imaging studies show that the brains of aerobically fit children may exhibit superior executive-function control. Physical activity, regardless of whether it's during recess, in the classroom or in physical education class, may improve school performance and achievement.

### Breakfast, diet quality and food insecurity are key issues.

Serving school breakfast — especially through alternative options such as breakfast in the classroom and grab 'n' go — is possibly the easiest, most cost-effective and most directly helpful step schools can take to improve school and student wellness. Because of federal reimbursements, potentially high participation rates and profitability, school breakfast programs make economic sense. Breakfast can also help improve the quality of children's diets. The quality of food children eat has been shown to relate closely to overall growth and development. Positive associations between diet quality and academic performance are helping shape the view of what constitutes the "best" breakfast. Meanwhile, far too many American children remain vulnerable on the food front. In

# CONVENING LEADERS, UNCOVERING CHALLENGES, ADVANCING SOLUTIONS

The call-out quotes throughout this report represent insights shared by experts at the GENYOUth Leadership Roundtable session of the **2012 GENYOUth Nutrition + Physical Activity Summit**, held in September 2012 in Washington, D.C. This Leadership Roundtable united a diverse group of CEOs and corporate executives, leaders in public health, education and fitness and students to identify barriers to the movement for healthy students and healthy schools and to brainstorm creative, cooperative solutions to school wellness challenges. GENYOUth Foundation serves as an aggregator of partnerships and shared wisdom about the ever-more complex, urgent and multilayered discussion around school wellness, with particular focus on the impact of nutrition and physical activity on learning. For more information, visit [www.GENYOUthFoundation.org](http://www.GENYOUthFoundation.org).



some cases, their situations link paradoxically to obesity. And that's as urgent a problem for learning as are poor nutrition and physical inactivity.

## **The costs mount for ignoring school wellness.**

The rise in poor nutrition, inactivity and unhealthy weight among children and youth not only adversely affect academic achievement, but also come with devastating monetary, individual and societal costs. The price for children may include poor academic achievement, early onset of diseases and reduced career prospects. Schools face the effects of lower standardized test scores, reduced funding from high absenteeism and the expenses involved in student academic remediation and chronic disease management. Costs to society may include higher healthcare expenses, lower productivity and a workforce unprepared for global competition. Business and the military may face higher annual medical costs, fewer recruits, lost productivity and other problems linked with overweight and obesity.

## **School wellness policies stand at a critical juncture.**

Today, school wellness represents a patchwork of implementation and enforcement. Some school districts align with national recommendations for nutrition and physical activity, some barely align and some don't align at all. Wellness policies often are plagued by vague language,

absence of a school point person and few, if any, consequences or accountability for being ignored. Socioeconomic level remains connected to school wellness: Implementation and enforcement of wellness policies are unequal when low- and high-socioeconomic (SES) status groups are compared. Low-SES schools are less likely than their peers in high-SES schools to have established wellness policies. Similar gaps exist regarding other issues that matter, such as the simple availability of salads at lunch, participation opportunities in sports programs and the degree to which formal nutrition education is offered. Academics may suffer since overweight or obese children and adolescents in every grade experience poorer academic outcomes than their normal-weight peers.

Despite hurdles, many schools are overcoming challenges through active buy-in from the full school community, dedicated technical assistance and training, sheer commitment to progress and the use of more serious accountability systems.

### **It's time to act.**

School wellness — that environment in which every child can access good nutrition and regular physical activity — is achievable. Many school districts have made progress toward that goal over the past decade. Still, hurdles to school wellness exist. Too little time is devoted to wellness or it ranks low on the totem pole of school objectives. Financial resources are scarce, support from stakeholders and leadership is low, poor communications abound and tools and training are unavailable to put wellness practices into effect.

Creating a culture of wellness is realistic and doable. But it requires a support system, active communication and promotion, and a formal set of comprehensive wellness policies that are implemented. Numerous organizations and individuals that work in and with schools already are creating such a culture. The action steps they endorse and follow — summarized in the box to the right and in more detail at the conclusion of the full report — can inspire and instill the changes that lead to healthy, high-achieving students and schools. ■

## **How to Create a Culture of Wellness**

### **Establish a support system.**

- *Hold schools accountable for adopting and implementing wellness practices.*
- *Provide technical assistance to build capacity for staff and students (from grants, programs or partners).*
- *Establish school health advisory councils.*
- *Encourage student participation.*
- *Use Coordinated School Health as a framework for delivery of nutrition and physical activity information and services.*
- *Conduct yearly evaluations.*

### **Communicate and promote wellness.**

- *Provide in-school promotions about physical activity and healthy eating goals.*
- *Promote resources and programs available that support wellness policies for school staff to incorporate.*
- *Conduct regular outreach to parents and community leaders about priorities and successes.*
- *Educate stakeholders regarding the role of nutrition, physical activity and healthy weight in reaching achievement goals.*

### **Instill comprehensive policies.**

- *Enhance knowledge about, and practice of, nutrition by starting or expanding breakfast programs that use alternative approaches.*
- *Ensure that nutrition guidelines are aligned with U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans and applied throughout the school.*
- *Provide high-quality nutrition education for all grades, with integration throughout the curriculum.*
- *Deliver quality physical education for all students in all grades that apply standards and best practices. Ensure that quality health education is available to all students in all grades.*
- *Improve knowledge about, and practice of, physical activity by providing options each day before, during and after school for students to be physically active. Activities could include a “walking school bus” for students coming to school, recess before lunch, activity breaks during class and after-school extracurricular activities and sports.*
- *Offer school employee wellness programs; engage staff, families/parents and community members in promoting physical activity inside and outside of school.*

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## About GENYOUth Foundation

Founded through an unprecedented public-private partnership with the National Dairy Council (NDC) and the National Football League (NFL) and committed to child health and wellness, GENYOUth brings leaders in health, education, government and business together in a movement to reverse childhood obesity rates. The Foundation officially launched on February 4, 2011, at Super Bowl XLV with the signing of a historic six-way Memorandum of Understanding with U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Education and Health & Human Services. GENYOUth empowers students to improve nutrition and physical activity by taking small steps to accelerate a lifetime of healthy changes. When youth are given a voice, change can happen. For more information, visit [www.GENYOUthFoundation.org](http://www.GENYOUthFoundation.org).

## About National Dairy Council

Established in 1915, National Dairy Council® (NDC), the nonprofit organization funded by the national dairy checkoff program, is committed to nutrition education and research-based communications. NDC provides science-based nutrition information to, and in collaboration with, a variety of stakeholders committed to fostering a healthier nation, including health professionals, educators, school nutrition directors, academia, industry, consumers and media. For more information, visit [www.NationalDairyCouncil.org](http://www.NationalDairyCouncil.org).

## About the American College of Sports Medicine

The American College of Sports Medicine is the largest sports medicine and exercise science organization in the world. More than 45,000 international, national and regional members and certified professionals are dedicated to advancing and integrating scientific research to provide educational and practical applications of exercise science and sports medicine ([acsm.org](http://acsm.org)).

## About the American School Health Association

The American School Health Association (ASHA) is the leading membership organization for school health professionals. ASHA's mission is to build the capacity of its members to plan, develop, coordinate, implement, evaluate and advocate for effective school health strategies that contribute to optimal health and academic outcomes for all children and youth. We envision healthy students who learn and achieve in safe and healthy environments nurtured by caring adults functioning within coordinated school and community support systems ([ashaweb.org](http://ashaweb.org)).

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The full report, including references and other supporting materials, is available at [www.GENYOUthFoundation.org](http://www.GENYOUthFoundation.org).