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**Sheila Mulrooney Eldred** is a freelance writer living in Minneapolis.

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**Schools with wellness-oriented curricula teach students how to thrive — and are leading the way for other institutions to start doing the same.**

BY SHEILA MULROONEY ELDRED

# To

get to the Academy of Global Citizenship (AGC) on Chicago's South Side, one drives down Cicero Avenue, past Popeyes, Family Dollar, Mattress Bargains, and Buy & Cell Mobile. Turning down a side street, I see petite, backpack-laden elementary school students trotting down the sidewalk with their parents. They're headed for a former parking lot that now hosts a play yard, chicken coop and garden. They'll pass through it on their way inside to join classmates, teachers and other parents for an organic breakfast cooked by parent Heriberto Arriola, a.k.a. Chef Eddie.

After breakfast, I follow a group of kids to their first activity of the day — yoga class. Twenty-five second graders slide onto the floor in a darkened room and spend a few quiet moments rolling their shoulders and stretching to soft piano music.

"Take a deep breath in, and a lion's breath out," says their teacher, Kyla Saphir. "Let's focus our bodies and minds on the positive day ahead of us. Our voices are off; our bodies are still. Put your wish for the day inside your hands."

A typical day at AGC always includes yoga, as well as two whole-food meals shared with staff members and family volunteers. There's also a daily wellness class that teaches children about healthy social and emotional habits in addition to physical fitness. The play yard, with its raised-bed vegetable garden and wind turbine, hosts the afternoon recess. "We pretty much go outside every day," explains

second grader Delilah Vazquez, "even when it's raining."

A charter school that operates under the umbrella of Chicago Public Schools, AGC and schools like it adhere to the principle that education needs to involve the "whole child," not just her intellect. This doesn't mean these institutions ignore academic development, however. That's because both educators and health advocates agree that addressing health and wellness significantly improves student achievement.

It's common knowledge that obesity and type 2 diabetes rates are skyrocketing among American adults, but children are undergoing their own crisis. In 2010 more than one in three children and adolescents in the United States was overweight or obese. This rate has doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the past 30 years, reports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. According to the 2011 National Diabetes Statistics, rates of type 2 diabetes, rarely seen in children before the 1990s, are rising along with their weight: Between 2002 and 2005, there were about 3,600 new cases a year. And parent surveys from the National Health Interview Survey indicate that ADHD diagnoses are also on the rise, increasing about 3 percent per year from 1997 to 2006 and 5.5 percent per year from 2003 to 2007.

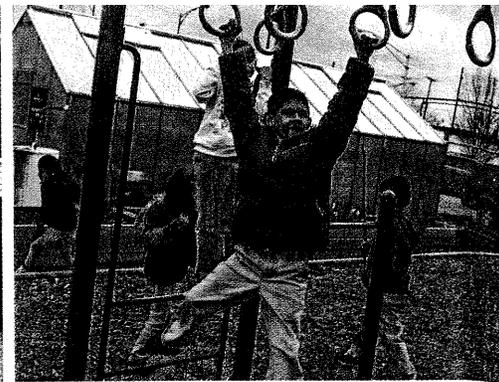
In light of these trends, schools have begun to experiment with a wide variety of health initiatives. Last year, South Lakewood Elementary in Lakewood, Colo., instituted physically active "brain breaks" after officials

there were forced to cut recess to meet state-mandated academic hours. Lamar Middle School in Austin, Texas, brought outdoor recess back with the help of parent volunteers. And New York City public schools have partnered with prestigious cooking schools that provide chefs-in-training to improve the quality of cafeteria fare.

A growing body of research suggests that physical fitness and nutrition are linked to cognition, and programs at schools like AGC have produced measurable improvements in test scores. But while healthy school initiatives are multiplying, health-oriented schools are still the exception rather than the rule.

