



# ADVOCATING FOR STUDENTS: The Generation Schools Network™ School-Based Health And Wellness Program

 **GENERATION**  
SCHOOLS NETWORK

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# Contents

Executive Summary .....	Page 1
Introduction to Social Emotional Learning in the School Context.....	Page 4
Overview of the Generation Schools Model.....	Page 7
Student Experience.....	Page 8
Teacher Experience .....	Page 9
Elements of the GSN Health & Wellness Program.....	Page 12
Advocacy .....	Page 12
Classroom.....	Page 17
Physical Health Support .....	Page 18
In-School Professional Counselors.....	Page 20
Community Network.....	Page 20
Discipline .....	Page 22
Results of the Program.....	Page 23
Lessons Learned.....	Page 24
Teacher Training is Critical .....	Page 25
Conclusion .....	Page 28
Endnotes.....	Page 29
GSN Health and Wellness Flyer .....	Page 30

# Executive Summary

“Advocacy at my school is the best part of my school day! It helps me build relationships with my teacher and other students, keeps me on track with my goals and helps me with problems that keep me from learning.”

**West Generation Academy 10th Grade Student**

The benefits of school-based health and wellness programs, many elements of which are also referred to as social and emotional learning (SEL), are well-documented. Multiple studies conclude that integration of SEL supports lead to improved academic focus and outcomes that, in turn, enhance future success.

The Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a policy and research organization at the forefront of this effort, defines SEL as:

...the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. SEL programming is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging and meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

The Generation Schools Network™ (GSN) school embedded health and wellness program captures these aspects of SEL and more, incorporating elements of counseling, social work, social service delivery, physical health, exercise, goal setting and monitoring, crisis intervention, and college/career transition planning support. Indeed, few education reform models have embraced the concept of addressing the “whole student” more than the Generation Schools Network Model.

In 2010, the National Association of School Psychologists reported a nationwide average ratio of school psychologists to student of 1:1,383, with the figure in some states in excess of 1:3,000.<sup>2</sup> This often leaves schools in the position of assigning the bulk of student health and wellness responsibilities to one or more already overworked career guidance counselors (national average of 450:1) supported by a cobbled together network of part-time psychologists, nurses, and social workers.

These statistics in and of themselves make it virtually impossible for students, especially those being impacted by issues of poverty, equity, immigration, etc. to receive the support they need to address challenges that are impacting learning.

In contrast, the GSN Model institutionalizes student health and wellness support across the entire staff, providing dedicated time to ensure that each student has an Advocate backed up by a school and community-based resource team. This support is manifest broadly throughout the entire school experience and is evident in the school's academic offerings, discipline policies and dedicated Advocacy time.

The individual SEL elements identified below form something far more than a “program.” In fact it is difficult to isolate these supportive activities within the daily routines, discipline policies and academic curricula at GSN schools. These are not compartmentalized modules taught in silos. Developing the whole student requires a comprehensive approach and GSN's school-based strategies include:

- Providing structured, teacher-led student peer support groups (known as Advocacies) that provide a safe and supportive environment;
- Empowering and enabling teachers to work individually with students to uncover underlying issues manifested in classroom performance and behavior;
- Preparing Advocates to work one-on-one with students and their families to address health and wellness issues and support a future focus;
- Budgeting for an in-school support team that includes professional counselors, social workers, and psychologists;
- Developing partnerships with a network of community social service and healthcare providers for student referrals;
- Promoting healthy living practices in the context of physical education and other classes; and
- Building exercise breaks into class time to refresh the mind and body.

The Generation schools in Brooklyn, Denver, and Cincinnati—Brooklyn Generation School (BGS) grades 9-12, West Generation Academy (WGA) grades 6-12, and Cincinnati Generation Academy (CGA) grades K-6 respectively—are located in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods where students all too often are challenged to learn within a community with above average rates of poverty, drug abuse, violence, gangs, and mobility. Many of these students have limited access to healthcare, nutritious food, stable housing and information about healthy lifestyle choices.

Putting these challenges aside to adequately focus on classroom instruction can seem nearly impossible, making academic struggles and behavioral issues relatively common. However, when the GSN Health and Wellness Program elements are incorporated into the school experience, the results have been encouraging as teachers recognize that academic underperformance is not necessarily the result of poor teaching or low aptitude, and that “acting out” is not always a reflection of incorrigibility. Root causes often are apparent and can be intentionally mitigated to help students excel academically.

The GSN health and wellness support system is guided by two primary strategies:

1. Shift from an approach of offering incremental “add-on” SEL components often as a crisis response to one of integrating SEL practices into daily interaction.
2. Train and support teachers as they develop an educational mindset that integrates SEL.

All GSN educators and administrators strive to deliver an educational experience focused on development of the whole student through rigorous academics, building personal and professional skills, a long term vision of lifetime achievement, and a healthy lifestyle. Ultimately, the program empowers students to resolve issues when they are fixable and helps them cope and adjust when they are not. ♦

# Introduction to Social Emotional Learning in the School Context

The problems our students face are not just problems of schools or education. There are dimensions that are social, political and economic. We are working with students who live awash in the stressors of poverty. Many struggle with immigration issues or English as a second language, or are living with violence... The academic success we've seen is due in large part to our teachers, counselors, and network of community service providers who embrace nurturing the whole student.

**Jonathan Spear, *Co-Founder and Chief Learning Officer***

Generation Schools Network

Jasmene\* came to Florida from Jamaica in 2011 and subsequently was sent to New York City to live with her grandmother in 2012. She came to Brooklyn Generation School (BGS) struggling with the English language and her unfamiliar surroundings. "I'm more of a closed person and I'm not good about expressing my feelings so I keep them inside of me to myself," she explains. "But I know I can talk about things outside of school and inside of school to my Counselor... The people at Brooklyn Generation helped me control my anger and frustration... and they helped me understand the school system." As a senior, Jasmene now is actively exploring college options and a nursing career.

The one word you'll hear repeatedly from Tanya Odums and her team at BGS is "trauma." As Odums, Director of Wellness and Preventive Services, explains,

I wouldn't be surprised if 100% of our kids suffer from some level of physical or emotional trauma given the communities they're coming from. A lot of our kids come from Brownsville, an area with very high crime rates and the kids have to deal with gangs, violence, abandonment, physical and sexual abuse, and losing parents to jail or substance abuse. How can we expect them to focus on school or their future if we don't do what we can to help them with these very real, daily situations?

