



HARKIN ON WELLNESS REPORT 2024

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Forewards

Senator Tom Harkin

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic left a lasting impact on nearly all aspects of our lives: the economy, food systems, and people's health: physical, mental, and emotional. Disruptions in routines and increased social isolation have had especially dire repercussions for children and adolescents, as providers report soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, and serious mental duress in young people.

Educators, health departments, agencies, nonprofits, and other organizations have explored innovative approaches to improve children's mental health. One of the most creative, whole health learning, has been developed and championed by groups like our partner for this year's symposium, WholeHealthED. Whole health learning approaches unify activities already widely available in schools, like mindfulness practices and spending time outdoors, as well as learning skills through school gardens, teaching kitchens, and cognition-bolstering physical education.

These approaches offer an opportunity to engage students in ways that call on their diverse learning capacities, which strengthen their academic, social, and emotional lives. We believe these approaches have the ability to improve children's wellbeing, mental health, and academics through their school years and into adulthood.

The theme of this year's Symposium is "Wellbeing in Schools" and will showcase the creative work being done across the country to improve children's mental health and wellbeing using whole health learning practices. We hope the organizations highlighted in this report will provide inspiration to implement whole health approaches in your own communities.

Senator Tom Harkin (retired)



Taylor Walsh

"Whole health learning" is a new twist on re-imagining the value of school-based practices that have long been familiar to educators. The garden, nature ed, and teaching kitchens are among these traditionally "nice-to-have" activities. It has been surprising to learn in recent years that student and faculty time spent in these, and other activities also positively impact children's mental, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing while supporting academic performance.

As we explored with The Harkin Institute last June in our webinar, "First Line of Defense," these outcomes now present important options for educators and child and mental health specialists at a time when the nation's schools are dealing with a 100,000-person shortfall of mental health professionals.

We are grateful to The Harkin Institute for continuing to examine together these practices, and for inviting U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy and the director of the CDC's Division of Adolescent School Health Dr. Kathleen Ethier as part of these conversations.

We hope today's collaborative, interdisciplinary conversations will continue to make the case that effective, well-proven school-based practices are readily available to support school efforts to strengthen their students' mental health and wellbeing.

Taylor Walsh

Founder and Executive Director

WholeHealthED.org

The Center for Whole Health Learning in K-12 Inc.

Introduction:

The prevalence of mental health issues has increased dramatically in recent years, particularly in the wake of massive social disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This led the nation's leading child health organizations and the US Surgeon General to declare a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health, an emergency that has both serious immediate consequences and ominous implications for the future. Though many ideas and approaches have been proposed to address this crisis, it is a challenge to implement any particular solution at a scale significant enough to truly tackle the problem.

We believe the K-12 school system can be a key vehicle for changes that can positively impact children's wellbeing across the United States. As the location where children spend the largest portion of their time outside of the home, activities at schools that promote wellbeing have been shown to have an important impact on children's academics and mental health.

For this reason, the 2024 Harkin on Wellness Symposium will focus on Wellbeing in Schools. The event will feature innovative, collaborative, hands-on, creative, and guided approaches to improving health and wellness in schools that can mitigate the challenges facing students, teachers, and school leaders. We will bring together advocates, policymakers, education leaders, teachers, pediatricians, child mental health specialists, and practice innovators from around the country to address whole child wellbeing approaches, review the scientifically supported best practices, and consider the case for placing health and wellbeing squarely at the heart of our education system's mission to prepare students for successful lives.

It is the goal of the Harkin on Wellness Report to highlight the top wellness and nutrition organizations and initiatives in the country that have been able to make a large impact through effective policy, system, and environmental change. We encourage others to use this as a tool to build partnerships and create sustainable, cross-sector coalitions within their own community and beyond.

Methodology:

In the Fall of 2023, we began the search for top wellness and nutrition initiatives from across the United States. The call for submissions was distributed nationwide through professional organizations, public agencies, and more. We asked that all submissions highlight how their initiative or program is working to improve the wellbeing of students or young people in their community.

We received numerous submissions which were reviewed by a committee to narrow down the applicant field. The review process included an analysis of each program that helped identify a series of elements necessary to enhance the quality, acceptability, and impact of health programming.

Submissions were rated on relevancy, adaptability, acceptance, implementation, reach, and cost (modified RE-AIM framework). For this report, we took special care to consider the following questions when selecting the top initiatives:

1. How has your organization worked to improve the wellbeing of students or young people?
2. What is the reach of your program (how many people has it, or can it impact?).
3. How is your program or initiative funded?
4. What outcomes (health, economic, environmental, and/or social) has your program or initiative had?

Based on the responses from the external committee, a total of 12 programs were selected as exceptional wellness programs and initiatives in the United States.