"Typically, people in education have addressed the health of children in a haphazard way rather than creating policies and programs that are strategically planned to influence academic achievement," says Charles Basch, a professor at Columbia University Teachers College who studies the link between student health and academic performance. "It's not surprising that there's been limited progress in turning around schools despite lots of efforts, because no matter what reforms are initiated, they won't work unless students are motivated and able to learn."

Schools that take a holistic approach, addressing the physical, mental and social-emotional well-being of children, offer the best environment for student success, says Basch. Here are three schools that are doing just that — and leading the way for other schools to follow. →



## Academy of Global Citizenship

Like all Chicago Public Schools, the Academy of Global Citizenship (AGC) is open to any and all students. A few of the kids here need help tying their shoes. Most of them laugh hysterically at BrainPOP cartoons. Some wiggle in their seats at lunch, sucking the juice from their oranges. It looks like a typical school, until you start noticing the subtleties — bags of organic produce from a school-sponsored purchase program lined up to be sent home, worm compost bins propping open doors, seedlings sprouting under grow lights — and a few not-so-subtle amenities, such as a chicken named Buttercup in the development office.

AGC founder and executive director Sarah Elizabeth Ippel began developing her educational philosophy around 2001, while she was attending university in Cambridge, England. It was the beginning of a “self-initiated quest” to study international systems of education.

“I visited 80 countries over the last

10 years,” says Ippel, “and throughout that experience I recognized disparities across the globe in terms of access to quality education, how health challenges were having an impact on children’s abilities to learn, and how everyday decisions were having an impact on the state of our planet.”

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Ippel became convinced that addressing health-related issues would have a positive academic impact on students in the United States. These students — like their parents — often suffer the physical consequences of being overly desk-bound. “There is substantial scientific research that points to the correlation between wellness, physical activity and students’ ability to learn, including outdoor time,” she says.

Ippel moved to Chicago after gradu-

ate school, determined to open a school that would make international cultural awareness, environmental sustainability and positive health the core of its mission. She founded AGC in 2008.

The engaging curriculum and attention to student wellness have produced impressive results in the face of daunting challenges. Nearly eight of 10 AGC students come from low-income households, and the charter school gets only 75 percent of the funding received by typical public schools. Yet, it has increased student literacy rates by 63 percent since it opened. Ninety-three percent of general education students are meeting or exceeding math standards.

The school’s curriculum has had a ripple effect on families, as well. Gisela Alcantar, who has four children at AGC, says her kids practice the school’s earth-friendly habits at home, leading the family to recycle more and eat more organic foods. It appears that educating healthy kids helps create healthy adults — even if they don’t attend the school themselves.

Clockwise from top left: Sarah Elizabeth Ippel, founder and director of the academy; AGC students with a feathered colleague; students at AGC play outside daily; the garden, a key part of the AGC curriculum; students enjoying the outdoors in their own ways.



## Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School

Students at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School (MLK) in Berkeley, Calif., score higher than the state average on math, reading and science tests, but you won't find them engaged in endless academic drills under fluorescent lights. On a typical day, you're as likely to find kids digging in the school garden, chopping vegetables in the kitchen or checking for honey in the school's beehives as you are to find them memorizing algebraic formulas. Kids get a block of time to spend in the garden and kitchen-as-learning-lab during the school day, and many return after school for more digging and cooking. Classroom teachers take their English or science classes outside for lessons.

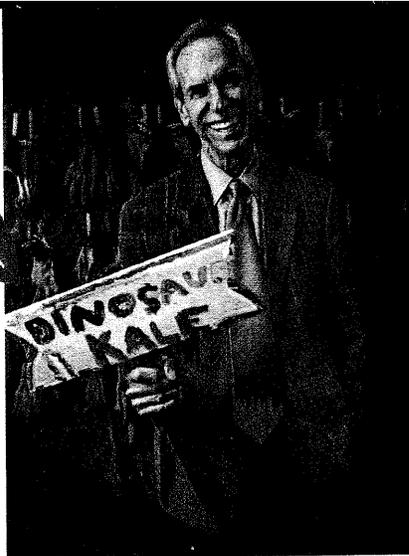
**“I don't ever remember any student being referred to the office from the garden or cooking class.”**

Alice Waters, chef-owner of Berkeley's renowned Chez Panisse restaurant and a legendary advocate for local food, started the garden at King Middle School in 1996 after she made a public remark that the school grounds seemed neglected. Then-principal Neil Smith invited her to tour the school, and the Edible Schoolyard Project was born.