In 2012, author and researcher Paul Tough pointed out that school reform efforts and national education policy in recent years have narrowly focused on improving teacher quality (such as through changes to tenure policies) in order to close the achievement gap for low income students. He argues that this approach is limited and short-sighted. Poverty in and of itself creates obstacles to learning and achievement and is itself a statistical indicator of additional personal challenges that must be overcome—for example, single-parent households, less-educated parents, and substance abuse. Tough identifies the inevitable result of all of these challenges: student stress.<sup>3</sup>

While Tough suggests that the secret to closing the gap lies largely in building the character of the student, that may only be part of the answer. In addition to building up the student’s self-image and self-worth through social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, a more comprehensive school-based health and wellness program can create pathways to alleviate external challenges related to poverty. This is critical as data indicates that 51% of students in U.S. public schools came from low income family environments.<sup>4</sup>

The value of SEL interventions as school-based efforts was quantitatively confirmed in a recent study by Columbia University. Researchers analyzed costs and benefits of SEL programs that include life skills training in areas such as problem solving, emotional management, and activities to reinforce positive viewpoints. They found that the benefits from these programs (including reduction in substance abuse, incarceration rates, and improved health) far outweigh the costs—with returns of more than 10 to 1 in some areas.<sup>5</sup>

The Generation Schools Network™ (GSN) programs in Brooklyn, at Denver’s West Generation Academy (WGA), and at Cincinnati Generation Academy (CGA) do indeed incorporate SEL elements (building personal character and instilling life skills and a focus on future planning). However, effectively preparing



**“Advocacy is really cool! Every morning we greet each other, shake hands, and just talk.”**

**WGA 10th Grader**

for long-term success is more than a state of mind. As a result, the GSN Health and Wellness Program is intentional in attempting to remove external environmental distractions to learning because learning is optimized when student minds are unencumbered by physical and emotional stress.<sup>6</sup>

Responsibility for carrying out many elements of the program lies with teachers and professional staff within the course of their daily responsibilities. The unique use of teacher time, talent, and resources in the GSN Model makes this possible within the confines of teacher contracts.

The health and wellness program itself is emblematic of GSN’s emphasis on broadly utilizing teacher skills and holistically working with a student to prepare him or her for a successful post-secondary transition. Before exploring the GSN Health and Wellness Program in more detail, a high-level overview of the GSN education model is detailed below to provide a context for integration of social and emotional learning.

## Themed Advocacy Units





## Overview of the GSN Academic Experience

The GSN Model<sup>7</sup> provides for a school day and academic year that are fundamentally restructured to expand learning time by as much as 30 percent, enhancing the opportunity for students to explore and prepare for college and career and receive social and emotional support. Teachers also benefit from the model through significant time scheduled for collaborative planning and professional development.

STRUCTURE	TRADITIONAL TEACHING	GENERATION SCHOOLS MODEL
Student Load	TRADITIONAL TEACHING 175 students daily (secondary)	GENERATION SCHOOLS MODEL 75 students/day
Class Load	5 classes daily	3 classes daily + Advocacy
Classroom Assignments	Teachers assigned a classroom	Classrooms utilized for multiple classes and purposes
Staffing	Teachers are hired for a subject or grade	Three different teaching teams hired for different teaching roles and staggered throughout the day and year to increase instruction time for students
Planning Time	Teacher planning periods scheduled various times throughout the day making collaboration challenging and often requiring paying substitutes to allow for teacher collaboration time or having an early dismissal or late start	Teacher teams have up to 2 hours of common planning time daily to apply data, group students, plan instruction and receive coaching
Teacher Teams	Teachers sometimes collaborate by grade or subject but largely function as an independent unit	Teacher teams consist of content experts, dual certified ELL and SPED teachers and paraprofessionals who all meet daily to address challenges, create opportunities and take responsibility for instruction
Professional Development	2-3 days per year, often district mandated, best teachers pulled out of the classroom to serve as instructional coaches	Up to 20 days per year, and two hours per day, the best teachers can remain in the classroom with students, serve as grade team leaders and support the professional growth of their colleagues

## Student Experience

Morning Humanities and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) subjects taught in 90 minute blocks are heavily emphasized in what are referred to as Foundation Courses that employ a blended learning rotational model. Afternoon Studio Courses complement these core courses and can serve as learning labs for remediation, acceleration and reinforcement; expand student horizons in the arts and other elective subjects; and provide time for concurrent enrollment, internships, and other future-focus activities.

The students' schedule also includes Advocacy—a group meeting facilitated by a teacher or staff member (Advocate) in which students explore challenges and opportunities in a supportive peer environment. The Advocacy session is at the core of the GSN Health and Wellness program and will be explored in more detail throughout this paper.

Throughout the year, students also embark on a journey to explore and prepare for post-secondary options. During these College and Career Intensive Courses, the students visit local workplaces and colleges, work on industry-related projects, and participate in a series of lessons, exposure opportunities and personalized activities that help them envision and plan for their post-secondary transition.

Overall, learning time is expanded by up to two hours per day and 20 days per year compared to traditional schools. While the school day is slightly longer, there still is sufficient time for after-school extracurricular activities.



**““We build healthy relationships with students and teachers so that each student in the building has at least one adult and a small group of other students they can trust.””**

<b>Students</b>	<b>FOUNDATION Teachers</b>	<b>STUDIO Teachers</b>
<b>FOUNDATION COURSE</b> 18-22 students   90 min.	<b>FOUNDATION COURSE</b> 18-22 students   90 min.	<b>COMMON PLANNING TIME FOR EVERY StudioTEACHING TEAM</b> 120 min.+
<b>FOUNDATION COURSE</b> 18-22 students   90 min.	<b>FOUNDATION COURSE</b> 18-22 students   90 min.	<b>60min. Administrative Duty</b>
<b>LUNCH + Advocacy GROUPS</b> 75 minutes	<b>LUNCH + Advocacy GROUPS</b> 75 minutes	<b>LUNCH + Advocacy GROUPS</b> 75 minutes
<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.	<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.	<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.
<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.	<b>COMMON PLANNING TIME FOR EVERY FOUNDATION-TEACHING TEAM</b> 150 min.	<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.
<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.		<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.
<b>EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES</b> (optional for students & staff)		<b>STUDIO COURSE</b> 30 students   75 min.

## Teacher Experience

Likely the biggest factor driving the success of the GSN program is the quality and commitment of its teachers. Given that they are assigned fewer daily classes and a reduced student load over more traditional settings, teachers are able to spend more time with individual students and assume more responsibility for their success. In their role as Advocates, they serve as the first line of defense when student health and wellness issues emerge and begin to interfere with academic success.

