

**CASE EXAMPLE**

# YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: ENGAGING YOUTH IN FOOD ACCESS EFFORTS

## Background

West High School’s School-Based Health Center, operated by Nationwide Children’s Hospital, opened in 2017 and serves patients from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in Columbus, Ohio. The SBHC provides primary care services including well care, sick care, immunizations, primary care mental health, treatment of chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes, blood work, teen health care, and more.

Below, Table 1 provides information on the school’s population in comparison with overall county and state data; all information reflects the 2021-22 school year from the Ohio Healthy Students Profiles, compiled by the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce.

**Table 1.**

	WEST HIGH SCHOOL	COUNTY	
Total head count	955	n/a	n/a
Medicaid participants (%)	64.8	39.2	37.7
PCP visit, within 2 years (%)	74.8	81.8	82.5
Dental visit, within 2 years (%)	39.7	52.7	50.5
Any Behavioral Health Condition (%)	21.6	23.1	31.2
On-Time Graduation (% , 2021 Cohort)	59.2	73.9	76.6
Chronic Absenteeism (%)	88.8	66.1	54.1

Source: Ohio Healthy Students Profiles

## Getting Started

During the 2023-2024 school year, a new Youth Advisory Council (YAC) was formed at West High School in collaboration with school leaders. The YAC is a dedicated group of student-leaders focused on promoting healthy behaviors and resource access amongst their peers, initiating health-related projects to better their school community, and providing a youth perspective to their SBHC and school administration. The YAC meets weekly during school lunch periods to work on health outreach initiatives. West High School students attended quarterly meetings with YAC members from other local high schools.

Students applied for membership in the council via an online or paper application. The application was advertised and shared with students through tabling during student lunch periods, announcements, and posters around the school. School administrators, teachers and School-Based Health Center staff also shared the application with students and provided feedback and recommendations based on the applications received. Students were recruited in the fall of 2023 and remained in the council throughout the school year. Returning members during the upcoming school year will serve as leaders to incoming council members.

## Youth Advisory Council Goals

The Youth Advisory Council was created to seek youth voice, promote positive health behaviors, improve the student experience with the Nationwide Children’s School-Based Health Center, and provide students with leadership skills and career exploration. With a focus on food access initiatives for the 2023-2024 school year, the YAC members were tasked with providing guidance and feedback on the best way to support food access initiatives within their school.

A School Health Liaison from the Nationwide Children’s Hospital School Health Services team served as the Advisor for the Council. Funding for projects was provided through grant support via the Ohio School Based Health Alliance Food Access Learning Network.

## Youth Advisory Council Activities and Projects

Addressed their peers at cohort meetings to represent themselves as a YAC and bring up conversations around food insecurity.

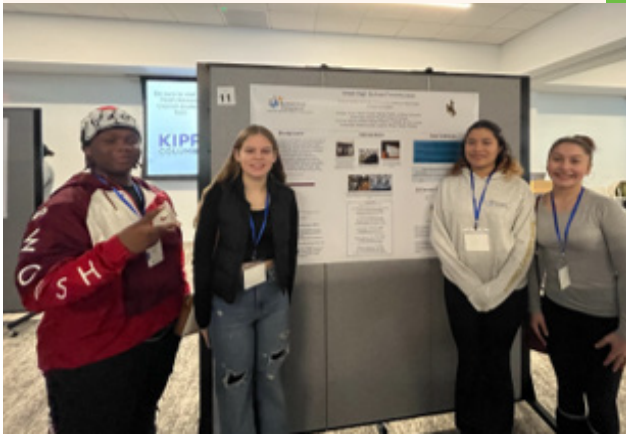


Toured a local nonprofit (Highland Youth Garden) to learn more about sustainable agriculture and opportunities in their neighborhood.



Held a spring resource fair with community organizations present to talk to students; food distribution from a community nonprofit, Local Matters.

Presented a poster at the annual School Health QI Symposium at Nationwide Children's Hospital to inform Community Wellness department members about their progress and ideas.



Posted "The Strangers Project" in high school walkway—encouraged students to share their personal experiences with food insecurity.

Additional activities and projects not pictured:

- Handed out food packages for their peers to have before winter break
- Two West students attended the National School-Based Health Alliance conference in Washington, DC to learn more about youth advocacy

## Youth vs Adult Responsibilities

ADULTS	YOUTH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewed applications for students interested in joining the YAC</li> <li>• Secured funding from Ohio SBHA to focus on food insecurity</li> <li>• Organize regular meetings with students, typically weekly during their lunch period</li> <li>• Ensure students have transportation to field trips or other off-campus opportunities</li> <li>• Encourage students to apply their experiences to their ideas</li> <li>• Help remove barriers to make students' ideas more successful</li> <li>• Create opportunities to elevate youth voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remain in good academic standing to participate in YAC</li> <li>• Communicate with teachers if they are to miss class for field trips</li> <li>• Participate in weekly meetings and work with their teachers and administrators to get approval for events/projects</li> <li>• Participate in idea generation and project execution</li> <li>• Create flyers and other advertisement opportunities for upcoming initiatives</li> <li>• Invite their peers to participate and engage in activities/events</li> <li>• Share learnings and experience in YAC in various capacities</li> </ul>

## What Makes this Program Successful

Projects related to food insecurity were student-led, with guidance and access to funding and additional resources provided by School Health staff. Students reported numerous benefits from their participation, including improved leadership and public speaking skills, exposure to new experiences and opportunities, meeting new people, gaining a deeper understanding of food insecurity, and developing community-building experience. Students provided feedback on the location and contents of the planned food pantry, and this feedback was directly incorporated into the planning of the food pantry's design. One student wrote a poem detailing the emotions and personal crises that can accompany the experience of food insecurity. The poem was read aloud to students at every grade level at West High School as part of the YAC's peer engagement.

## Future Plans

Introducing a Youth Advisory Council to West High School has opened a great deal of possibilities for continued partnership and collaboration. The YAC has allowed for authentic relationships to grow with organizations like the Highland Youth Garden and Local Matters, as well as strengthening the connection between the school-based health providers and student leaders. In the coming school year, West High School will have a YAC with both new and returning members to bring ideas into their projects. A food pantry has also been established in the school with donations from a local church, and YAC members will be a central part of communicating to their peers about the pantry and assisting with food distribution.

As Nationwide Children's Hospital looks to continue its youth engagement strategy, student leaders at West High School will be an important sounding board. These students will connect with other Youth Advisory Councils in the Central Ohio area at quarterly meetings, where they will share ideas and engage in leadership and networking activities. Returning YAC members would be an excellent resource for any students at other schools who are interested in focusing on food insecurity in their communities.

Food insecurity and mental health are interconnected,  
A topic that deserves to be reflected.  
When access to food becomes a concern,  
Emotional well-being can take a turn.

For those who struggle to find a meal,  
Stress and anxiety can become very real.  
The worry of not having enough to eat,  
Can lead to depression and feelings of defeat.

Nutrition plays a vital role in our brain,  
Lack of proper food can cause it strain.  
Mental health can suffer, it's true,  
When hunger becomes a constant issue.

But let's remember, we can make a change,  
By supporting organizations that arrange,  
To provide food for those in need,  
We can help them thrive and succeed.

Together, we can fight food insecurity,  
And promote mental health with sincerity.  
Let's spread awareness and lend a hand,  
To create a world where everyone can withstand.

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