GENYOUth' INSIGHTS SPRING 2024

Fostering Wellness in Youth Cultivating Healthy Eating for the Future

The advantages of instilling healthy eating habits in young individuals are extensively documented, encompassing improved overall health, enhanced immunity, strong bone development, and a reduced risk of chronic ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer. When young people start their day with a nutritious breakfast, they not only experience heightened diet quality but also exhibit improved classroom behavior, academic performance, fewer visits to the school nurse, and reduced absenteeism.

However, the prevailing beliefs and behaviors regarding healthy eating among today's youth, as well as the motivating factors behind them, remain lesser known. This GENYOUth Insights report delves into the current landscape, considering the lingering impact of the COVID pandemic, identifying crucial gaps in youth nutrition, and exploring the attitudes, behaviors, and sources of information that can guide educators, school nutrition professionals, policymakers, health experts, and families in enhancing nutrition education and program initiatives.

The health trajectory of our youth is intricately linked to their dietary choices and lifestyle habits. Through prioritizing early intervention, nurturing educational initiatives, and employing innovative strategies, we can empower the next generation to embrace healthy eating patterns, paving the way for a vibrant, resilient, and flourishing future. As stakeholders, it is our collective responsibility to champion this cause, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive and lead a life filled with vitality and well-being.

GENYOUth INSIGHTS What Youth Are Telling US!

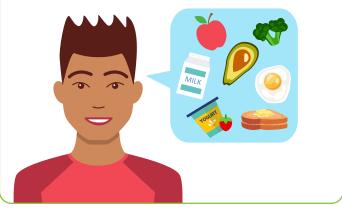
What Drives Healthy Eating Behaviors?

New GENYOUth Insights reveal:

In addition to household income, key predictors linked with healthy eating among youth include:

- Feeling knowledgeable about nutrition and healthy eating
- Eating school breakfast
- Being surrounded by people who care about good nutrition
- Getting information about nutrition at school
- Being active in physical education class and over summer breaks
- Getting encouragement from teachers
- **Eating family meals on a regular basis**

Based on a driver analysis of GENYOUth Insights Youth Eating Behaviors and Nutrition Literacy survey data.



Today's students have a strong sense of responsibility for their health and wellness. We know because we ask them. **GENYOUth INSIGHTS** elevates youth voice through original, timely research on topics that matter to students and to healthy, high-achieving schools.

This report was produced in counsel with David Bersoff, PhD, Head of Research at the Edelman Trust Institute.

Elevating Youth Nutrition: Unveiling Critical Gaps

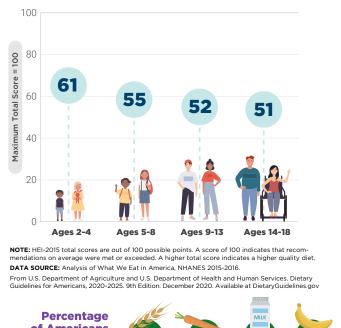
PROGRESS, BUT FAR FROM THE FINISH LINE.

As a nation, we have made progress in raising awareness about healthy eating and improving many aspects of nutrition and the food environment over the past two decades. Food has long been linked to overall physical health, and increasingly, food is seen as a way to prevent, manage, and treat illness (**Food Is Medicine**) and support mental health (**Food and Mood**). To varying degrees, this progress has impacted individual dietary habits, access to healthy food options, and food-related policies such as labeling and nutrition assistance programs.

The benefits of adequate nutrition are well documented, including the promotion of general health and the reduction of chronic ailments such as heart disease, as well as — for children — nutrition's positive impact on learning. But there are notable areas for improvement in U.S. diets. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2020-2025 **Dietary Guidelines for Americans** notes that "...diet-related chronic disease rates have risen to pervasive levels and continue to be a major public health concern." The report also notes particular "nutrients of concern"— that is, nutrients typically consumed in amounts dangerously below recommended levels in the U.S. — including calcium, Vitamin D, fiber, potassium, and iron.

The vast majority of Americans, including children and youth aged 5-18, are not meeting recommendations for whole grains, vegetables, dairy, and fruit. And for adolescents specifically, the difference

HEALTHY EATING INDEX SCORES ACROSS CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE





between recommended food group amounts and current intakes is greater for ages 14 through 18 years than for any other age group across the lifespan.