While GSN expects its teachers to meet the needs of the whole student, the system provides significant resources and time to help them be effective in doing so. Planning and collaboration time is built into the teachers' daily schedules. Training and skill development occur in the weeks leading up to the school year and during the time their students are experiencing College and Career Intensives Courses.

	<b>FOUNDATION Teachers</b>	<b>STUDIO Teachers</b>	<b>INTENSIVES Teachers</b>
<b>PRIMARY Role</b>	Teach 2 core Foundation courses each morning.	Teach 2 core Foundation courses each morning. Teach 3 Studios each afternoon (electives, other courses, mandated services, etc.)	Teach Intensive courses focused on college and career readiness. Each lasts for one month.
<b>SECONDARY Role</b>	Teach one Studio course each afternoon, or provide mandated services.	Provide administrative support (attendance, scheduling, IEP compliance, etc.)	Provide Smart Start support to launch the school year and college and career guidance throughout the year.

Nearly all teachers and professional staff are assigned to facilitate a daily Advocacy group and are trained to deliver on the five elements of a successful Advocacy program detailed below. Members of the school's Advocacy Committee coach and support their colleagues, ensuring they have the most urgent and relevant information to guide students on issues such as bullying, depression, stress management, family outreach, mental and physical health along with meeting timely needs such as internship, and college application deadlines.

Due to the unique annual and daily schedule, while student class time is extended, a teacher's day and school year remain largely the same as in a traditional school. Further, personal after-hours time spent preparing for class activity is minimized thanks to the planning time built into the teachers' daily schedule and academic year.

# Annual Schedule

- Vacation
- Professional Development - all teachers get at least 20 days of job embedded
- PD a year
- Foundation & Studio Courses/Teacher Instruction  
College & Career Intensives/Teacher Instruction

## Students: 200 School Days

Grade	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Mar	Jun	
9th	Full School Vacation												
10th													
11th													
12th													

## Teachers: 180 School Days

Role	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Mar	Jun	
9th grade	Full School Vacation												
10th grade													
11th grade													
12th grade													
Intensives													

**Note:** 1) Teachers have a one-month vacation in July. They also have two separate 4-week breaks throughout the school year consisting of three weeks of vacation and one week of team planning and PD.  
 2) A side agreement with the United Federation of Teachers in New York and an Innovation Plan in Colorado allows for this schedule.

## Elements of the GSN Student Health & Wellness Program

Advocacy is designed to support every student’s social and emotional growth, stimulate their academic progress, and prepare for successful post-secondary transition. In the process, students build supportive relationships of trust with a caring adult —their Advocate—and many of their peers.

**Wendy Loloff Piersee, CEO**  
Generation Schools Network

### Advocacy

Attention to student health and wellness occurs throughout the day in a GSN-model school but is most pointedly addressed during a daily session called Advocacy, led by a teacher-Advocate. While other schools may capture SEL elements within the role of an “Advisor,” GSN’s use of the term “Advocate” is purposeful in that it elevates the scope and stakes of the activity. Advocating implies “going to bat for” and “taking personal responsibility for” individual students. This, incidentally, prepares and trains students to advocate for themselves in the school setting and beyond.

The GSN Advocacy structure hinges on the fact that young people are social beings. Students who are connected to the school community through a trusted adult and a supportive peer group are more likely to come to school, work hard in classes, feel optimistic about their futures, and succeed long term.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately the environment created by Advocacy is one of a school-wide positive culture and climate—developed one student and teacher at a time.

In practice, Advocacy takes place primarily in daily small group sessions of 30-45 minutes where students “check in” with their Advocate on scholastic issues as well as health and wellness matters. In these sessions, students talk about typical adolescent challenges like rumor-spreading, relationships, and bullying. Anastasia, a 10th grader at WGA describes the Advocacy format in her class. “Every day we have to respond to a question or issue and go around the room. We get to interact with people we don’t normally talk with. If there is someone with the same opinion that I have, we have a connection right there.”

In the Silent Epidemic Study, students were asked why they dropped out of high school. Many stated that they felt no one at their school would even notice if they were gone.<sup>9</sup> Advocacy ensures that every student is noticed, greeted, and checked on every day. In fact, in the event of an absence, the Advocate calls the home to check on the student’s status.

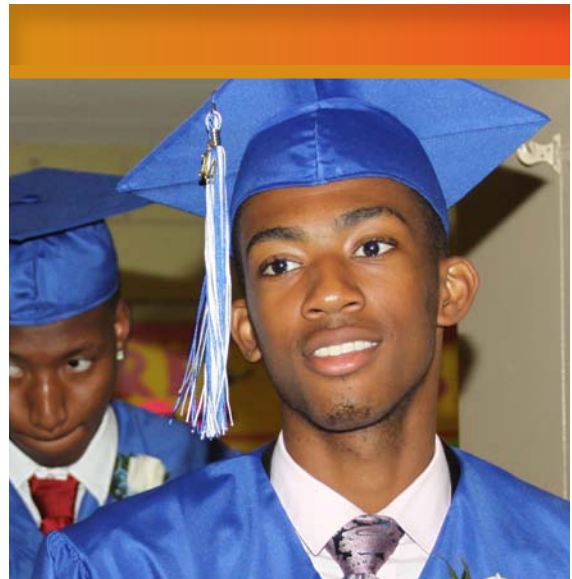
GSN's Advocacy program is built around five goals.

- 1. Develop and maintain relationships (student to student, student to Advocate) reinforced by supportive personal relationships with family members, school staff, community partners, and others.** Also referred to as “mentoring” or “coaching,” this activity acknowledges the principle that a student is more likely to care about success when the people, especially adults, in his or her life care about the student. Experts at the University of Minnesota point out the limitations but also the incredible potential of these adult relationships in a school setting.

