



REPORT  
BRIEF FOR  
PARENTS



# The Wellness Impact:

## Enhancing Academic Success through Healthy School Environments



*The Wellness Impact* addresses why school wellness is more important than ever to students' and our nation's future. It illuminates the vital importance of improved nutrition and increased physical activity in ensuring a school environment that enhances students' readiness to learn. This report brief provides highlights and key action steps of interest to parents.

For a copy of the complete report, visit [www.GENYOUthFoundation.org](http://www.GENYOUthFoundation.org).

## Key Takeaways from This Report

**IT'S ALL ABOUT SCHOOLS.** Schools are key to widespread student wellness, which makes their role in a healthy future for your kids an important one. Schools can and should cultivate health-promoting behaviors and parents can help.

**THE PROOF IS IN THE BRAIN.** New research into how kids' brains are affected by nutrition and physical activity is strengthening the learning connection, which is the idea that improved nutrition and physical activity directly affect learning.

**PAYING THE PRICE.** The costs of ignoring school wellness take many forms. Costs to kids may include poor academic achievement and reduced career prospects. Costs to schools may include high absenteeism and lower test scores. Costs to society may include higher healthcare expenses and an unprepared workforce. Yet creating health-promoting school environments is an opportunity to reduce all these costs. Countless parents nationwide have assumed the role of advocate and supporter.

**LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD.** The ability of schools to influence children's readiness to learn is hampered by financial and social inequities. These disparities can begin to be addressed and to some extent corrected by creating health-promoting school environments that prioritize proper nutrition and physical activity.

**HOW'S YOUR SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICY?** School wellness policies are mandated by federal law; however, policy implementation and enforcement varies: some districts align with national recommendations, some barely align and many don't align at all. Now is a great time to find out about your school's wellness policy – first to be certain you have one, and then to find out how you can help put it into practice.

**SURMOUNTING HURDLES.** Hurdles to school wellness include lack of time, financial resources and leadership, among other challenges. In spite of these barriers, school wellness is a realistic vision – one that parents can help support on behalf of their children and the future of their community.

**CULTURES OF WELLNESS ARE ACHIEVABLE.** Schools nationwide are overcoming barriers every day to achieve healthy school environments. Right now what's important is accelerating the progress already made toward healthier schools by taking specific action. The good news is that parents' voices and actions matter!

## IT'S A REALITY.

Many kids aren't getting all of the nutrients or the amount of physical activity they need, which some research suggests may affect their ability to learn and achieve academically. Schools can help by creating health-promoting environments that make the healthy choice the easy choice for students.

How? By providing kid-appealing foods – such as low-fat and fat-free milk and dairy foods, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains – as part of a balanced, nutritious diet that is aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. And also by offering classroom-based or recess-based physical activity, before/after school physical activity options as well as regular physical education classes.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:**  
Healthy students are better students.

### SCHOOL BREAKFAST: SMALL STEP, BIG IMPACT

Does your child's school provide breakfast? School breakfast is an easy, obvious, cost-effective step to improving school and student wellness. Whether served in the cafeteria, in the classroom or grab 'n' go style, children who eat school breakfast...

- \* Are better able to learn
- \* Achieve higher test scores
- \* Are less likely to be absent from school
- \* Behave better in school

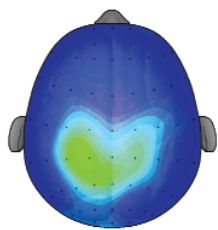
Source: Food Research and Action Center, [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).

# AMAZING IMAGES

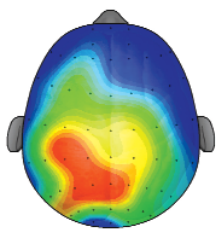
Research indicates that cognition is impacted by the quality of foods kids eat and by physical activity. Brain-imaging, a tool in the field of neuroscience, is helping us understand these connections better than ever before. The images here represent the work of Dr. Charles Hillman of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who is focusing on the relationship between physical activity and children's attention, memory and academic performance.

## Cognitive Effects of Exercise in Preadolescent Children

Average composite of 20 students' brains taking the same test after sitting quietly or taking a 20-minute walk:



After 20 minutes of Sitting Quietly



After 20 minutes of Walking

Reprinted with permission of Dr. C. H. Hillman.

