

# CREATING A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Strengthening School Health through Grants and Awards



**PennState**  
PRO Wellness

**HIGHMARK**<sup>®</sup>  
FOUNDATION

A group of diverse students, including a young man in a light blue t-shirt, a young woman in a white tank top, a young woman in a dark blue polo shirt and jeans, and a young man in a light blue polo shirt, are running happily in a school hallway. The background is slightly blurred, showing other students and the hallway environment.

## INTRODUCTION

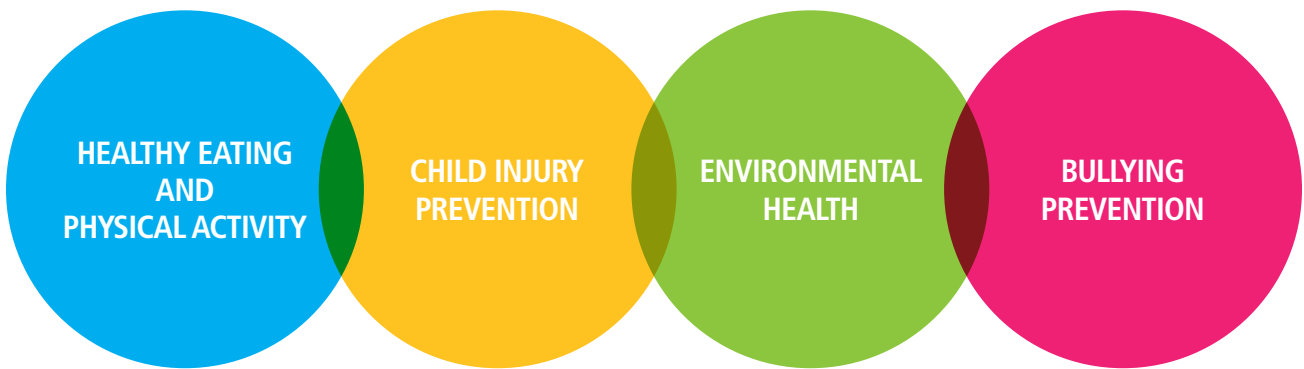
---

The Building Sustainable and Lasting Changes in Schools component of the Creating a Healthy School Environment Grant and Awards Program supports the enhancement of school wellness environments across Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Thanks to Highmark Foundation's partnership, Penn State PRO Wellness was able to develop the scope of the program and implement per the plan outlined within. The report highlights the effectiveness of the program by spotlighting key success stories from participating schools.

## HIGHMARK FOUNDATION

Promoting child health and wellness is consistent with Highmark Foundation's strategy and focus to intervene at an early age in order to prevent future health problems. The Foundation recognizes that schools are a powerful platform to help achieve its goal. The Highmark Foundation supports healthy school environments through a comprehensive strategy that addresses the health, safety, education and wellbeing of our children.

To help schools promote student health and wellness, Highmark Foundation awards high-impact grants to charitable organizations that implement evidence-based programs aimed at improving community health -- creating healthier and safer environments for students. Funding addresses four priorities: healthy eating and physical activity, child injury prevention, environmental health and bullying prevention.



## PENN STATE PRO WELLNESS

Penn State PRO Wellness helps Pennsylvania communities live healthier lives using evidence-based strategies for measurable and sustainable results. Historically focused on childhood obesity prevention, PRO Wellness has helped children and their families eat well, engage in regular physical activity and incorporate healthy habits into their everyday lives. PRO Wellness draws on key national resources, such as those put forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Academy of Medicine and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Using a project management-based model to develop, implement and evaluate programs and interventions, PRO Wellness promotes strategies that have demonstrated success.

---

**Highmark Foundation provides funding and resources throughout the areas of Pennsylvania and West Virginia served by Highmark Inc., to create healthier and safer environments for students.**

---



## HIGHMARK FOUNDATION AND PRO WELLNESS PARTNERSHIP

For several years, PRO Wellness has partnered with Highmark Foundation to support schools that are awarded grants through Building Sustainable and Lasting Changes in Schools, of the Creating a Healthy School Environment Grant and Awards Program, in achieving their wellness goals. Along with serving on the grant application review panel, PRO Wellness provides assistance and expertise to schools in the implementation of their awarded programs. This assistance includes program development support, data collection guidance, program implementation and troubleshooting. It takes place via phone conferences, webinars, email communications and site visits.