Photo to the right courtesy of Crellin Elementary School

Harkin On Wellness Designees

2024 Designees

Apples to Zucchini Cooking School- Santa Barbara, CA

Balanced- Kansas City, MO

Crellin Elementary School - Oakland, MD

Dubuque Brain Health Retreat Room - Dubuque, IA

Des Moines Public Schools Food and Nutrition Program- Des Moines, IA

Green Trees Early Learning Center Inc. - Milford, PA

Healthy and Ready to Learn - New York, NY

Healthy Kids, Happy Planet! - Oceanside, CA

Institute for Natural Medicine's Naturally Well Program - Seattle, WA (EJE Academies Charter School - El Cajon, California)

Iowa HHS's Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Youth Projects- Iowa

Inner Explorer Program - Franklin, MA (Patricia Sullivan Elementary School - Tampa, FL)

P.O.W.E.R. KIDS - Grinnell, IA

Photo below courtesy of Des Moines Public Schools



Apples to Zucchini Cooking School

Since 2016, Apples to Zucchini has brought people together over shared meals by teaching children, teens, and adults how to prepare delicious, nutritious, affordable meals made from seasonal and local ingredients. When they learn to cook, children become empowered with their health, their food dollars, and their culinary tastes. As they learn about nutrition, they can become nutrition ambassadors with their family and friends.

Fewer than 7% of American teens are eating enough fruits, and fewer than 2% are eating enough vegetables. For many Americans, their entire diet consists of ultra-processed foods. By showing them how to prepare delicious fruits and vegetables in a fun, positive, approachable way, we can make a lasting impact on their health, and the health of their family members.

In addition to cooking, students learn how to set the table, enjoy the meal as a community, practice table manners, and clean up the kitchen together. Studies show that teens who eat at least three meals per week with their family are less likely to engage in risky behavior.

Photo below courtesy of Apples to Zucchini Cooking School



Photo below courtesy of Apples to Zucchini Cooking School



Balanced

Founded in 2017, Balanced is a nutrition security and public health advocacy organization working to improve the healthfulness of menus in schools, hospitals, offices, and other critical community institutions. Balanced's mission is to hold the food industry accountable, help restore balance to institutional food environments, and make healthier eating easier and more realistic for people everywhere.

Balanced has a multi-pronged strategy to improve public health and ensure nutrition security. Their program areas include Community-Led Advocacy, Institutional Outreach and Support, and Nutrition Policy.

Balanced's programs provide the materials, resources, connections, technical assistance, implementation support, and policy proposals necessary to improve the healthfulness and sustainability of institutional menus across the country, with most of their work geared towards improving school meals. For more information, check out [Balanced.org](https://www.balanced.org).

Photo below courtesy of Balanced



Crellin Elementary School

Crellin Elementary School is a small, rural school nestled in the mountains of Western Maryland that has implemented a number of measures to promote the wellbeing of their students. A place-based approach to teaching and learning is woven into the instructional framework, promoting engagement and creating meaningful connections with the community. Both environmental and agricultural lessons are a part of the daily routine as students are immersed in hands-on authentic learning experiences. Whether tending to the school's farm animals and gardens or conducting stream studies, outdoor education is at the heart of our learning. Through these activities, our goal is to cultivate students' understanding of their role in community improvement, fostering a sense of responsibility and connection. Throughout the year students bridge generational gaps by regularly maintaining the yards of elderly neighbors and visiting with them in their homes. These experiences instill a profound appreciation of place and belonging. Students feel a sense of pride as they acknowledge their role in making their community thrive and witness first-hand the positive impact they have on others.



Photos above courtesy of Crellin Elementary School

Photos below courtesy of Dubuque Community School District



Dubuque Brain Health Retreat Room

The Brain Health Retreat Room program aims to create a place where high school students and staff can feel comfortable and safe. A place inside of schools where students' feelings, thoughts, and problems are accepted without judgment and with encouragement to learn new self-regulating techniques. The program works in conjunction with Brain Health Now, whose main initiative is to end the stigma and change the negative words used surrounding brain health.

Brain Health Retreat Rooms are utilized in two Dubuque Community School District high schools. Dubuque Senior and Hempstead, as well as in the campus housing the Alternative Learning programs. Each Brain Health Retreat Room is staffed full-time by a licensed school counselor or brain health professional, dubbed a Brain Health Room Liaison. The space generally serves as a safe place for students who need a short (20 minutes) brain break, due to a brain health condition throughout the day. Students who visit these spaces typically experience brain health symptoms and need a quiet, safe, and supervised space. Students are able to learn self-regulation strategies and have someone they can talk to for a short time and regroup before returning to the classroom.

Des Moines Public Schools Food and Nutrition Program

The Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) is committed to the health and wellbeing of its students and families. DMPS strives to make the connection between the different nutrition education programs such as Pick a Better Snack and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program to give students continual exposure to fruits and vegetables. They work hard to help students and their families make the connection between what is grown in school gardens and what is in school meals.