In short, poor nutrition among youth remains a serious concern, with consequences for growth, development, health, well-being, learning, and achievement, today and tomorrow.

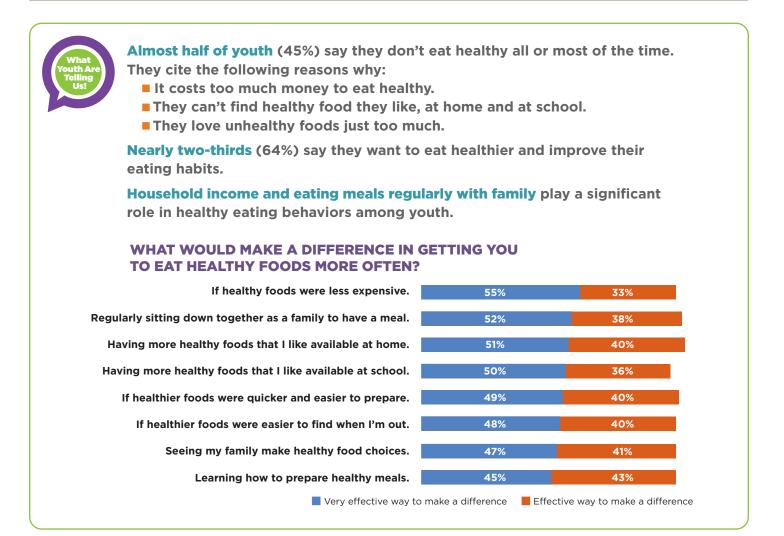
GENYOUth[®] INSIGHTS

Beliefs and Behaviors



New GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Youth have specific ideas about what makes a food or beverage healthy. They identify fresh ingredients, an abundance of vitamins and minerals, and high protein as desirable elements to seek in foods. And they view added sugar, sodium, and a high calorie count as elements to avoid.



Hunger: Ongoing Post-Pandemic Challenges

SOBERING REALITIES.

Roughly 30 million children depend on the USDA's school meal programs for all or part of their daily nutrition, and for some children and youth, school meals are the only meals they can count on. A recent **GENYOUth survey** of over 1,000 school nutrition professionals confirmed that student hunger/food insecurity remains a vital concern from their in-the-trenches perspective.

Today, 1 in 5 children in the U.S. is food insecure. USDA <u>research data</u> indicate that 44.2 million Americans lived in households that struggled with

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"If we address opportunity gaps students face — food insecurity being a huge one then their readiness to learn is dramatically increased. Access to food is a right that students possess."

> Alberto Carvalho, Superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District

hunger in 2022, an increase of 10.3 million compared to the previous year's rates. Rates of food insecurity are higher for Black (22.4%) and Latinx (20.8%) households, both of which are double the rate of white and non-Latinx households. A higher number of households in rural areas (14.7%) experiences food insecurity compared to urban areas (12.5%).

As hunger and poor nutrition persist among children and youth, the need for school nutrition continues to grow. This was acutely evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which school nutrition professionals showed impressive creativity to address hunger in their communities by continuing to provide school meals through grab and go, bus stop deliveries, or drive-through pick up while school buildings were closed. During that time, according to the **CDC's Adolescent** Behavior and Experience Survey, nearly one in four students (24%) experienced hunger/food insecurity; 66% had difficulty completing schoolwork; and 37.1% experienced poor mental health.

ENGAGING PARTNERS TO END STUDENT HUNGER

Since 2020, GENYOUth has provided over 10,000 schools with nearly \$15 million in cash and equipment to increase access to school meals, address food insecurity and end student hunger, with the help of generous partners that include Albertson's, America's Dairy Farmers, Blue Shield of California, Cub Foods, Florida Blue Foundation, Frito-Lay, Kroger, Quaker, Schreiber Foods, Tyson, PepsiCo Foundation, and others, along with individual donors. GENYOUth's approaches that help increase access and drive participation include:



School Meals: Nourishing Kids Where They Are

SCHOOL MEALS ARE ESSENTIAL.

Apart from the fact that a school meal is the only nutritious meal many American children eat on some days, research has shown that school meals, especially breakfast, can benefit a student's academic performance. A child who starts their day with breakfast is more likely to be at school, learn better with better brain function, memory, and attention, and participate in class. School meals reduce food insecurity, obesity rates, and poor health. Students who go to school hungry may suffer from an inability to concentrate and stay focused — thereby falling behind academically and being at risk of missing school because of illness.