Youth need to be the active agent of change; adults cannot force it. However, staff can act as social and emotional coaches by providing support, encouragement, and guidance as youth navigate social and emotional terrain. (Rusk, et al., 2013)...Staff who view themselves as social and emotional coaches will become careful observers of youth's social and emotional skills and experiences and offer feedback and thoughtful learning experiences to foster growth.<sup>10</sup>

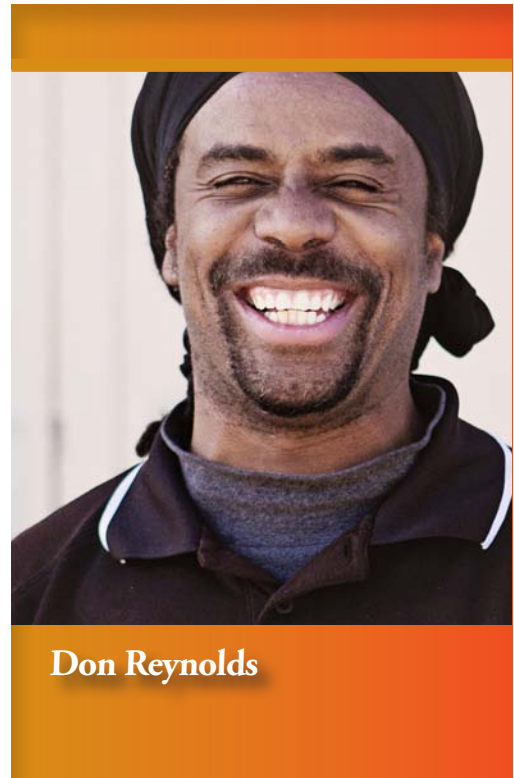
- 2. Support students in reflecting upon and monitoring their academic progress through a formal conferencing structure.** In addition to promoting SEL priorities, Advocacy offers a setting for reinforced student accountability and predictable intervention to help keep academics and attendance top of mind for the student. Foundation and Studio Course teachers routinely advise a student's Advocate regarding the student's achievements as well as observed academic challenges. Root causes are explored and discussed with the student in one-on-one meetings.

Personal goal setting occurs in this environment as well supported by the coaching relationship established. GSN encourages the use of the SMART goal construct that



**“Students come together in a safe environment where they are able to engage in meaningful social, emotional, and academic conversations and activities with a teacher and their peers”**

ensure goals are: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound. Goals typically are built around grades, attendance, behavior, and credits (high school). Students monitor progress toward achieving these goals to create momentum toward growth and achievement. Don Reynolds, a math teacher at WGA, requires his Advocacy students to always be focused on three different goal time frames. Each Monday his students set a “Big Goal for the Week” and at the beginning of every trimester, students set a goal for that trimester as well as one for the year ahead.



**Don Reynolds**

**3. Recognize when a student’s personal, physical, emotional, social, and psychological needs are presenting barriers to academic success and use strategies to mitigate them through referrals.**

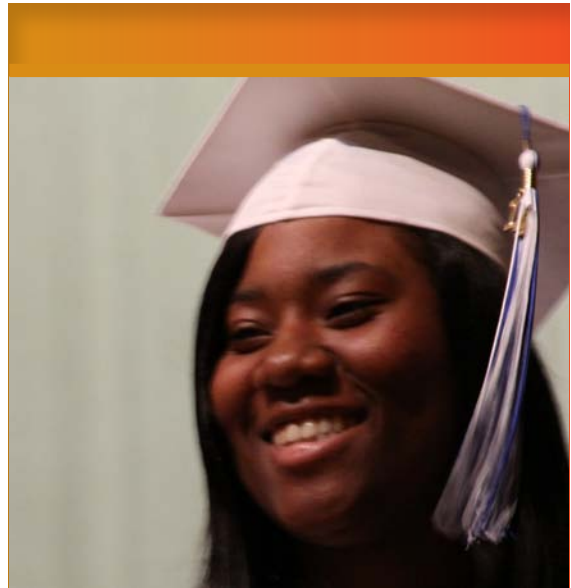
For better or worse, students do not have well-honed life compartmentalization skills. They typically are distracted and sidetracked by social dramas, family concerns, and health issues. These are accentuated, and the list grows, in high-poverty situations. It is no wonder that school work often takes a backseat in the daily lives of students. Psychologist Susan Engel points out that students ideally need to rely on resources in the school setting to help obtain that necessary foundation of well-being.<sup>11</sup> As mentioned above, the key to accomplishing this is having an adult Advocate check in daily with students on these types of personal matters. Developing this trusting relationship allows the student to report his or her needs and request assistance sooner with issues such as housing, transportation, food security, and health.

As needed, Advocates refer students to an in-house school nurse, social worker, or staff psychologist. Using the Resource & Referral Guide developed for the school by GSN, Advocates may also steer students and their families to a local community agency that has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the school to help meet the needs of students and families.



**4. Identify and develop the necessary attitudes, behaviors, awareness, and skills to succeed in school, college, and life.** A 2013 survey sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities offers an interesting perspective on the skills employers are looking for in college graduates. Notably, more than nine out of ten employers indicated that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than a candidate’s undergraduate major.”<sup>12</sup> GSN firmly believes that developing those skills, as well as flexible thinking, persistence, collaboration, and the ability to focus<sup>13</sup>, should start early (at the elementary school level) and be reinforced throughout middle and high school in GSN’s Advocacy sessions, Foundation and Studio classrooms, and in the context of the College and Career Intensives courses. GSN has partnered with Pairin, The Talent Science Company to develop a tool that measures these personal competencies to help students track their progress.

**5. Provide students with the resources and information necessary to make thoughtful decisions about the future with a focus on post-secondary planning.** GSN offers extensive post-high school preparation in its College and Career Intensives program. These lessons are reinforced in Advocacy where students are encouraged to undertake specific tasks to prepare for post-secondary transition. As an example, for 11th and 12th graders this may include writing and reviewing college essays with their peers, completing job or internship applications or developing a LinkedIn profile. At least one Advocacy session per week is focused on assessing future possibilities,



“We see in our Advocacy classes all the time just how kids take care of each other, how they look out for one another, and how they push each other to make the right choices and to succeed...Most of the kids in our schools come from similar backgrounds and home lives and they understand what another student is going through and the obstacles they are up against.”

Mary Cipollone  
Director, Health & Wellness  
Generation Schools Network™

college/career readiness mapping and taking concrete steps toward planning for the future using a guided sequence provided by GSN. Setting aside this dedicated time ensures that every student receives the opportunity to successfully prepare for post-secondary transition.

A key element of Advocacy is shifting a student's perspective from a day-to-day focus to one of creating and meeting longer-term goals, to replace daily drift. The Advocacy meetings and one-on-one sessions offer the accountability and support so necessary for moving down this path and the cycle of setting, meeting, and re-setting goals.

Group Advocacy sessions often are devoted to learning and practicing valuable life skills such as public speaking, problem solving, and active listening. While students in general tend to avoid showing vulnerabilities and sharing feelings, with the right facilitative leadership by the Advocate, peer to peer support within Advocacy can be genuine and powerful. Internalizing protective factors such as social connectedness is particularly important during middle and high school years when adolescents tend to experience feelings of isolation and alienation.<sup>14</sup>

**An Advocate's responsibilities can extend beyond this daily group session and include:**

- Checking in with another Foundation or Studio Course teacher to gain insight into specific behavior or performance issues to develop further support strategies;
- Referring students to in-school counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses, or similar professionals;
- Referring students and their families to community support services outside the school.
- Serving as the school's primary conduit for interaction with a student's family—inviting them to school events and keeping them informed of the student's progress via phone calls, parent-teacher conferences, and (if possible and warranted) home visits.

