

# The Impact of **HIGH-QUALITY, HEALTH-CONSCIOUS**

## Dining Programs on Student Well-Being and Academic Performance

Author: Vanessa Kechichian, RD



*“By steering away from cheap, highly processed, fried, frozen, high in sugar, and high in sodium foods, and instead embracing a culture of nutritious, balanced meals, we can protect our students from the dangers of childhood obesity, behavior issues, and lower academic performance.”*

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) "the number of overweight or obese children and adolescents (aged 5-19 years) increased from 340 million in 2016 to 379 million in 2022." The consumption of unhealthy, processed foods is a significant contributing factor to childhood obesity which is associated with an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and respiratory problems, among other health issues. (1).

As leaders in the education and well-being of our students, it is our duty to prioritize their health and academic success by offering nutritious, well-balanced meal options that support students physical, mental, and emotional development. One critical aspect of this is the role that nutrition plays in the lives of students. According to a study from the Health and Social Research Center, "a higher fruit and vegetable consumption, and a lower sugar consumption are associated with high school performance among adolescents." (2).

A high-quality dining program, that prioritizes wholesome, freshly prepared foods that are low-sugar, low-sodium, rich in essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals, can significantly impact your student's health, academic performance, and overall behavior. Here are some of the compelling benefits that a healthy dining program could impact your esteemed institution and students.

### 1. Promotion of Health and Wellness

- a. A nutritious dining program, incorporating fresh minimally processed ingredients, antibiotic-free and free-range chicken, fresh grass-fed beef, low-sugar, low-sodium, and organic produce, schools can significantly reduce the intake of harmful additives and chemicals commonly found in processed foods. This approach is proven to lower the risk of childhood obesity.
- b. The consumption of cheap, highly processed foods has been linked to a myriad of health issues, with childhood obesity being a prominent concern. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. The problem is global" (1)



## 2. Behavioral Impact

- a. Beyond physical health, the foods consumed by students have a profound impact on their cognitive function and behavior. Studies have shown that a diet high in processed foods and additives can lead to increased hyperactivity, inattention, and behavioral issues among children. In fact, the National Institutes of Health states “a poor diet, rich in red and processed meats, refined cereal grains, soft drinks, and hydrogenated fats, was shown to increase the risk of ADHD by 92%.” (3) Conversely, a diet rich in fresh, high-quality ingredients has been associated with improved focus, concentration, and overall behavior.
- b. In the words of Dr. David Ludwig, a pediatrician and nutrition researcher at Boston Children's Hospital, “A diet based on whole foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein, can improve learning and behavior in children.”(4)

## 3. Academic Performance

- a. The link between nutrition and academic performance is well-established. A nutritious dining program provides essential nutrients that support cognitive function and brain development. Improved nutrition has been correlated with enhanced memory, concentration, and overall academic achievement.
- b. A study by Sacred Heart University states that “ High levels of academic achievement are obstructed by poor nutrition in that poor nutrition hinders proper mental development, prevents optimal cognitive functions, decreases test scores, and increases rates of absenteeism and tardiness in schools.”(5)

The significance of a high-quality dining program that embraces fresh, low-sugar, low-sodium, and minimally processed ingredients, along with fresh, antibiotic-free and free-range chicken, fresh grass-fed beef, and organic produce, cannot be overstated. By steering away from cheap, highly processed, fried, frozen, high in sugar, and high in sodium foods, and instead embracing a culture of nutritious, balanced meals, we can protect our students from the dangers of childhood obesity, behavior issues, and lower academic performance.

We encourage your esteemed institution to consider the implementation of a dining program, such as Epicurean Group’s award-winning dining program, recognizing the far-reaching benefits it can offer to your students. Together, let us commit to providing our students with the nourishment they need to thrive physically, mentally, and academically.

### References:

1. World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros. T. World Obesity Day 2022 – Accelerating action to stop obesity 2022, Mar 4. <https://www.who.int/news/item/04-03-2022-world-obesity-day-2022-accelerating-action-to-stop-obesity#:~:text=More%20than%201%20billion%20people,adolescents%20and%2039%20million%20children>. And Obesity and overweight Fact Sheet 2021, June 9.
2. López-Gil JF, Mesas AE, Álvarez-Bueno C, Pascual-Morena C, Saz-Lara A, Cavero-Redondo I. Health and Social Research Center. Association Between Eating Habits and Perceived School Performance: A Cross-Sectional Study Among 46,455 Adolescents From 42 Countries. *Front Nutr*. 2022 Feb 3;9:797415. doi: 10.3389/fnut.2022.797415. PMID: 35187033; PMCID: PMC8852839.
3. Pinto S, Correia-de-Sá T, Sampaio-Maia B, Vasconcelos C, Moreira P, Ferreira-Gomes J. Eating Patterns and Dietary Interventions in ADHD: A Narrative Review. *Nutrients*. 2022 Oct 16;14(20):4332. doi: 10.3390/nu14204332. PMID: 36297016; PMCID: PMC9608000.
4. Ludwig DS, Holst JJ. Childhood Obesity at the Crossroads of Science and Social Justice. *JAMA*. 2023 Jun 13;329(22):1909-1910. doi: 10.1001/jama.2023.7592. PMID: 37126323.
5. Molinelli, M.C., Sacred Heart University. The Relationship Between Nutrition and the Success of Learning in American Elementary Aged Students. 2022, Dec 13. At- <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2004&context=acadfest>