



BUILDING HEALTHY HABITS AND HEALTHY FUTURES:

# How Afterschool Programs are Supporting Physical Activity and Healthy Eating

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Physical activity and healthy eating are instrumental to a child’s overall healthy development, resulting in a number of positive outcomes, like better academic performance and a lower risk of depression. Yet, most young people are not meeting the recommended daily amount of physical activity, are not eating enough vegetables or fruits, and are exceeding recommended limits of added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat.<sup>1</sup> The current situation is especially alarming given that activity and dietary patterns formed in adolescence often carry into adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Beyond health impacts at the individual level, poor nutrition and physical inactivity have broad societal consequences. From a national security perspective, only 2 in 5 youth aged 17-24 are “weight-eligible and physically prepared” for basic military training.<sup>3</sup> And the economic costs are steep: In 2019 alone, childhood obesity was linked to an estimated \$1.3 billion in medical expenses.<sup>4</sup>

Afterschool and summer learning programs can help. Programs offer much-needed access to nutritious meals and recreational opportunities, as well as helping young people build healthy habits. Programs can offer:

- daily meals and physical activity;
- fun activities like cooking classes and trying new sports; and
- supportive relationships with staff who reinforce positive attitudes toward nutritious eating and physical activity.

Together with families, schools, and communities, afterschool and summer learning programs are stepping up to keep young people healthy, active, and engaged.

Visit Afterschool Alliance’s [research page](#) to access the full issue brief.



## Not making the grade

According to the Physical Activity Alliance's U.S. Report Card, during the last decade the overall physical activity grade for children and youth has been a D-, and figures from recent years reveal that childhood obesity is on the rise, with an estimated 1 in 5, or nearly 14.7 million, children and adolescents currently obese.<sup>5</sup>

### Declining physical activity and healthy eating as children enter adolescence

In addition to the poor state of physical activity and healthy eating among young people today, research shows physical activity and healthy eating typically decline as children transition into adolescence. For example, the National Survey of Children's Health found that while 26% of children ages 6 to 11 played a sport or participated in physical activity for at least 60 minutes per day, this decreases by nearly half among children ages 12-17.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, while children 5-8 score 55 out of 100 on the Healthy Eating Index, this decreases to 51 among children ages 14-18.<sup>7</sup>

### Immediate and far-reaching consequences

Sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy eating habits can have immediate consequences for children, including nutrient deficiencies and poor academic performance.<sup>8</sup> Children who are inactive and have a poor diet are also at risk of becoming overweight or obese, which in turn places them at risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and bullying.<sup>9</sup> Long-term health-related consequences of inactivity and unhealthy eating include obesity in adulthood, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart attack, stroke, and dementia.<sup>10</sup>

### Differences accessing healthy foods and physical activities

While physical inactivity and a poor diet are widespread issues, research has found that certain groups are less likely to meet recommended healthy eating and physical activity levels due to structural and environmental barriers.<sup>11</sup> For example, children from low-income families, Black and Hispanic children, and children living in rural areas have a higher likelihood of living in a food-insecure household than children nationally.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, girls and children with disabilities have far fewer opportunities for physical activity than boys and children without disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

## Afterschool as a key partner supporting healthy eating and physical activity

Afterschool programs, once focused primarily on providing a safe space for students when the school day ended, have expanded to support the holistic well-being of children, including their healthy eating and physical activity. Research has found that afterschool programs help reduce child hunger, improve diet quality, increase physical activity, and develop skills that can foster healthy lifestyles.<sup>14,15,16</sup> Afterschool programs can offer exposure to new foods, activities, and experiences; encourage youth to challenge themselves physically and mentally; and provide access to supportive adults and peers who model healthy lifestyle choices—all of which support healthier young people becoming healthier adults.

### Cultivating healthy habits

Operating 66 sites in four school districts across Johnson County, Kansas, the **Johnson County Parks & Recreation District (JCPRD)** provides year-round programming rooted in health and wellness to 3,600 K-6<sup>th</sup> graders. Students receive a healthy snack, get help with homework, engage in physical play, and work on building skills such as self-regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution. From cooking clubs, where students learn how to make healthy snacks like smoothies and veggie roll-ups, to staff spending time with students to talk about healthy food options and the importance of including physical activity in their daily routines, JCPRD incorporates healthy habits into every aspect of its programming. Over in Bemidji, Minnesota, the **Boys and Girls Club of the Bemidji Area** offers a year-round garden program dedicated to promoting nutritious eating habits, environmental and agricultural knowledge, and making healthy eating appealing and accessible for youth and their families in a community where food security is limited. Members plan, plant, weed, and water gardens, as well as gain entrepreneurial skills, selling their produce at local farmers' markets. The program produces more than 1,000 pounds of produce per season, supplying daily snacks for the Club, lunches for local schools, and healthy meals for families in their community.