Research on the association between school meal consumption and overall dietary intake is encouraging. U.S. schoolchildren who eat school breakfast

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and school lunch every day have healthier dietary intakes overall; regular consumption is a factor in good nutrition.

National School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) meals are provided for free or at a reduced price to eligible children and are a critical nutrition safety net for students facing hunger. However, participation, particularly at breakfast, is below where it should be due to rushed morning schedules; non-traditional work hours for families; bus and class schedules not allowing time for children to eat; and the social stigma that school breakfast in the cafeteria may carry. Additionally, school lunch periods can be short, with long lines for students to receive their meal. As a result, students often miss out on the chance to fully benefit from a nutritious meal.

"Schools are now the single healthiest place Americans are eating... Our results suggest substantial nutritional harms for millions of kids who have not been consistently receiving meals at school and must rely on other sources. These harms also disproportionately affect low-income, Black, and Latinx children."

> Dariush Mozaffarian, Senior Study Author, "Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018"

THE LEGACY OF THE SHUTDOWN.

The school nutrition landscape post-pandemic is nowhere close to "back to normal." Average daily meal participation (ADP) among students took an alarming drop during the pandemic, putting millions of children at risk for hunger. School meal programs have historically been under-funded, and the stress to school budgets has gotten worse due to rising food costs, supply chain issues, and labor shortages. Post-COVID, the expiration of Universal Free Meals at the national level now means that school nutrition programs may continue to be in financial peril and children may go hungry.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

PROVIDE schools with the equipment and resources they need to feed students and give them food dignity. Public and private sector partners can help — working collaboratively with school leaders, educators, school nutrition staff, and students to identify needs and design solutions. MAKE SURE that

foods served and sold at school, including school meals and snacks, are accessible, culturally appealing, nutritious, and aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. And help students understand the nutritional value of school meals.



IMPROVE the mealtime experience with smoothie programs, cafeteria makeovers, grab and go carts, and other innovative solutions.

SUPPORT funding solutions like -GENYOUth's <u>End</u> <u>Student Hunger</u> **SOLICIT** students' own ideas, as with GENYOUth's <u>AdVenture</u> <u>Capital</u> initiative, in which students identify surprising opportunities to grow school-meal participation by introducing kid-approved menu items, and are empowered to implement their innovations.

Bottom line: fewer students are receiving the vital nutrition they need, which creates a financial strain on schools since they are reimbursed for every meal served. Lower participation rates mean fewer dollars for schools to cover the costs of ensuring students are fed.

SOME GOOD NEWS.

Many schools are now feeding kids in more locations, at more times of the day than ever — be it in the cafeteria, classroom, Grab and Go before and after classes, or throughout the campus — which results in greater meal participation. To make these alternative approaches possible, schools are moving from a traditional cafeteria meal-service model to a flexible CONTINUED

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operation with food available in multiple locations. This is happening even as school nutrition programs remain under extreme budgetary pressure, and as the gap between government reimbursement and the full cost of meals is growing.

Regarding diet quality, the **USDA Food and Nutrition** <u>Services</u> notes that children who participate in school meals consume more dairy milk, fruits, and vegetables than non-participants and they consume fewer desserts, snacks, and non-milk beverages.

Additional **research from Tufts University** has revealed that school meals have a higher nutritional quality compared to meals from other meal sources, such as restaurants and even meals at home. The findings suggest a positive impact on long-term health based on the current school meal nutrition standards.



"Healthy meals are an essential part of the school experience just like teachers, classrooms, and books."

Stacy Dean, Deputy Under Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Morning Momentum: School Breakfast Sets the Stage for Nutritional Success

AN IDEAL SOLUTION.

Of all the steps schools can take toward creating healthier, higher-achieving students and a culture of wellness, implementing an effective school breakfast program is perhaps the simplest and most cost effective, with very possibly the most direct impact. Breakfast is linked with numerous health and educational benefits — including improved academic performance, school attendance and dietary intake. Additionally, school nutrition programs receive federal reimbursement for each meal served, supporting the financial bottom line.

ACCESS, OBSTACLES, AND INNOVATION.