	GRANT PROGRAM YEAR:		
	2013/14 TOTALS	2014/15 TOTALS	2015/16 TOTALS
Number of schools	96	79	55
Number of counties	35	37	27
\$ awarded to schools	\$506,652	\$434,450	\$291,405

## PRIORITY AREAS

Highmark Foundation awards grants for evidence-based programs that address the following topics.

### BULLYING PREVENTION:

Bullying threatens the wellbeing of young children and teens and can result in physical injuries, social and emotional difficulties and academic problems. The harmful effects of bullying are frequently felt by others, including friends and families, and can hurt the overall health and safety of schools, neighborhoods and society. While research is still developing that will help to better understand and prevent bullying before it starts, several evidence-based programs exist to educate and train students and staff about the dangers of bullying and serving as an advocate for a safe and friendly school environment.



### ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH:

Research continues to demonstrate that there is a parallel between academic achievement and a safe and healthier school environment. Through improving the environment of schools, students can engage in effective learning and healthy living. Factors that influence the physical environment include the school building and surrounding areas, any biological or chemical agents that are detrimental to health and physical conditions such as temperature, air quality, safe routes to schools, noise, lighting and fresh drinking water. A healthy environment includes the physical, emotional and social conditions that affect the wellbeing of students.



### CHILD INJURY PREVENTION:

National data shows that unintentional injury is the leading cause of death among all children. Common preventable injuries include falls, motor vehicle accidents, poisoning and sports and recreation accidents. Changing schools to promote an environment where children can safely learn and play is crucial. The public health approach for reducing childhood injuries includes identifying the magnitude of the problem through data collection, analysis and identifying risk and protective factors. On the basis of this information, schools can collect their own data, develop, implement and evaluate evidence-based interventions and promote widespread adoption of these practices and policies.



### HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:

Schools play a key role in the health and wellness of a child. During a standard academic year, children spend more than half of their waking hours in school and consume more than half of their daily calories. However, schools are under enormous pressure to focus on academic performance and often cite this and other competing demands as reasons for not fully embracing their role in the physical wellbeing of children. Evidence supports many programs that can be adopted by schools, including enhanced fitness assessments, nutrition education and promotion, before and after school physical activity programs, farm to table initiatives and safe routes to school.





## SUCCESS STORIES

---

PRO Wellness provided assistance and support to schools that were awarded funding for healthy eating and physical activity, physical and environmental health and child injury prevention programs. The following are examples of great work happening in these areas.

## HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Elizabeth Forward School District is thinking outside of the box about their students' health and wellness. The district developed a creative plan to take action-based research and provide health and wellness opportunities to all students. The district has established an Action-Based Learning Lab, which allows their health and physical education department to build off the success of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program and the Polar Go Fit heart rate monitor training programs they already had in place. With support from the entire school community, the Learning Lab will demonstrate the important connection between student health and academic performance.

The district is transforming a high school storage room into the action-based lab, which ties together both academics and fitness. The room is utilized every day by students grades k-12 and within all academic disciplines, and is equipped to provide physical activity in a dynamic environment. Participants are offered a variety of experiences including a focus on fitness testing initiatives, opportunities for elementary and middle school field trips to utilize the Polar GoFit App heart rate monitor technology, high school physical education functional training circuits, adapted physical education for life skills students, staff wellness opportunities before and after school, and Take 10 Activity Breaks. Teachers can also utilize the room to allow students to engage in fitness circuits as they learn and practice core academic concepts covered in their regular classroom.

## CHILDHOOD INJURY PREVENTION

St. Edmund's Academy in Pittsburgh, PA is making a difference in child injury prevention. St. Edmund's is enhancing a culture of health and safety with its "SEA Safe" program. After reviewing a number of incident reports related to playground safety, it was clear to administration that changes were needed to protect students from injuries.

Through the grant program, St. Edmund's was able to elevate the concept of injury prevention into the curriculum and implement an outdoor learning space. The new curriculum addresses health and safety in play with awareness and prevention topics including concussions, sun safety, head injuries, sports injuries, choosing safe toys, first aid and bicycle safety. The added and improved rubber play-deck accommodates a variety of in-school and after-school activities. The new deck includes a foursquare area, hopscotch area, an open game area and area around the climbing structures. On any given day, the space is filled with children engaging in physical activity, while others learn history or rehearse music. The improved outdoor space offers safe options for teachers to get students up and moving throughout the school day. Engaging schools in child injury prevention education and raising awareness to protect students from unintentional injuries, moves communities closer to creating a safer school environment where children can thrive and grow.