### Fostering self-esteem and positive attitudes through supportive relationships

Social support, especially peer support, is crucial for encouraging healthy eating and physical activity in children and adolescents. Peer support is at the heart of **Team Prime Time**, an afterschool program located within 24 Title I schools in the Los Angeles and Inglewood Unified School Districts, offering competitive and non-competitive physical activities and sports. The program also provides a leadership component, where middle and high school students become peer coaches for students with disabilities, referred to as athletes. As a full-inclusion sports program, peer coaches and athletes play and learn with and from each other. For example, peer coaches develop confidence in their capacity

to work with people with differing abilities while athletes improve their self-efficacy in team sports, which can catalyze a lifelong love of physical activities. One athlete shared, “being a part of the team is like being a part of a family. It makes me feel like I blend in well.” In South Carolina, **Momentum Bike Clubs** promotes the health, well-being, and self-esteem of under-resourced youth through the power of cycling and mentorship. With eight locations throughout Greenville and Pickens counties, the program offers school and community bike clubs where youth team up with trained mentors, who are often teachers from their schools, to bike through trails, parks, and college campuses. The program’s family-like environment allows youth and mentors to cultivate deep trust and meaningful friendships that keep both coming back week after week. Since its inception in 2010, Momentum Bike Clubs has reached more than 800 students and biked 200,000 miles—or nearly eight times around the earth.

### Developing the life skills needed for healthy decision-making

Sports-focused afterschool programs do more than keep kids active; they also instill in youth attributes needed for personal, academic, and lifelong success. For example, since 1955, the **Washington Tennis and Education Foundation (WTEF)** has kept D.C. youth active, healthy, and equipped with the essential skills needed to lead successful lives through comprehensive academic, life skills, and tennis instruction. WTEF’s students’ time is divided between the court—where coaches help them reach their individual goals, whether that is to stay fit and have fun or to play tennis competitively—and the classroom, where students get homework help and participate in additional enrichment opportunities, such as health and wellness education and coding lessons. From the court to the classroom, life skills development is interwoven throughout program offerings. **Downtown Boxing Gym (DBG)**, a free, year-round youth development program in Detroit, Michigan, offers more than boxing to its students. Guided by students’ interests, DBG allows students to explore a wide range of physical activities, from ballet to badminton, as well as integrates academic and enrichment opportunities, including STEAM activities, one-on-one tutoring, targeted math and literacy interventions, and college and career readiness. DBG uses sports and physical activity to build critical life skills, such as discipline, willingness to try new things, self-efficacy, and resilience. DGB students experienced a 12% year-over-year increase in their belief that they can succeed, and since its inception in 2007, 100% of participants have graduated from high school and 98% have gone on to pursue college.

## Conclusion

Improving health outcomes for young people will require a concerted effort from policymakers, communities, schools, families, and young people themselves. Afterschool programs are fundamental partners in this work; along with addressing critical gaps in children’s health and wellness and meeting their immediate needs, afterschool programs are coming together with communities and families to lay the foundation for healthier futures for our young people.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO BUILD HEALTHY HABITS AND HEALTHY FUTURES

To ensure that all young people have access to healthy foods, are provided opportunities to be physically active, and are given the supports to develop healthy habits, there are policy solutions at the federal level that can make a powerful difference and increase the ability of afterschool and summer programs to reach the children and families in their community that are in need of additional help.

- ✓ **Increase funding for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers initiative (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC).** An increased investment in funding for 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC programs, which provide almost 1.4 million students with access to comprehensive afterschool programs, would help increase the number of children able to take part in health and wellness activities. During the 2022-2023 school year, local 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funded-programs provided 1.98 million hours of healthy and active lifestyle programming to children and youth.
- ✓ **Reinstate the Farm to School Grant program.** Reinstating the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm to School Grant program—which promoted nutrition education, healthy eating, and gardening—would expand and enhance the available supports to build students’ healthy habits. Reports reviewing the program document benefits, including more opportunities to learn about agriculture and nutrition, improved knowledge of and attitudes toward healthy foods, and increased access to healthy foods.
- ✓ **Invest in afterschool and summer programs through the Make America Healthy Again initiative.** The Make America Healthy Again initiative includes combatting health challenges facing children in the U.S. One action that could be taken to improve the health and well-being of our nation’s young people is making new funding available through this initiative to local afterschool and summer learning programs that provide healthy eating and physical activity opportunities for children and youth.



## Endnotes

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