The National School Breakfast Program is an important solution that provides a healthy morning meal to millions of students across the country. But millions more are missing out. In fact, only 56 low-income students participate in school breakfast for every 100 who participate in school lunch. And when youth skip breakfast, <u>research</u> shows they have lower quality dietary intake. Innovation in school nutrition — so evident during the COVID pandemic — remains evident in postpandemic times, too, from the expanding popularity of Grab and Go kiosks and smoothie programs to comprehensive summer and after-school feeding initiatives. The Food Research & Action Center's annual **School Breakfast Scorecard** recognizes Breakfast After the Bell, which moves breakfast out of the cafeteria, as the most successful strategy for increasing school breakfast participation. Today, universal free access to school breakfast is available in many states throughout the U.S, ensuring healthy meal access for all.

"The emergence of new breakfast options has been great, with some districts starting as early as 6 a.m. This particularly helps homeless students, which is an issue in many districts. Other districts are letting kids order food ahead, using apps. Food trucks, kiosks, and Grab and Go breakfast carts are extremely effective new options."

> Katie Wilson, Executive Director, Urban School Food Alliance

School Breakfast



New GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Youth who skip breakfast are less likely to eat healthy.

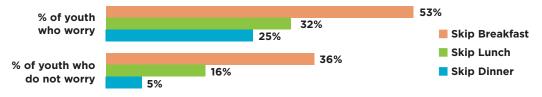
Breakfast is the meal that youth are most likely to skip; over half of youth (54%) skip breakfast at least once a week.

Students from lower-income households earning below \$50K/year are less likely to prefer eating breakfast at home (46%) than students from households earning \$100K/year or more (64%).

Over half of youth from lower-income households (58%) say they skip breakfast every day, a few times a week, or at least once a week.

YOUTH WHO WORRY ABOUT FOOD ARE MORE LIKELY TO SKIP MEALS

A third (33%) of youth say they worry about having enough to eat. These "youth who worry" about having enough to eat skip meals a few times a week or every day far more often than "youth who do not worry" as noted below.



When asked why they eat school breakfast, "youth who worry" are more likely to agree with the statements, "They [school] serve healthier food than I can get at home" (15% versus 4% non-worriers) and "I don't have food to eat at home" (17% versus 5% non-worriers).

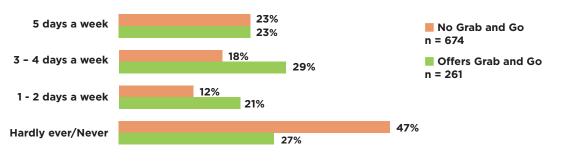
Only 59% of youth eat breakfast regularly, even when it is available.

Youth who don't eat school breakfast most commonly cite taste, lack of time, or right timing as barriers.

Breakfast in the cafeteria is by far the most frequent setting where students experience school breakfast.

Grab and Go school breakfast dramatically increases participation, yet only 28% of survey respondents say their school offers Grab and Go breakfast, either in addition to or instead of cafeteria breakfast.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU EAT SCHOOL-PROVIDED BREAKFAST IN A TYPICAL WEEK DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR?



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

Schools Can:

EXPAND school breakfast, including alternative breakfast opportunities at school in a variety of settings, including Grab and Go carts and Breakfast in the Classroom.



CONTINUE to elevate and support Grab and Go breakfast as a proven – solution to nourish more students. **MAKE** breakfast available *when* students want it, especially later in the morning (second-chance breakfast, later school start time). **CREATE** a positive school culture around eating and nutrition through appealing breakfast options.

WORK to overcome barriers like busing schedules, time constraints, and a lack of flexibility within the school schedule to accommodate breakfast.

GRAB AND GO BREAKFAST: A PROVEN SOLUTION



For more than a decade, GENYOUth, with the support of public and private partners, has helped to test and scale Grab and Go school breakfast in school districts across the U.S. Most recently, GENYOUth joined with the Arizona Super Bowl Host Committee, BHHS Legacy Foundation, Dairy Council of Arizona, Fiesta Bowl Charities, Frito-Lay North America, Fry's Food Stores, ISA Foundation, The Quaker Oats Company, and the PepsiCo Foundation to provide **Grab and Go carts** to schools throughout the state of Arizona – part of GENYOUth's annual collaboration with Super Bowl Host Committees throughout the nation. Participating schools provided feedback and data from September 2022, prior to using the carts, and from April 2023, after carts were in use.