With the help of neuroimaging, we're learning that:

- \* Physical fitness may benefit cognition and brain health, as well as academic performance.
- \* Early physical activity experiences may shape the brain and its functions.

Physical activity may positively impact students' academic performance, *whether it comes during PE class, recess, in the classroom or before/after school.*

We can't make kids smarter, but with improved nutrition and physical activity, we can put a better student in the chair.

— Robert Murray, MD, Department of Pediatrics, The Ohio State University

## What Parents Can Do

**LEAD BY EXAMPLE.** Be a good role model. Eat well and move more.

**DROP IN.** Join your child at school to experience school lunch or breakfast firsthand.

**ENCOURAGE.** Urge your child to try unfamiliar, healthy foods.

**INQUIRE.** Reach out to your child's principal to ask about your school's wellness policy and ask what you can do to help make sure it's communicated, implemented and monitored.

**PITCH IN.** Help your school organize walkathons and family food-and-fitness fairs, improve playground facilities or sponsor wellness-themed fundraisers.

**JOIN AND LEAD.** Be willing to take part in a school health advisory council or committee. Share your expertise and time to make your school/district a healthier place.

**START A MOVEMENT.** There's strength in numbers. Share your enthusiasm for improving your school's nutrition and physical activity practices with other parents.

## Resources That Can Help

Many organizations and government agencies provide resources that can help schools and parents create healthy change in their district or school. Here are just a few.

**Fuel Up to Play 60** (NFL and National Dairy Council) [www.FuelUpToPlay60.com](http://www.FuelUpToPlay60.com)

**Let's Move!** (launched by First Lady Michelle Obama) [www.letsmove.gov](http://www.letsmove.gov)

**Parents Advocating for School Wellness Toolkit** (Action for Healthy Kids) [www.actionforhealthykids.org/for-schools/resources/files/parentadvocacytoolkittooc.pdf](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/for-schools/resources/files/parentadvocacytoolkittooc.pdf)

**Wellness Policy Tool** (Action for Healthy Kids) [www.actionforhealthykids.org/for-schools/resources/tools/wellness-policy-tool.html](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/for-schools/resources/tools/wellness-policy-tool.html)

**Breakfast in the Classroom Toolkit** (School Nutrition Foundation) <http://docs.schoolnutrition.org/SNF/BIC/>

**Families Finding the Balance: A Parent Handbook from We Can! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition** (National Institutes of Health) [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan\\_mats/parent\\_hb\\_en.pdf](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan_mats/parent_hb_en.pdf)

**MyPlate Guidance and Tools** (U.S. Department of Agriculture) [www.ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://www.ChooseMyPlate.gov)

For a more complete listing of resources, see the full report at [www.GENYOUthFoundation.org](http://www.GENYOUthFoundation.org).

### 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).

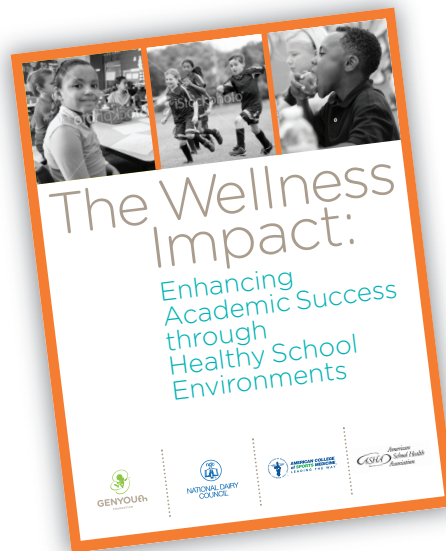
### About the American College of Sports Medicine

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 is the leading membership organization for school health professionals. It is concerned with all health factors that are necessary for students to be ready to learn, including optimum nutrition, physical fitness, emotional well-being and a safe and clean environment. The Association focuses its efforts on professional development, outreach and advocacy for educators and health providers ([ashaweb.org](http://ashaweb.org)).

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For a copy of the complete report – including references and other supporting materials – visit [www.GENYOUthFoundation.org](http://www.GENYOUthFoundation.org).



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