



# Youth Leadership for Wellness: Policy Advocacy That Works for Schools and Students

Many children and youth are on school campuses at breakfast time, lunchtime, even dinnertime. The meals that schools serve – as well as the ways in which schools serve them – have a real and lasting influence on student health. As shown by the examples below, school communities, with school-based health centers (SBHCs) as key contributors, can make significant, positive changes to school food environments.

## ***Salad Bar Quality? Mission Accomplished! Urban Promise Academy (UPA)***

Less than a year after its establishment, UPA's After School Health Council had already achieved a major victory in its mission to improve the school food environment and student health. The group, made up of 7th and 8th graders, had approximately a dozen active members: they were selected through an application process and, in exchange for a year's commitment and hard work, were given a stipend for their efforts. A health educator from the Hawthorne Clinic SBHC was their adult ally and facilitator.

With guidance and support from that adult ally, the After School Health Council focused on making the salad bar an appealing and well-used feature of the cafeteria. They knew that if it were stocked with favorite fruits and vegetables it would encourage much healthier eating habits – so they made it happen! They surveyed their peers to find out what they would like to see in the salad bar. They presented in classrooms, to staff, to administrators, and to their parents about the importance of healthy foods and the school's opportunity to improve the salad bar to promote wellness. They trained other students, including elementary school students, to talk about the importance of nutrition. They led youth-friendly activities at a school health fair to further invest students.



Ultimately, in collaboration with their principal and cafeteria manager, as well as the Family Resource Center and SBHC, the After School Health Council successfully improved the salad bar. Today, parent volunteers work each morning to prepare the fruits and vegetables that students enjoy. As a result, a growing number of students are eating well and feeling passionate about healthy eating at school and at home.

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**About these Case Studies.** *These case studies highlight the contributions that SBHCs and their partners have made to the Bechtel Oakland Wellness Champion Initiative, which aims to reduce obesity among Oakland youth by creating school environments that promote healthy eating, physical activity, and wellness. This Initiative serves as a model for implementing wellness policies at the school level. To learn more, contact the California School Health Center Association's Technical Assistance Director Samantha Blackburn at (510) 268-1038 or [sblackburn@schoolhealthcenters.org](mailto:sblackburn@schoolhealthcenters.org). You may also wish to visit [www.schoolhealthcenters.org](http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org).*

## ***Breakfast for All: Oakland Technical High School (Tech)***

Tech's peer health educators and Health Academy students noticed a troubling trend: very few of their classmates were eating in the cafeteria, choosing instead to leave campus for meals. At the same time, staff at the TechniClinic SBHC noticed that most morning visits were for headaches and stomachaches, often the result of missing breakfast. After a Wellness Committee discussion, an active group of students surveyed their peers to find out what was going on. Their findings? A large percentage were skipping breakfast, while for those who ate breakfast, the typical fare was chips and soda. The cafeteria was perceived as unappealing and inconvenient.

In exploring their options, Tech's students found a solution that seemed promising: the Grab-N-Go Breakfast, which allowed students to pick up a bagged breakfast at the school entryway and had been successfully piloted at a nearby high school. Inspired by their example and the need for action on their campus, Tech's students took up the cause. With the support of the principal, Wellness Committee, and TechniClinic, they presented at faculty meetings on the academic benefits of eating breakfast: increased engagement, decreased disciplinary issues, and better cognition. Then, they interviewed the teachers, finding at least 75% of the faculty excited to bring Grab-N-Go to Tech.

Prompted by student leaders, Health Academy and TechniClinic leaders worked with Oakland Unified School District and the school's cafeteria staff on Grab-N-Go implementation. At the same, students advertised Grab-N-Go among their peers and made colorful signs for the front hall. Today, Grab-N-Go is a reality at Tech and it is working: more students are eating breakfast – and arriving at class ready to learn.

## ***Wellness in the Media: Oakland High School***

For years, Oakland High School's SBHC, Shop 55, has offered a rich system of youth development programs. The programs, which focus on topics as diverse as healthy eating, grief support, and performing arts, are well-integrated with each other as well as into Oakland High School's broader approach to student support. One particular Shop 55 program, FRESH, gives participants a unique advocacy opportunity and platform.

FRESH is an after-school program and online magazine dedicated to advancing student and school thinking on issues of health and wellness. With the guidance and support of an adult facilitator, FRESH is led by seven

students interested in journalism and media, including two senior editors and five contributing editors.

The editors research issues of interest to Oakland High School students, blog about those issues in ways that will appeal to and draw in their peers, and promote campus wellness events. The online magazine has a section dedicated to facilitating student conversation about food and health.

Shop 55 develops youth advocates in many other ways beyond FRESH. Students in the new Public Health Policy Academy, as well as those participating in the CSHC's Youth2Youth Network, are building their skills in youth-driven participatory action research – and will soon be putting them toward positive campus-based change.