As reported by six school districts covering 38 schools and over 32,000 students:

- All districts said meal carts created excitement or improved perception of school meals among students.
- Half of districts said the Meal Carts increased school breakfast or lunch participation.
- Two-thirds of the districts said the Meal Carts increased meal service locations and/or access to school meals.
- Increase in breakfast Average Daily Participation: between 11 and 58%.
- Increase in lunch Average Daily Participation: between 2 and 11%.

Knowledge <u>Is</u> Power

"NUTRITION ED" NEEDS TO HAPPEN.

There are currently no federal mandates requiring nutrition education in U.S. schools. Yet according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <u>nutrition education</u> should be a vital part of any comprehensive health education program; it empowers children and youth with knowledge and skills to make healthy eating choices.

Research also indicates that nutrition education can teach students to recognize how a healthy diet influences emotional well-being and how

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emotions may shape eating habits. However, because schools face so many demands, already overstretched school staff often consider ways to add nutrition education into the existing schedule, rather than creating dedicated courses or study units. As a consequence, according to the **CDC**, U.S. students generally receive fewer than 8 hours of classroom nutrition education each school year, far below the 40-50 hours that are needed to change behaviors.

Further, most students don't know or understand where their food comes from. According to GENYOUth Insights data on <u>Youth and the Future</u> <u>of Food</u> almost all youth feel it's important for people to know something about where the food they eat comes from — especially how it's grown or raised and what's been added to it. Yet only 21% of youth say they actually are very knowledgeable about where their food comes from, while 40% say they know little to nothing at all about the topic. The majority say they want to know more.

As reinforced by the most recent GENYOUth Insights survey on *Youth Eating Behaviors and Nutrition Literacy*, getting youth thinking about healthy eating and equipping them with what they need to know seems to be a powerful driver of eating healthy overall.

GENYOUth[®] INSIGHTS

Nutrition Literacy



New GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Knowledge has a powerful and positive effect on healthy eating. Among those youth who say they are "very" or "somewhat" knowledgeable about healthy eating, the vast majority (80%) report that they are eating healthy on a regular basis. By comparison, only one in four (24%) youth who say they have little to no nutrition knowledge report that they eat healthy. Youth learn about healthy eating in a variety of places and ways:

Health class is the number-one place at school where youth say they are learning about healthy eating and nutrition. Youth also cite classroom teachers and physical education teachers/coaches as additional common sources of information about healthy eating.

Outside of school, parents/adult caregivers are by far the principal providers of their children's nutrition and healthy eating information (cited by 69% of youth). About a third of youth (32%) say they get nutrition information from a doctor, dietitian, or other health professional, while 31% are getting information from Google or another search engine.

More than half of youth (60%) are interested in learning more in school about healthy eating and nutrition.

YOUTH LEARN ABOUT HEALTHY EATING IN A VARIETY OF PLACES AND WAYS



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

INCORPORATE nutrition education throughout the school day and in various locations within school, such as health education class, P.E. class, or combined with STEM and other subjects; in the cafeteria; through morning announcements; farm visits; staff meetings; send-home information; and more. See <u>CDC Healthy Schools</u> for more ideas.

EARMARK necessary funding, where possible, for nutrition education.

ENGAGE families in meaningful ways to improve student health and learning, recognizing GENYOUth Insights survey findings that parents/caregivers are the #1 influencers of their child's eating choices. Encourage families to support and reinforce healthy behaviors in multiple settings — at home, in school, in out-of-school programs, and in the community.

RECOGNIZE the Importance of messaging and communicating the healthfulness of school meals — to students, parents, educators, and school staff along with showing the connection between healthy eating and benefits to overall health, well-being, learning, and school performance.



INVOLVE students in menu and food choices at school so they have access to healthy, culturally sensitive meals they like.

HELP students understand the difference in credibility and accuracy among various nutrition information sources, and show them how to do research and identify reliable sources.

Physical Activity: Critical to Youth Wellness

VITAL TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.

Along with nutrition, physical activity is critical for optimal health. And recent GENYOUth survey data (see box next page) reinforce the important link between physical activity and healthy eating. Yet fewer than one in four school-aged youth meets recommended physical activity guidelines, despite the health and learning benefits physical activity provides. And few schools now have regular recess or daily physical education. Few students walk or bike to school, and student participation in sports is declining.

