

# Ensuring Student Wellness by Promoting Healthy Eating & Physical Activity

Dewey High School - Oakland, CA

2013

## WHY FOCUS ON A GARDEN AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION PROGRAM?

Dewey High School, a continuation school, took a comprehensive approach when considering ways to provide healthy outlets for at-risk youth. Wellness Champions, recognizing that students “have their social and mental state in check if they exercise and they’ve had some [healthy] food and water”, decided to implement two projects—a school garden and a physical education (PE) program—to create a healthier and more positive environment for students and staff.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

- 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade
- 238 students
- 80% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals

### Ethnicity:

- 56% African American
- 31% Hispanic/Latino
- 2% Other

## ACTION STEPS

One of the first steps Dewey’s Wellness Champions focused on was building trusting relationships with students and allowing them to help envision the projects. With student buy-in and principal and teacher support, Wellness Champions began implementing the projects over the course of the 2012-2013 school year. The PE project initially started during the school day, but once students became excited about exercising, staff established before and after-school workout programs focused on endurance, martial arts, as well as self-discipline. The garden was supported by a grant from PG&E and provided an excellent opportunity for student leadership, with students helping think through various elements, from what would be planted to where the soil came from. The Culinary Arts program used produce from the garden for cooking. Both projects clearly link back to student health and success in the classroom—newfound interest in healthy,



fresh food and regular physical activity fuels students' minds and bodies. On their way to the gym, students walk by an enticing array of vegetables in tidy planter boxes, free for the tasting.

## CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

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While Wellness Champions experienced some initial hurdles to the garden project, related to where the garden boxes could be placed, transporting soil into the school, and protecting seeds from pests, they were eventually able to overcome them by problem solving creatively and working with the District. They built the boxes in a location that wouldn't interfere with campus landscaping already in place and planted seeds in the winter to avoid pests. In the gym, challenges primarily relate to wear and tear or loss of the equipment, and staff are thinking through solutions for upkeep or ways to garner additional resources for maintenance. To motivate students to keep working out, the Wellness Champions bring in well known community leaders to provide inspiration and workout tips.

## IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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The garden and physical activity projects are changing behaviors and promoting wellness among students and staff by incorporating health into the school day and providing mentorship at all levels. There are healthier options in the cafeteria since the school lunch program transitioned to scratch cooking, and both students and staff work out using the school facilities, which helps strengthen relationships and build trust. Wellness

*"Food doesn't come from the corner store, but from the earth. We are reconnecting them to nutrition."*

Wellness Champion

Champions have noticed a major culture shift with the students in particular. "I have seen students who haven't eaten anything but packaged food who are now eating from the garden...Even if it's not hitting them now, it will continue to affect them" stated one Wellness Champion. The programs even support students' career development, helping them learn new skills and connecting them with internship and college opportunities.

## ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

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For Dewey's Wellness team, consistency has been extremely important. In order to keep student investment and excitement high, school staff have to be reliable and walk the walk, especially for those students who are not being supported to be healthy at home. In addition, having staff and students who really want to support wellness work and lead the efforts makes a huge difference, because as one Wellness Champion noted, "You can't do it alone."

### For More Information:

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