DMPS has the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program at 34 of its 38 elementary buildings, where students can try a serving of fresh fruits or vegetables three times per week. DMPS goes a step further and creates educational materials for teachers as an option to discuss with students while they are trying their serving of fruits and vegetables.

FoodCorps Service members are also an important part of our students' lives at DMPS. Currently, four of our elementary schools have a service member, which strengthens the understanding of where their food comes from with hands-on learning activities through the garden.

Recently, DMPS has started expanding nutrition education to early childhood centers. Because this education needs to come earlier in life, they are working on creating nutrition education for teachers to engage with their students during mealtimes. This gives students the opportunity to connect what they are eating to how it helps their bodies stay strong and healthy.



Photo above courtesy of Des Moines Public Schools

Photo directly below courtesy of Des Moines Public Schools



Green Trees Early Learning Center, Inc.

Green Trees Early Learning Center, inc. is a non-profit 501©3 organization and a licensed childcare center in the state of Pennsylvania. Their mission is to provide education to children of all backgrounds, cultivate strong roots, and open the doors to the wonders around. Green Trees provides services to children aged six weeks through twelve years, including year-round programs, before and after-school care for elementary school children, and a summer camp program. The center has been acknowledged as a Star Four facility with the highest rating for quality childcare under the Keystone Stars program and is a recipient of the Pennsylvania Equity in Early Childhood Education Champion Award, Gold Level.

The organization strives to support our diverse community by incorporating a variety of specialized curricula, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives. Taking a holistic approach, the center incorporates social-emotional learning in the classroom with activities such as yoga and mindfulness, intentional breathing exercises, therapy dog visits, Slumberkins curriculum, and a school sensory garden. In addition to these programs available to the children during their routine hours of care, parental support is available through regularly scheduled education workshops including elements such as mental health and young children, health and safety, nutrition, and gardening. Through these activities, children and families can continue to cultivate and strengthen bonds with one another while engaging in stress-releasing activities and slowing down the mind in a world that often travels very fast. Green Trees promotes the elements of connection, compassion, and care, advocating to meet the needs of families rooted in a growth mindset and trauma-informed care.

Photo below courtesy of Green Trees Early Learning Center, Inc.



Healthy and Ready to Learn

Healthy and Ready to Learn (HRL) works to ensure that school communities are trauma-responsive, connected environments where educators, students, and families have the knowledge, support, and resources they need to be healthy and ready to learn. They accomplish this through an online Resource and Training Center (hrl.nyc) and by training educators and caregivers around issues related to physical and mental health. HRL is currently piloting a caregiver learning workshop program called Healthy Foundations at an elementary school in New York's South Bronx. With an understanding that addressing health barriers to learning and building school communities as early as possible yields the best outcomes, the Healthy Foundations program focuses on early childhood and the transition from home to school.

Photo below courtesy of Healthy and Ready to Learn



Photo below courtesy of Healthy and Ready to Learn



Healthy Kids, Happy Planet!

Healthy Kids, Happy Planet! is an eco-focused nutrition education organization, with the mission to empower youth to create a healthier, greener, and kinder world. For over ten years, Healthy Kids, Happy Planet! has partnered with education and school food professionals to bring evidence based and multicultural plant-forward nutrition education programs and culinary experiences to students in grades K-12. In addition to live presentations and cafeteria promotions, a classroom culinary grant project reaches approximately 1,000 elementary students around the country annually. Healthy Kids, Happy Planet! also delivers a comprehensive and no-cost nutrition education curricula to teachers (grades 3-6), which can serve to link classroom to cafeteria, utilizing a collection of standardized plant/bean-based school lunch recipes, as well as cafeteria posters and PSAs.

Photo below courtesy of Healthy Kids, Happy Planet!





Institute for Natural Medicine's Naturally Well Program

Founded in 1993, the Institute for Natural Medicine (INM) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that educates, raises awareness, and works to improve access to evidence-based natural healthcare options. INM empowers patients to take control of their health journey by providing unbiased, evidence-based resources that address health promotion and disease prevention. Their findanaturaldoctor.com database provides access to trustworthy and up-to-date information on licensed naturopathic doctors working in the U.S. and Canada.

INM partners with elementary schools and child- and youth-focused community centers to support lifelong health among children and their families in at-risk communities. Their children's culinary nutrition education program, Naturally Well, focuses on preventative medicine to establish early habits for lifelong health. While nutrition is central to many of the lessons on quality materials from the food they're cooking, Naturally Well goes beyond diet, encompassing a fuller understanding of nutrition and how to make the healthiest choices. These interactive, hands-on classes include label reading, diet information, how to prepare healthy food and why we want to, and the mind-body-spirit connection to good health.