Smith, now interim co-superintendent of Berkeley Unified School District, says the garden has had a major impact on the school's entire culture. The kids love it, consistently ranking it second behind PE and sports on a survey of favorite activities every year. And happier, healthier students seem to perform better in all arenas.

“I don't ever remember any student being referred to the office from the garden or cooking class,” Smith says.

The success of the Edible School-

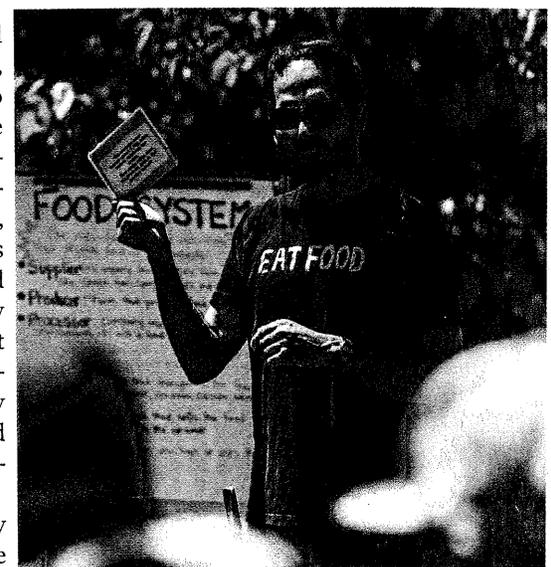


yard (ESY) Project in 2004 spawned Berkeley's School Lunch Initiative, designed to bring similar programs to schools throughout the district. The impact on student diets has been noteworthy. A 2010 evaluation of the initiative by the University of California, Berkeley, found that younger students exposed to these programs increased their fruit and vegetable intake by almost 1.5 servings per day, and that middle school students preferred in-season produce, ate more dark leafy greens than their peers and believed their food choices affected the environment.

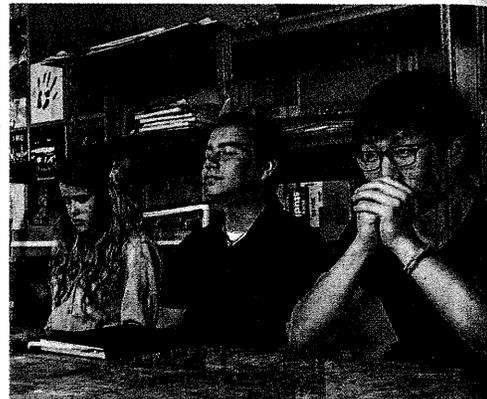
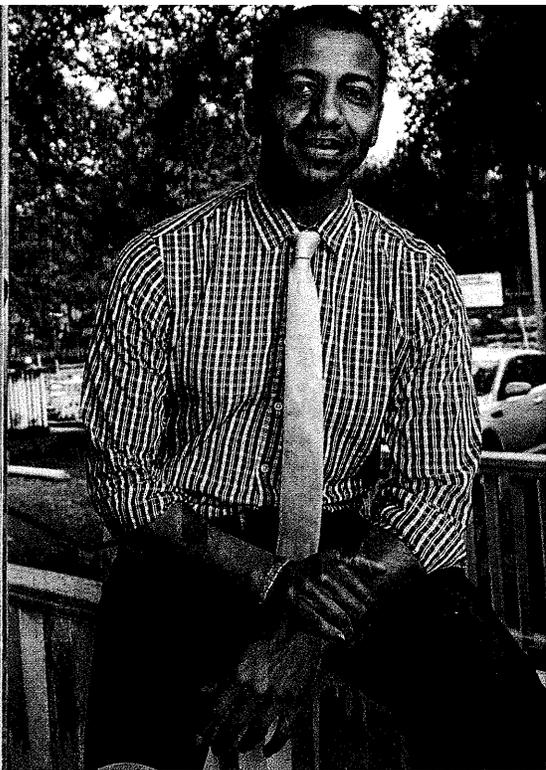
“My kids look at food differently now,” says Griselda Cooney, whose two children attended MLK when they were younger. “We'll go out and buy a sandwich and my teenager will be like, it tastes really weird; it's not fresh. We don't do processed food anymore, and they don't crave Cheetos.” Cooney's kids have moved on to high school, and she is now employed by ESY as the Family Class Coordinator at MLK.