The physical activity challenge is especially concerning among girls, whose interest in physical activity declines dramatically as they enter middle and high school. Girls living in lower-income households and girls from communities of color are at even greater risk. The participation of minority youth in P.E. has also declined as schools have cut programs due to funding shortfalls. All of this



matters because students who are physically active tend to have better grades, school attendance, cognitive performance, and classroom behaviors. Regular physical activity can help children and adolescents improve cardiorespiratory fitness, build strong bones and muscles, control weight, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and reduce the risk of developing health conditions such as heart disease, cancer, Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and obesity.

GENYOUth Physical Activity



New GENYOUth Insights reveal:

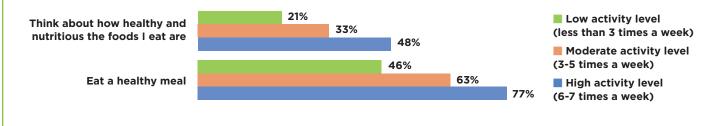
Among youth who are active six or seven times a week, 64% say they eat healthy on a regular basis, versus 52% of all youth who have a medium level of activity.

Gym and physical education (PE) class at school is where most youth (59%) get regular physical activity (and where many students get nutrition information). After gym/PE class, youth are most likely to be physically active by:

- Doing other kinds of activities on their own like running, walking for exercise, biking, yoga, dancing, etc. (49%).
- Playing on a school sports team (37%).
- ► Working out at home (36%).

YOUTH WHO ARE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE BETTER EATING HABITS.

Percentage of youth who say they think about healthy eating and who eat healthy based on self-reported levels of physical activity.



BECAUSE NUTRITION MATTERS

The indisputable fact that nutrition matters for youth health, wellbeing, and learning — and for society more broadly, today and in the long term is hardly new news to anyone working in education and health-related fields. However, what may be news is the degree to which good nutrition among American youth is at risk, and the multiple and overlapping factors that youth themselves identify as reasons for the crisis of poor nutrition — which include economic, social, educational, structural, or simply logistical barriers.

Young people's perspectives on issues that affect them and the conditions that support healthy eating — as reflected in the GENYOUth Insights data shared in this brief — help to illuminate what's at stake. Youth also help point us toward potential solutions that are inevitably well-informed, frequently "From my perspective, a healthy school not only provides healthy and balanced school meals and opportunities to engage in physical activities, but also creates an environment in which students have everything they need to be happy and healthy."

Jimena, High School Student (Texas)

innovative and even ingenious, sometimes surprising, and always worth listening to.

Dietary choices and lifestyle habits are undeniably linked to the health trajectory of young people.

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Empowering youth to embrace better eating habits by prioritizing earlier intervention, nurturing educational initiatives, and putting innovative strategies to work — will lead to a more promising future. It's our collective responsibility to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive and lead a life of robust good health and physical and mental well-being. GENYOUth partners with youth, schools, businesses, government, and other public and private sector organizations in our mission to help all schoolchildren thrive. The "opportunities for action" in this brief offer a go-forward road map for those who share our mission, and our belief in the unquestioned value of, and the crucial need for, a well-nourished, physically active next generation.

Thank you to the GENYOUth <u>National Youth Council</u> and <u>Youth Insights Advisory Council</u> experts who provided invaluable perspective on this report.



SURVEY METHODOLOGY. The GENYOUTH Insights *Youth Eating Behaviors and Nutrition Literacy* survey data featured in this report included a representative sample of 1,017 middle, junior, and senior high school students from public, private, and parochial schools, ages 13-18. An advisory committee of health, education, nutrition, and youth engagement experts, students, and practitioners provided guidance on the research topic, hypothesis, and online survey content. One student focus group was held to inform the survey content and questions. All differences reported between segments of the data are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

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GENYOUth is a 501c3 national nonprofit dedicated to helping school children thrive by living a well-nourished and physically active life. A catalyst for youth health and wellness, GENYOUth has supported over 77,000 U.S. schools to equip them with the resources needed to ensure millions of children have equitable access to nutrition and physical activity. Founded by America's dairy farmers and the NFL, GENYOUth convenes a network of private and public partners, including Fortune 100 companies and foundations to ensure all children are nourished and active to be their best selves. With a commitment to end student hunger, GENYOUth provides nutrition grants to increase access to healthy school meals among food insecure students. To learn more and support GENYOUth visit www.GENYOUthnow.org and follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.