Advocacy groups can also be established to serve a specific group of students with common needs for a specific period of time. BGS has been on the forefront of this, setting up, for example, a Women's Empowerment Group (addressing gender self-esteem issues), Kids Making a Change (for students drifting dangerously toward the juvenile detention system), and Respect Squad (primarily for freshmen who are having difficulty acclimating to the high school setting).

In addition to her College Readiness Advocacy, Markinlie, an 11th grader at BGS, participates in a grief and loss group started by Odums in 2014. After she lost her mother in a traffic accident the previous year, Markinlie explains that, “I felt I was alone...I didn’t want to talk with anyone...In the class, we talk about grief and we know that we’re not alone and that there are other people that have the same feelings...Now I’m able to be more social.” Odums felt it was important to start this class after a number of students lost family members in the summer of 2014. She explains, “In that class, we learn about and work through the five stages of grief so the students can understand what’s behind their mood shifts and attitudes in the weeks and months after their loss.”

Even though the School’s Advocacy Committee chooses topics from an Advocacy Curriculum Guide provided by GSN, Advocates are encouraged to be innovative with their programs as long as the lessons remain meaningful. One Denver teacher conducted an Advocacy program in conjunction with another Denver school, one that was more suburban and with a more affluent student demographic. Students crossed over between the schools for Advocacy-type sessions—and some broadening insights were shared in both directions.

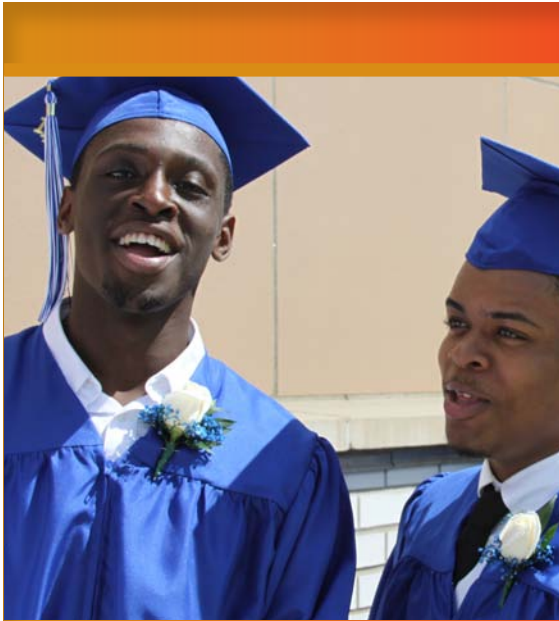
The GSN Advocacy curriculum is thematic in nature so Advocates can choose from topics that are most relevant for their particular group of students. They can also request additional lessons from GSN to address unanticipated student needs. These types of requests have included a series for elementary school students on managing anger, a middle school series on personal hygiene and high school lessons to address students’ questions related to the legalization of marijuana in their state.

## Classroom

Individual student challenges can quickly become evident in a Foundation or Studio Course classroom. GSN teachers are encouraged to determine if the issue is purely an academic challenge—comprehension of the material or a language barrier, for example—or whether there



**“Get better grades and good attendance**



**Students say Advocacy has helped them to:**

**“Stay relaxed and out of trouble”**

**“Become less shy and quiet”**

**“Set goals and know what I need to do in order to do well in my classes”**

may be an underlying health and wellness factor. Purely scholastic issues in a Foundation Course setting can be resolved through placement in a Studio Learning Lab, a referral for a special education evaluation or push in ELL support or with another type of differentiated learning arrangement.

However, when a teacher suspects underlying health and wellness problems are driving a problematic classroom situation, he or she elevates the issue—initially to the student’s Advocate. In the GSN model, Advocacies are assigned by grade level, allowing for one day each week of teacher collaboration time at the grade level to focus specifically on Advocacy and Response to Intervention strategies.

As described below, the classroom is also where GSN implements its “Active Bodies, Active Minds” program, drawing on the well-documented tenet that brief periods of exercise in a classroom setting stimulate the brain and enhance comprehension, concentration, and retention<sup>15</sup>. At least once during a 90-minute Foundation Course, instruction stops and a brief 3-5 minute period of active exercise and stress relief takes place. This movement can incorporate academic content or serve purely as a “brain break.”

## **Physical Health Support**

Under the theme, “Active Bodies, Active Minds,” GSN integrates physical activity into the classroom.

In his popular guide to classroom fitness activity, Dr. David Katz notes the multitude of benefits from such “activity bursts” throughout the school day, including:

- Reduction in obesity and other weight-related conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, and depression;
- Development of exercise habits that will carry through life;
- Stress reduction that frees students to engage more fully with their peers and in the classroom
- Enhanced concentration and brain activity in the classroom; and
- Reinforcement of a sense of belonging and interpersonal skills (e.g., teamwork and cooperation) through group exercise.<sup>16</sup>

GSN encourages teachers to incorporate at least one activity break into each class period. They also are encouraged to creatively tie this activity into the lesson plan to reinforce learning objectives. The school uses Katz's material, the Active Bodies, Active Minds poster and other guides to support teachers' efforts.

Physical health support also encompasses assistance in obtaining preventive and treatment services. Typical student health challenges, according to Odums at BGS, include pregnancy prevention, STDs, obesity, drug abuse, depression, and seizures. Counselors and Advocates at GSN schools in Denver, Brooklyn, and Cincinnati are prepared to counsel students on these issues and also refer them to community agencies, county hospitals, substance abuse clinics, and other organizations. Community partnerships provide additional education and prevention opportunities for students in these areas.

Physical Education classes include health education about the benefits of physical activity and a healthy lifestyle along with information about common health conditions such as STDs, diabetes, and heart disease common in the local population. Students often complete a research project during a health Intensive exploring the details of a specific disease, looking into causes, prevention, and treatment. Preparing a health fair for the school's community is another popular project option.

Odums describes her team's approach to health and wellness as much more hands-on than the typical New York City school. "We act almost like a mini-preventive program and we're extremely active with assessments and referrals." When necessary, school personnel venture outside the building, for example to a Medicaid office, family court, or the Department of Probation, in support of a student.

## In-School Professional Counselors

GSN Advocacy teachers are backed by a team of professional counselors. While every school has a different mix of these care providers, students typically have access to an on premise nurse, social worker, therapist, and psychologist. Additionally, local graduate school students in these disciplines frequently fulfill internship requirements supporting the team.

