



## OPPORTUNITY AREA

# YOUTH VOICE: EMPOWERING POSITIVE CHANGE

A decade ago, youth as change-agents for healthy schools was a novel concept — the idea that students can and should play a lead role in demanding, creating and participating in solutions that affect their health and well-being in their school communities. But today, empowered youth are a driving force in many education and public health initiatives. When it comes to creating healthier schools, the need exists for more and better opportunities for empowering youth. Indeed, students may be their own best innovators and advocates.



*Healthier School Communities* addresses why healthy schools matter today: what's at stake, what progress has been made, what challenges we face and what key opportunities exist. As a society we've learned a great deal over the past two decades about what's needed to create and sustain healthy schools and exactly what's at stake for students and for society if we don't. The report — and this related "opportunity area" brief on youth voice — provides information and inspiration to spur continued commitment and momentum to create the healthy school environments that whole child success demands.

# What's the Issue?

## ELEVATING STUDENT VOICE

In recent years, there has been increasing attention to promoting meaningful youth engagement, participation and voice in adolescent health, and students want their voices to be heard.<sup>1</sup> Today, students believe in their own power. Social media has turned youth into influencers. They believe they can positively influence each other, their families and their schools for positive change. This has implications for schools and student wellness. Garnett et al. note that “[a]ddressing and preventing the major health issues affecting American adolescents requires collaborative and authentic youth participation” and that “[o]ur current time reflects a pendulum shift toward authentic youth voice and democratic participation in school wellness and reform.”<sup>2</sup>

While Gen Z youth (which includes today's students in middle and high school) are particularly well suited to exercise their voice and influence (see box at right), Torres-Harding et al. point out that “even young children could successfully and meaningfully participate in... school-based activism projects” and that participation in projects by younger children facilitates a sense of community and empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

## CREATING HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE CHANGES IN SCHOOLS

Researchers are assessing the impact of youth-led change efforts and finding, as Bozsik et al. note, that “youth advocacy can improve health-related behaviors and environments by empowering youth to act as change agents in their community.”<sup>4</sup> While youth are often thought of as beneficiaries of policies, programs and decision-making, “youth are also stakeholders and active participants in their own lives and the lives of their communities and society.”<sup>5</sup>

There is a powerful link between youth empowerment efforts and wellness in the school environment as emphasis shifts on children and adolescents as decision-makers in their health and well-being. Youth-led health programs are not only effective in reaching the student body; providing students with the tools to create change in their environment can lead to progressive reforms — and may increase sustainability of changes because of student buy-in.<sup>6</sup> Indeed some experts see youth empowerment and organizing as part of a triad — with the

“interplay between youth development, community development, and social change” being a central dynamic of civil society.<sup>7</sup>

# What's at Stake?

## TRANSFORMATIVE BENEFITS FOR YOUTH

Student-led health reforms can significantly impact students' life and leadership skills and their health behaviors. More specifically, Gutuskey et al. identify



## THE RISE OF GEN Z

With the rise of Generation Z or “Gen Z” (youth born between 1997 and the early 2010s), the potential for youth to make a difference would seem greater than ever before. Demographic studies show that Gen Z youth are digital natives with an openness to understanding other kinds of people; they tend to be focused on pragmatism, entrepreneurialism, equity and sustainability in its various forms. They are predisposed to be activists, solution-generators and influencers. They value individual expression and avoid labels. And they easily mobilize themselves for a variety of causes.<sup>14</sup>

Hyperconnected, they have — unlike other generations in history — the ability to connect every human being on the planet to each other, to provide the opportunity for each person to be fully educated and to be socially and economically engaged. Some view this demographic picture as reason for optimism.<sup>15</sup>

**“Youth awareness of wellness is burgeoning. They’re very conscious of food waste and how food workers are being treated. There’s a growing consciousness of animal care and agriculture. They’re not waiting for adults to take steps; they’re very action-oriented. I see youth-led action really bringing communities together.”**