Still, participants agree that the garden program is about more than breaking the junk-food habit; it promotes physical and intellectual exercise, cooperation and teamwork, and it gets kids outside. “It teaches students not just about growing tomatoes,” Cooney says, “but the patience of seeing a plant grow from a seed you put in the ground.”

A garden also conveys the fact that seedlings need proper care if they're going to become strong plants. Not a bad message to instill in kids' minds. →



Clockwise from top left: Neil Smith, former principal of MLK and host of the first Edible Schoolyard; MLK students planting a new crop; students learning about the larger picture of food production in their garden class; getting some sun during garden class never hurts.



## The Khabele School

Khotso Khabele and his wife, Moya, were expecting their first child soon after the events of 9/11 shook the United States, and it made him wonder how he would educate his own child in such a rapidly changing world. So in 2001, when the school where he had been teaching science closed, he and Moya founded The Khabele School in Austin, Texas, which serves students age 18 months through 12th grade.

"We're not always going to be able to anticipate what the world will look like in 20 years," Khabele explains, "but we can [teach] the ways of being that will increase the likelihood that kids will not only survive, but thrive."

The private school is guided by five key values: student well-being, environmental and cultural awareness, self-generated learning, self-expression, and leadership. Khabele says there's a reason well-being is foremost on the list. "Even if you score a 5 on your AP calculus test," he says, "you've got to be able to have creative ability, and that comes from a foundation of well-being."

In their wellness class, kids discuss study skills and personal organization, as well as tools for healthy living. These wellness lessons are embedded in all of the curriculum. Every class starts with "centering," a short meditative practice that promotes mindful breathing and compassion. And each ends with a debriefing, when students report to the teacher what they learned, whether they were able to focus, what they think they contributed and what they took away.

"It helps to set a different tone in the classroom," says science teacher David Heroy. "Just being heard is huge."

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Lunch at Khabele lasts 50 minutes, compared with the half hour or less allowed for eating and recess at most schools. The cafeteria sells everything from local energy bars to cooked-from-scratch hot lunches (seared salmon and grilled veggie kabobs, for instance)

throughout the day. And recently, middle school kids started attending gym class daily.

"Parents saw a change at home and teachers saw more focused students," Khabele says. "We found out that middle school might not be so hard with healthy wellness practices."

Finally, teachers report that many kids who hadn't fared so well at other schools succeed in this environment.

"There was one boy who went to different schools in town and never really fit in," Heroy says. "He was detailed-oriented and driven, and had a hard time connecting. But, on a six-day canoe-camping trip, he packed extra stuff, knowing the other kids wouldn't remember to bring enough socks or scarves or gloves. One person at a time, he doled out these things to different people. At the end of the trip when we circled up to debrief our experiences, students acknowledged him over and over again for his generosity. 'They love me!' he exclaimed after the trip. It was a turning point, and he ended up graduating and getting accepted into college at 14."

Clockwise from top left: Founder Khotso Khabele; music class, one of many opportunities for Khabele students to cultivate creativity; students do much of their learning away from desks; meditating before art class; Khabele and students playing basketball.

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