The GSN Resource and Referral Guide provides instructions on when and with whom teachers should confer on typical issues ranging from vision correction to transportation challenges as well as emergency situations such as suicide concerns.

Advocates though, are not simply conduits pushing students to social workers. Mary Cipollone, GSN Director of Health and Wellness, explains, “The long term goal is to arm the Advocates with more of these social work skills that they usually don’t learn about in a typical teachers college. But in the event of a serious matter, we definitely want them to refer.”

Charles Davis is a school psychologist at BGS and he points out quickly that there are no cookie cutter fixes for the students—they all have unique stories and situations. “We accept them as they are and work with them from that point. Our wellness approach is a holistic approach—working with home life, community life, and school life and putting it all together to make sure each student has a full, positive experience.”

## Community Network

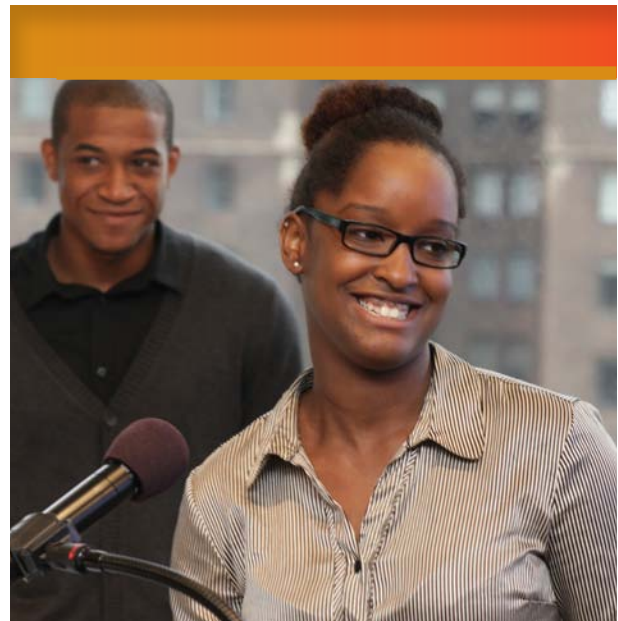
School administrators and GSN organizational staff strategically reach into the community to identify support partners who agree, through the aforementioned Memorandum of Understanding, to be an available resource for the school’s students and families. Throughout the year, GSN counselors, administrators, and Advocates link students and their families with government agencies and nonprofit organizations that can provide services related to:

- Physical health—including dental, vision, sexual health, and substance abuse
- Mental health
- Access to food and shelter
- Immigration assistance
- Legal assistance

- Grief and loss counseling
- LGBTQ support
- Childcare and community-based enrichment programs
- Transportation and bus routes
- Additional services based on need

The teachers' Resource and Referral Guide includes information on available organizations and programs. When necessary, school personnel coach a student on how to request assistance from these groups—to the point of walking them through the experience of making the connection and requesting services.

As an example, WGA students benefit greatly from the Denver-based nonprofit, Colorado Uplift—a comprehensive in-school/after-school mentoring model for urban youth. Colorado Uplift's accredited full-time teachers teach Studio Course electives in character education at WGA and then lead complementary after school small group, large group, and one-on-one sessions at Colorado Uplift's facility. Gabe Trujillo, Colorado Uplift's Vice President of Program Services (and a former Denver middle school principal), explains that in the course of the WGA classes, and with the help of WGA faculty, “we identify a lot of kids with school ‘connectedness’ issues. These are not bad kids—they're not failing, but they're wandering... they're not involved in a lot of activities. We call them ‘ghosts,’ they don't have a strong enough connective point at the school.” These students are steered to Colorado Uplift's afterschool program where they can broaden their horizons and interact with mentors, participate in organized field trips, and be involved in facilitated peer sessions.



**Teachers say the purpose of Advocacy is:**

**“To create a safe space where students can fail, talk, and inquire”**

**“To give students a home base to talk about issues”**

**“To establish culture and support for our students”**

**“To help students become successful advocates for themselves”**

## Discipline

BGS's Odums is convinced that disciplinary action is a component of, and must be consistent with, health and wellness support. Student misdeeds can have many different triggers—some related to mental health. As she explains:

If at all possible, disciplinary codes must be flexible. You have to decipher what is going on [with a student]. Is it a mental health issue leading to behavioral problems? Or is it someone who needs structure and consequences?...Disciplinary codes need more flexibility with consequences based on a personal understanding of what the individual's issues are.

Clearly, some behavior can be traced to a cultural, socio-economic, familial, or health situation. GSN administrators are encouraged to consult with a student's family, Advocate, and other school personnel to construct a meaningful disciplinary consequence and to determine if the situation should trigger some type of health and wellness support response.

When it comes to imposing consequences, GSN strives to apply principles of “restorative justice.” The classic example of restorative justice is requiring a graffiti vandal to repair the damage he or she caused and write letters of apology. In this way, actions taken against society are ameliorated and the person is restored back into the community.

Restorative justice is combined with the related principles embodied in the concepts of “love and logic” (<http://www.loveandlogic.com/t-what-is-for-Love-and-Logic-teachers.aspx>) . GSN students are aware of a set of basic rules at the school and understand that adhering to them is the best choice they can make to assist their learning process. Corrective action is meted out with a predictability that allows the student to experience the consequences, but in a way that also provides a measure of empathy and love so that the recipient knows that while the actions were not appropriate for a learning environment, the person is still valued. Each encounter leaves the student with a clear choice for restoration and personal growth. Discipline is viewed as a learning opportunity where both the choice and adherence to the consequence are under the student's control.

The Love and Logic philosophy developed by Jim Fay and Foster Cline, also requires determining underlying causes of violations or misbehavior and focusing there first. For example, a substance abuse violation that



causes a student to be late and disruptive in class should trigger appropriate counseling in which GSN staff and teachers look deeper than the outward behavior to get the student the help he or she needs.

GSN schools also seek to reinforce positive behavior. Each school is encouraged to identify core values and then integrate them into a rewards and incentives program. At WGA, teachers and students nominate one another for PLACE (Persistence, Leadership, Academic Achievement, Community, and Engagement) Awards. Celebrations occur throughout the year and the student's family is notified.

Cipollone points out that when it comes to discipline and managing behavior, the GSN teacher in the classroom is in a unique position to head off these issues.