— **Katie Wilson**, PhD, SNS, Executive Director,  
Urban School Food Alliance

improved skills such as assuming responsibility, self-confidence in public speaking and pride in becoming healthy role models as well as improvements in dietary intake and physical activity as positive outcomes of students’ emerging identities as health reform leaders.<sup>6</sup>

Other research has noted that youth empowerment positively influences adolescents’ healthy eating and physical activity motivations and behaviors<sup>8</sup> and that authentic youth engagement also develops self-confidence and self-advocacy skills, especially when there is partnership between youth and adults.<sup>9</sup>

Zeldin et al. put it succinctly: “Youth voice in decision-making, particularly when the experience is situated within supportive adult relationships and a sense of safety, significantly predicts emotional and cognitive engagement.”<sup>10</sup>

### **BUILDING CONNECTIONS AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY**

Schwartz and Suyemoto suggest that the experience of engagement itself can be transformative to youth and that some youth are only able to imagine their potential to make change after they have participated in engagement activities and have seen the results. For these youth, they say, engagement leads to a greater belief in themselves which, “in turn, engender[s] other positive outcomes, including broader changes in self-concept related to an increased sense of connection and civic responsibility.”<sup>11</sup>

On the flip side, lack of engagement among students is itself an equity issue that deserves attention. While some students are actively involved in their local school community, a sizable portion of students in any given school tend to remain unengaged. Teachers play a key role in motivating

students, yet sometimes teacher bias can play a role: teachers may tend unconsciously to selectively recruit subsets of students (e.g., academically advanced students). This is something that likely contributes to later inequality in participation and is a phenomenon of which schools, and teachers themselves, should be aware.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, the sense of **connectedness** — a key by-product of empowered and engaged youth — is so important, say many educators. According to Berg et al.’s summary of one assessment of the impact of empowerment among students, “Results revealed that most participants gained a sense of connectedness to their school and peers, improved their health awareness and facilitated student engagement. With adult-led support, schools should consider utilizing student-led initiatives to assist in health-related activities.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Defining Terms**

### **YOUTH EMPOWERMENT:**

**An attitudinal, structural and cultural process through which young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of others — including other youth and adults.**

### **STUDENT VOICE:**

**The expression of individual and collective student opinions, experiences, knowledge and wisdom.**

## **RESOURCES**

**GENYOUth Insights Surveys** elevate youth voice on key issues including sustainable nutrition and the future of food, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on youth, teens and sleep and more.

**Empowering Youth Voice**, from the Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), provides case studies in why and how to cultivate youth voice for change.

**Adolescent Connectedness**, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has information about why and how to promote connectedness among youth.

# What's Needed?



GENYOUth has gained insights and drawn conclusions about elevating and supporting youth to improve school and student wellness, drawing on a growing inventory of youth conversations and interviews, the results of student surveys and program utilization surveys, findings from student training and events, reports of student focus group sessions, insights from youth advisory group gatherings and more. Here's a snapshot of what we are learning.<sup>16</sup>



## WHAT MOTIVATES — AND CHALLENGES — STUDENTS AS CHANGE-AGENTS?

- ▶ Appreciation from peers
- ▶ Social engagement
- ▶ Excelling in things they love to do
- ▶ Respect from admired adults
- ▶ Making their families proud
- ▶ Taking care of important people in their lives
- ▶ Building a résumé for college and the future
- ▶ Having an impact on their world
- ▶ Being independent
- ▶ Bucking the system a bit



## WHAT CHANGES HAPPEN WHEN STUDENTS ARE INVOLVED IN CREATING HEALTHIER SCHOOLS?

**Schools with higher levels of student involvement are notably more likely to:**

- ▶ Implement school-wide actions to improve the healthy eating and physical activity environment.
- ▶ Have more adults involved in school wellness efforts.
- ▶ Stay engaged with wellness activities and improvements.

**More students are aware of and involved in creating healthier schools when:**

- ▶ One or more student leaders help to engage their peers.
- ▶ One or more adults is a wellness champion at school.
- ▶ Physical education and school nutrition leaders support school wellness improvement efforts.
- ▶ Proper nutrition and physical activity are an important part of the school culture.
- ▶ There is a strong wellness policy.
- ▶ Parent volunteers support healthy changes at school.