Inner Explorer Program & Patricia Sullivan Elementary School

Inner Explorer is a mindful awareness program proven to improve students' stress resilience, behavior, and academic performance. It's an audio-guided, 5-10 minute-a-day program that helps students develop critical life skills, including regulating, and expressing emotions, navigating relationships, and empathizing with others. The program has been particularly effective because it is easy for teachers to implement, inexpensive, and delivers higher grades and test scores, fewer suspensions, and better attendance.

Patricia Sullivan Partnership Elementary in Tampa, Florida, is the top school in the country for its consistency in implementing Inner Explorer, and its results have been remarkable. They began using the program in 2017 and have had all classrooms and students participate each day since then! Sullivan is a Title I school that primarily serves students of color, where 80% are unhoused. Despite these difficult circumstances, Sullivan students are achieving exceptional results with achievement 36% higher than the national average in Math and 50% higher in English. Through exemplary leadership and committed educators, the school has virtually eliminated suspensions and demonstrated how to help students thrive.



Photos above courtesy of the Inner Explorer Program and Patricia Sullivan Elementary School

Iowa HHS's Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Youth Projects

The Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Healthy Eating Active Living team is committed to improving nutrition and physical activity knowledge and environments. The team uses a variety of funding sources to administer programs and projects to youth in early care settings and elementary schools. In 2023, the Healthy Eating Active Living team contracted with 38 organizations to implement nutrition and physical activity youth initiatives in local communities.

Iowa HHS's Pick a Better Snack is an evidence-based program funded by USDA through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education (SNAP-Ed) grant. Last year, 122 elementary schools in 24 school districts participated, reaching over 24,000 students. Through the Pick a Better Snack program, nutrition educators deliver monthly lessons

about fruits and vegetables to students in K-3 grade classrooms. This nutrition education is complemented by Farm to School and Play Your Way projects. These projects focus on making changes to policies, systems, and environments that make it easier for students to eat healthy and be active.

The Early Care Outdoor Learning Project helps early care and education providers create an outdoor learning space. Ten participants complete the Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environment Certificate Course to gain the knowledge and skills to plan, implement, and promote high-quality outdoor learning and play spaces. After completing the course, participants receive funds to create spaces using the strategies and principles learned in the course and five outdoor learning spaces were created, reaching 367 children. Examples of outdoor learning environments implemented include: a circle of stump seats, log benches, a wooden teepee, hollow trees to play in, raised garden beds, and an acoustic play area.

Photos below courtesy of Iowa HHS



P.O.W.E.R. KIDS

P.O.W.E.R. KIDS, a new partner program of the Claude W. and Dolly Ahrens Foundation, aims to empower students in elementary school to make healthy choices inside and outside the classroom. Students are exposed to a variety of activities for learning about healthy snacks, forming positive habits, and other wellness opportunities.

Conversations began in the spring of 2022 with the Grinnell Education Partnership (GEP) about the previously named Healthy Readers program which has been a part of GEP since 2015 and run through AmeriCorps leaders. During the pandemic, as schools closed and visitors were limited, the Healthy Readers program efforts were reduced. Moving into the 2022-2023 school year, GEP was looking for help with sustainability of the program and CDAF excitedly stepped up to form a new partner program called P.O.W.E.R. KIDS. The program mission aligns directly with the mission of CDAF – working to improve the quality of life of current and future generations of Grinnellians through parks and recreation, health, and education. P.O.W.E.R. KIDS is helping program students achieve the overarching goals of increased wellness through healthy choices and activities.

Photo below courtesy of P.O.W.E.R. KIDS.



Photo below courtesy of P.O.W.E.R. KIDS.



Our 2024 Designee's websites can be found on our website [here](#).

The 2024 Harkin on Wellness Symposium was made possible due to the support of our generous sponsors!

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Navigate

Paul and Claudia Schickler
(Paul, BN'74, GR'83)



Photo above courtesy of Crellin Elementary School

About the Harkin on Wellness Symposium

The Harkin on Wellness (HOW) Symposium is an annual gathering to discuss timely topics associated with wellness and nutrition. Each year, the HOW Symposium gathers practitioners, policymakers, students, educators, and members of the public for an engaging and educational event.

The Harkin Institute and Drake University

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement serves as a venue and catalyst for dynamic non-partisan research, learning, and outreach to promote understanding of the policy issues to which Senator Tom Harkin devoted his career.

The Harkin Institute is located at Drake University. Established in 1881, Drake is recognized as one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the Midwest. A mid-sized, private university in Des Moines, Iowa, Drake offers the benefits and resources of a larger institution along with the advantages of intimate class sizes and close personal relationships.

Drake's mission is to provide an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship. The Drake experience is distinguished by collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff and by the integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. Our inspiration is that together we transform lives and strengthen communities.