It's really up to the teachers to set the right culture and expectations... If you see a classroom where there are a lot of kids misbehaving, it's generally not the students' fault; it mostly comes back to the teacher. Therefore, the challenge for the school is to support the teachers so they can create high expectations, deliver engaging content, and incorporate routines and rituals—all the things that keep students focused and help them to ultimately succeed. And of course, when things still go wrong, employ the principles of restorative justice and love and logic.

## Results of the Program

As mentioned, the GSN Health and Wellness Program is designed to build character and ameliorate external and internal barriers to learning. Therefore, determining the impact of the program should be a function of measuring improved academic performance, attendance, retention, feelings of safety and solid plans for post-secondary transition. Evidence can also be seen through a reduction in discipline incidents and teacher and student satisfaction data. While many aspects of the GSN experience contribute to the success of the students, the comprehensive Health and Wellness Program surely is one significant factor along with GSN's extended classroom time that allows for differentiation, motivated teachers, teacher collaboration and training time, and deliberate college and career preparation.

A fundamental tenet of the GSN model is that each student should have daily access to a caring adult who is motivated to help that student succeed. This goal is well on its way to being met. In an anonymous survey of WGA students regarding their Advocacy experience,

- 83% said their Advocacy teacher is available and easy to talk to;
- 82% knew their Advocacy teachers cared about them;
- 73% felt they had classmates in their Advocacy that they trusted; and
- 65% felt they could be themselves in Advocacy without being judged.

Other results are evident as well:

- 68% of the students in grades 9-11 at WGA have already completed a college course. Nearly 100% of those students come from families where no one has previously attended college
- Graduation rates in 2014 at BGS exceeded the expectations of public school officials by a factor of 2.25.
- WGA attendance has improved dramatically over the past three years, increasing by more than 6% at both the high school and middle school level.
- At Pagosa Springs Elementary, an elementary school in rural Colorado where GSN worked with teachers to redesign the use of time in response to their pain points, they implemented a daily Advocacy program and saw discipline referrals drop by 50% over the previous year.

## Lessons Learned

**Advocacy requires dedicated time of at least 20 minutes, but ideally 30-40 minutes per day.**

While Generation Schools Network is known for redesigning time to create schools that are simultaneously good for students, teachers and industry, any school that wants to reap the true benefits of an Advocacy program must set aside dedicated time for Advocacy to take place, ideally on a daily basis. This time trade-off can net the types of benefits discussed throughout the paper when delivery of the five elements of Advocacy are prioritized.

**The types and mix of health and wellness demands varies from school to school.**

Student body cultural diversity, social norms, poverty levels, and many other local conditions vary from city to city and school to school. As Cipollone points out,

There is a big difference between the student populations in Denver and Brooklyn and that helps guide our mix of services and teacher focus in the two schools...For example, Brooklyn has a significant population of Haitian immigrants, many of whom came to New York after the last major earthquake in Haiti. They might be orphans and their only living relative is in Brooklyn—they are possibly unwanted or not really welcomed...for them, overcoming trauma, acquiring language skills, and cultural adaptation issues are key...The Denver student body may be a little more homogenous culturally, but immigration challenges are more prevalent and ease of access to marijuana is at the root of many disciplinary incidents at WGA.

Clearly, these types of differences call for a unique mix of health and wellness services and supports. Rather than imposing a pre-designed health and wellness program from the top down, these programs should be designed based on informed input from students and families, local health and wellness caregivers, teachers, law enforcement representatives, and social service providers. Advocates should have the latitude to customize their lesson plans and formats to meet student needs while best accomplishing the purposes of Advocacy. Over time, the program must evolve to meet new areas of emphasis such as impacts from natural disasters (for example, the BGS community was hit hard by Hurricane Sandy) and even changes in local laws and regulations (such as Colorado's legislation to legalize the recreational use of marijuana).

## **Teacher Training Is Critical**

Quality teachers are most often natural mentors and coaches. They want nothing more than to help develop the “whole student”—encompassing not just academics but also social, physical, and emotional welfare. But young psyches are fragile and adolescent challenges must be handled carefully. For that reason, professional development time is built into the GSN teacher's annual schedule. Some of that time is devoted to health and wellness training so that teachers can serve as first responders when student challenges become evident. At WGA, the “Mental Health First Aid” curriculum, which engages Colorado state agency staff instructors, has been used to prepare teachers for that role. Without this type of training, a teacher could become overwhelmed, or even worse, handle an opportunity poorly in spite of his or her best intentions.

Health and wellness matters also are covered in Advocacy training, and the teachers' Advocacy Curriculum Handbook includes information on what to look for when it comes to these challenges. Equally valuable, though, is the one-on-one informal guidance teachers receive from one another in Advocacy workshops provided by GSN and during the collaborative time built into the teacher's daily schedule. In addition to teacher training, teacher aptitude in this area is important. As Leslie Burdick, GSN's Coordinator of

Partnerships & Community Engagement points out, “Teacher job descriptions are pretty clear about our expectations in the area of health and wellness support, we cover it in the job interview as well. Even before we hire someone, we really want to know if serving as an Advocate is something they are interested in and passionate about.”

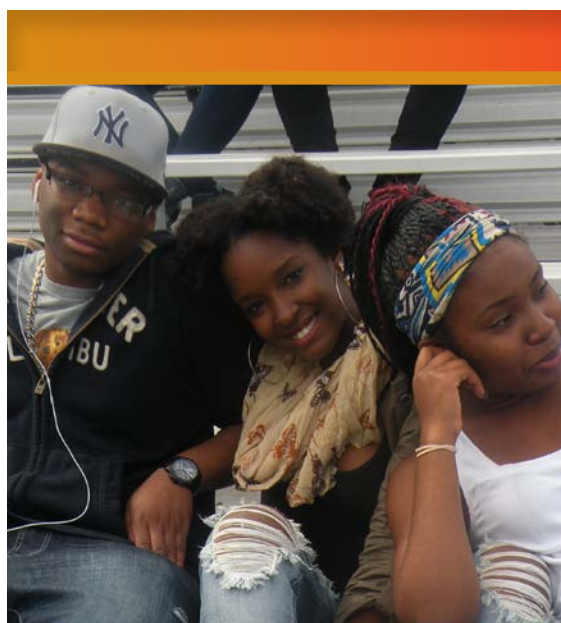
As described above, teachers in GSN schools collectively form an Advocacy Committee, made up of teachers who are passionate about Advocacy opportunities; a representative of school leadership; and often the school nurse, psychologist, and social worker. Committee members frequently offer constructive guidance to peers for whom this role is a challenge and the related responsibilities do not come as naturally.