# What We Can Do

To create positive changes, youth should be given chances to plan, participate, lead and advocate for healthier schools. Some opportunity areas include:

## DEVELOP STUDENT AGENCY AND CAPACITY

To become more effective as change-agents, students say they want:<sup>16</sup>

- Leadership training and more opportunities to act in leadership roles.
- Training in communication skills, including public speaking and using social media.
- Interpersonal skills to effectively work with peers and adults.

- Training in how to use research and insights to make the case for change.
- Access to mentors and peer-learning opportunities.

**“Once we are informed, youth want to make a difference. It can be hard if someone in power keeps shutting us down.”**

— Taylor, Student, Grade 8 (Florida)

## SEEK AND LISTEN TO YOUTH INPUT

Educators and school leaders can ask young people for input on what a healthy school should look like. Ensure that students are represented in school wellness discussions, planning, committees, implementation and

participation. Encourage students to work alongside peers to assess wellness needs and develop recommendations for enhancing/ expanding the school wellness environment.

## CULTIVATE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

Business and industry can invite young idealists and change-makers to convene and collaborate on opportunities that drive meaningful impact and visibility for a healthier future. Engage in dialogue with youth through schools, social media, events and outreach programs. Invite youth input on your products, practices and innovation challenges (see GENYOUth's [AdCap Challenge](#) as an example).

## SPEAK UP

Students can be champions and influencers for their own health futures. Students: let your school and companies know what you like, what you need and how to improve their offerings and information for you and your peers. ([Fuel Up to Play 60](#) has information and opportunities for students to learn, grow, connect and make a difference in their school communities.)

## ENDNOTES

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## GENYOUTH<sup>®</sup> CREATING HEALTHIER SCHOOL COMMUNITIES<sup>™</sup>

GENYOUth empowers students to create a healthier future for themselves and their peers by convening a network of private and public partners to raise funds for youth wellness initiatives that bolster healthy, high-achieving students, schools and communities. We believe that all students are change-agents who deserve the opportunity to identify and lead innovative solutions that positively impact nutrition, physical activity and success. [www.genyouthnow.org](http://www.genyouthnow.org)



AASA, the School Superintendents Association, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA members range from chief executive officers, superintendents and senior-level school administrators to cabinet members, professors and aspiring school system leaders. AASA members advance the goals of public education and champion children's causes in their districts and nationwide. As school system leaders, AASA members set the pace for academic achievement. They help shape policy, oversee its implementation and represent school districts to the public at large. [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org)



National Dairy Council (NDC) is the nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing to life the dairy community's shared vision of a healthy, happy, sustainable world —with science as the foundation. NDC provides science-based nutrition information to, and in collaboration with, a variety of stakeholders committed to fostering a healthier nation, including health and wellness professionals, educators, school nutrition directors, academia, industry, consumers and media. NDC has taken a leadership role in promoting child health and wellness through programs such as Fuel Up to Play 60. Developed by NDC and the National Football League (NFL), Fuel Up to Play 60 encourages youth to consume nutrient-rich foods and achieve at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. [www.USDairy.com](http://www.USDairy.com)



The Urban School Food Alliance consists of 12 of the nation's largest school districts, which represent 3,600,000 students, serving 635 million meals annually. School districts include: New York City Public Schools; Dallas Independent School District; Baltimore City Public Schools; Chicago Public Schools; Orange County Public Schools (Fla.); Boston Public Schools; Los Angeles Unified School District; Broward County Schools (Fla.); Palm Beach County (Fla.); Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Fla.); The School District of Philadelphia; and DeKalb County School District (Ga.). These districts work together to leverage their collective voice to transform school meals and make sure all students have access to high-quality, healthy meals. [www.urbanschoolfoodalliance.org](http://www.urbanschoolfoodalliance.org)

**For a copy of the complete report, *Healthier School Communities: What's at Stake Now and What We Can Do About It*, visit [www.genyouthnow.org](http://www.genyouthnow.org).**

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