### **Teachers Must Embrace Their Advocate Roles**

Advocacy can make a big difference in a student’s life if the program is implemented correctly and the Advocate buys into the curriculum and process. According to Burdick, “My analysis shows that there is a big difference in student grades and other performance measures when the Advocate takes it seriously and implements the structures that GSN has created.” Though they are provided with curriculum materials and training, Advocacy teachers must plan for their daily Advocacy session in a way similar to how they prepare for a Foundation or Studio Course.

While acknowledging that Advocacy comes easier to some teachers than others, Don Reynolds, WGA math teacher, clearly has embraced his role as an Advocate:

One of the primary pieces of the [GSN] Model that attracted me to the school was Advocacy...In my first two years I stayed pretty well scripted with the Advocacy



### **Students like Advocacy because:**

“They let me be myself and I can tell them about my personal problems.”

“We talk about situations and conflicts in our school, ways to improve ourselves, and the society around us.”

“I feel like part of a community.”

“I feel much safer.”

curriculum I was provided. Now I've taken that and run with it...I stress the theme that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to respond to challenges. These kids know already that life is not going to be consistently easy, so we have real conversations about a lot of situations and how best to respond.

### **Administrators And School Districts Must Support And Measure Health And Wellness Efforts**

Though the benefits from SEL activities are not always immediate, administrators must remain committed to the programs and measuring the impact of implementation to net results. Cipollone observes:

Physical activity and Advocacy are always on the chopping block when schools decide they need more time for things like math tutoring, reading, or other STEM related activity. You have to constantly take the opportunity to demonstrate that this is an important investment that really pays dividends when it comes to academic performance.

GSN has been working with Pairin, the Talent Science Company in partnership with several other entities in Colorado and New York to form the Project Be: Ready Consortium (<http://www.projectbeready.org/>). The consortium has been focused for the past two years on the development of a reliable survey tool to measure a student's capacity on 20 different personal and professional behaviors desired by employers and demonstrated to be critical for successful employment. Among the characteristics measured are problem solving, collaboration, leadership, grit, accountability and initiative among others. Use of the Project Be: Ready survey allows teachers and Advocates to capitalize on student's strengths and better understand their areas of challenge; critical information in helping them reach their individual goals for post-secondary success and transition. It also validates the investment of time in Health & Wellness efforts since progress is measurable in a way that is meaningful to both the teachers and employers as well as the the students themselves. ◆

# Conclusion

Velesia\*, a 10th Grader at WGA has never really known her father. He was incarcerated when she was an infant and she now sees him once a year. “It’s hard growing up without a dad,” she admits. “I talk a lot to [my Advocate] about how I feel about that. We actually find things to laugh about and it helps make my sadness go away.”

Clearly, the days are long gone when school instruction and the school experience simply encompassed a series of lecture classes interrupted by a lunch period and PE class. Schools now are rightly expected to address the health and wellness needs of their students whenever possible to remove barriers to learning. This should not be seen as an additional onerous obligation, but rather as an opportunity to support the whole student, improve every student’s academic performance, and enhance every student’s list of assets to propel future societal contribution and self-sufficiency.

The challenge always has been to find the time and resources to offer this level of student support. This struggle takes place in all schools—public, private, urban, suburban, and rural. The need for these services, however, is arguably greatest and most wide-ranging in settings where students come from disadvantaged communities. GSN’s ability to help schools rethink the use of time, talent and resources, provide curriculum and support teacher training makes integration possible.

From the beginning, GSN has included health and wellness development and services as an integral part of its model and as a key function at its schools—first in New York, then in Colorado, and now in Ohio. Thanks to teachers and social service providers within the schools and in their respective communities, the GSN schools are providing services that enhance students’ self-esteem and confidence, putting them in daily contact with a caring adult, providing access to physical and mental health guidance and care, and meting out discipline in a positive and productive manner.

This full scope of health and wellness care is not only fulfilling a critical day-to-day need, but empowering students to excel in school and be better prepared for college, careers, and the balance of their lives.

\*Student names changed to protect privacy

# Endnotes

1. Insert CASEL reference (website): <http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/>.
2. Please cite the PDF identified in the fourth item on the list of studies on this page: <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/spworkforce.aspx>.
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5. Belfield, C., et al. (2015). *The economic value of social and emotional learning*. Teachers College, Columbia University, Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education.
6. Jensen, E., (2008). *Teaching with the brain in mind*. Alexandria, VA. ASCD, p. 74
7. For more in-depth information on the GSN education model, please review the information on the Resources page of the GSN website: <http://generationschools.org/learning-opportunities-and-resources.html>.
8. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr05/vol62/num07/A-Case-for-School-Connectedness.aspx>
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10. Blyth, D., Olson, B., Walker, K. (2015). *Intentional practices to support social & emotional learning*. University of Minnesota Extension. Youth Development Issue Brief. February, 2015. Authors cite Rusk, N., et al. (2013). *Research applications and interventions for children and adolescents*. pp 247-261.
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15. Jensen, *Teaching with the brain in mind*, page 44
16. Katz, D. *ABC for Fitness™ Teacher Manual*, 2006, rev. 2008.

# HEALTH & WELLNESS



Integrated health programming empowers students to succeed in school, work, and life.

Students growing up in under resourced communities confront a myriad of health and wellness related obstacles to academic success including experiences of violence, abuse, and neglect; limited access to health care, recreational opportunities, and nutritious food; and a lack of education and awareness around healthy lifestyles. Our innovative health and wellness programming empowers students with a supportive community and the skills, information, and resources they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond.



## ADVOCACY

During this daily student-centered time block, 9-15 students meet with their faculty Advocate to engage in activities that support their social and emotional growth as well as their academic success. These sessions provide students with opportunities for positive peer interaction, life skills development, and coaching to overcome educational, personal, and social barriers to educational attainment. Teachers receive additional training to fulfill their role as true Advocates that support students' complex needs. Teachers are also equipped to integrate social and emotional learning into all of their classes.



## SCHOOL CULTURE

Creating a safe, caring, and challenging environment for learning and personal growth is critical for success. We help schools implement restorative practices and classroom strategies that lower disciplinary incidents, energize student voice, and accelerate achievement.



## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

By utilizing the expertise and resources of community partners to bring innovative health and wellness programming into classrooms, we expose students to life changing experiences. Students participate in counseling groups, explore their identities and self-expression through spoken word poetry, connect to food sources in the student learning garden, and discover creative dance and digital media. We also help schools develop a Community Resource and Referral Guide that allows students' Advocates to make referrals for concerns such as substance abuse, dental care, eye care or severe psychological needs.





# ADVOCATING FOR STUDENTS: The Generation Schools Network™ School-Based Health And Wellness Program

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