---

**“As a result of our Breath of Green Air program, Gateway School District was able to replace harmful cleaning agents with green cleaning products. This improved our air quality, especially for our students and staff who suffer from asthma, allergies, and COPD. Through the generosity of Highmark Foundation, Gateway is now on the road to making successful changes that will positively impact all who attend and work in our schools.”** Former Superintendent of Schools, Gateway School District

---

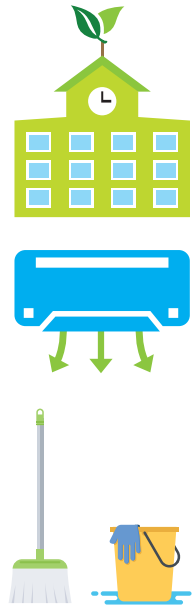


## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Gateway School District in Monroeville, PA made noticeable improvements in achieving a green and healthy learning environment for its 3,400 students and 600 staff members. With funding from Highmark Foundation, the district was able to conduct testing for radon and implement a green cleaning program throughout its seven buildings.

Radon testing at Gateway School District revealed that schools are meeting acceptable levels as set forth by government standards. However, a plan for ongoing testing will ensure that building air quality remains safe.

Switching to green cleaning products and replacing old mops and dusters with a new microfiber cleaning system, resulted in cleaner breathable air quality. Gateway custodial staff report noticeable improvements in the physical appearance of dirt and dust in the buildings. Other positive results include reductions in reported staff respiratory issues and savings in cleaning costs. School staff learned to identify and remove seemingly harmless items that can contribute to air pollutants like throw rugs, plants (some types can cause mold and spores) and aerosol sprays. This creates a safer healthier setting for students to thrive and learn.



## BULLYING PREVENTION\*

Vida Charter School in Gettysburg, PA is making strides to integrate bullying prevention to its regular school day. Through schoolwide collaboration, including adults and students, Vida is improving its learning environment with the “Responsive Classroom” program to educate and practice evidence-based behavior management techniques that are consistent and sustainable to address this problem area.

Through the grant program, Vida was able to engage its administration, staff and students through multiple levels of activities tailored to each audience. At the beginning of the program, the plan to include professional development series for administrators and staff was established in order to train these individuals in effective practice of behavior management techniques. Emphasis was placed on each person to practice the skills accordingly so that consistent implementation could be achieved across the school. Various opportunities were provided for administrators and staff to practice these new skills with the students, including daily morning meetings in classrooms, monthly morning meetings for the whole school, discussion of the information presented in these meetings highlighted in newsletters, and the administration of the Responsive Classroom program survey.

Vida Charter School identified multiple ways to improve the program for their students and for other schools. Some examples include:

- Consistency in the administrator and staff approach to children about behavior management, for example the use of the “time apart” student re-focus strategy
- Ongoing professional development as a key factor in sustaining the program and vital for staff engagement
- Comprehensive funding, as this grant award was combined with additional funding received from the school’s board to ensure program implementation and activities

*\*Bullying prevention content provided by Center for Safe Schools: <http://www.safeschools.info/>*



---

**“We believe that children need to have the time and space for unstructured, outdoor play time as they’re developing their cognitive, social and emotional skills. Our new play and learning area allows them to play, discover, learn and create with classmates in the heart of our urban campus.”** Chad Barnett, Head of School at St. Edmund’s Academy

---

## RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Opportunities made available through Highmark Foundation, and delivered through PRO Wellness, help schools overcome barriers and create sustainable changes to the wellness environment. Awarded schools demonstrated commitment to creating sustainable programs, policy and environmental changes. PRO Wellness provided technical assistance to schools for program implementation. This model of technical assistance provides schools with expertise in program operations, data collection, sustaining change and evidence-based resources. School visits allowed PRO Wellness to encourage school wellness champions and recognize schools that were committed to enhancing the nutrition environment and physical activity opportunities, improving injury prevention measures and revising environmental health strategies.

### SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS HAVE SEVERAL QUALITIES IN COMMON:

- Defined Wellness Champion
- Administrator support and buy-in
- Regular communication with Highmark Foundation and PRO Wellness, as needed
- Commitment to meet deadlines
- Realistic program scope

Successful programs ensure sustainable change in the entire school environment. Thanks to the wellness champions in schools, the health, wellness and overall wellbeing of thousands of students has improved.



## LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout the programs and partnerships within the awarded schools, several common challenges were present. These challenges provide lessons for all schools to learn. Some examples include:

- Availability of resources (time, staff, money, space) to support school-based programs that are founded in research and best practice
- Consideration of timing needed to execute planning and collaboration on school-based partnerships while keeping in mind the availability of staff and administrators
- Design of a program that will directly address the needs assessment of the school and condones a collaborative approach to comprehensive school health education

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

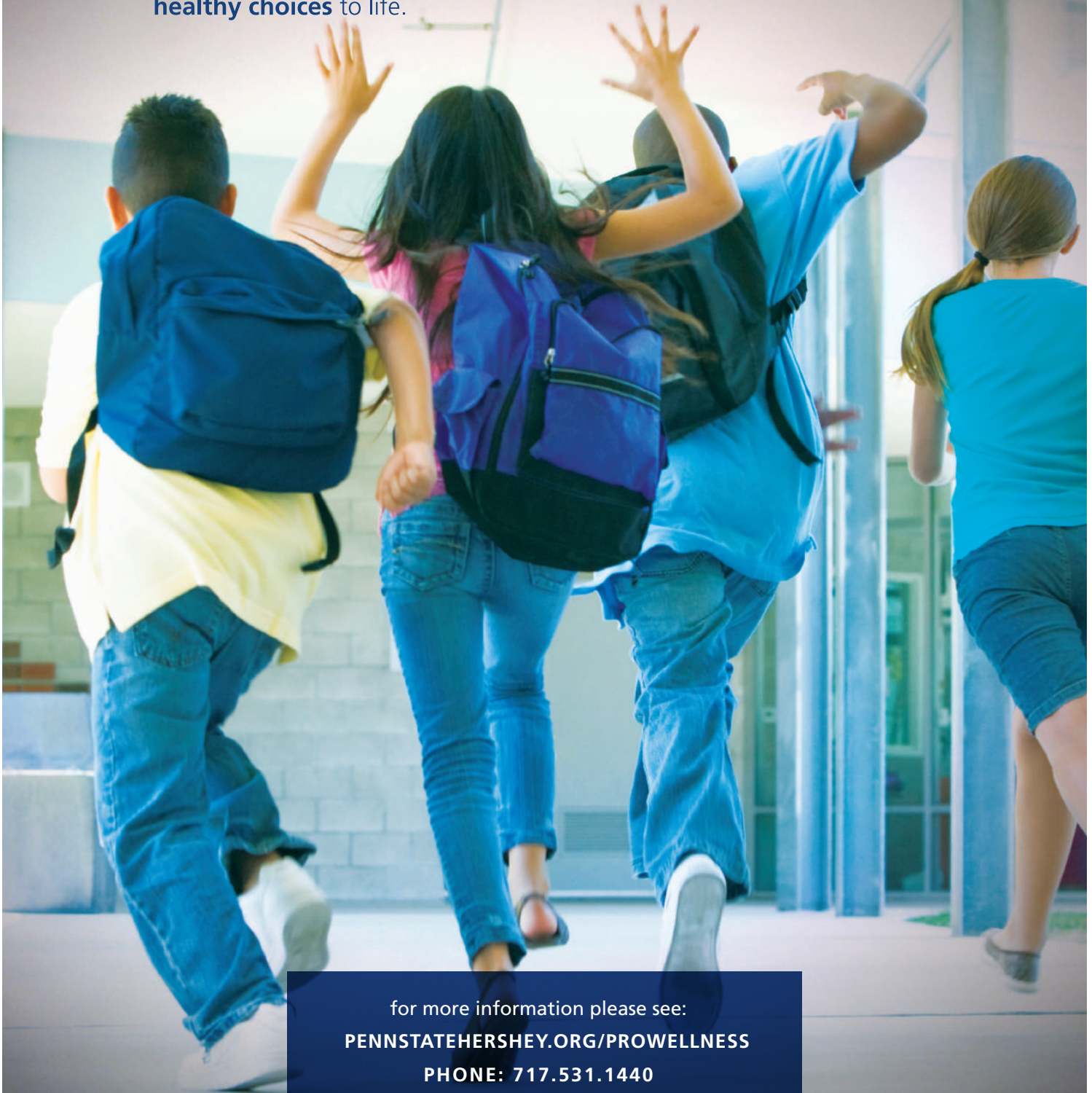
The longstanding partnership between Highmark Foundation and Penn State PRO Wellness has strengthened PRO Wellness' position as a thought-leader in providing assistance to schools, communities and families to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic and create healthy places for students to grow, learn and play. The next generation relies on support from role models, teachers and administrators who help secure a safe and healthy school environment for all. PRO Wellness is proud to be a part of Highmark Foundation's mission to improve the health and wellbeing of children.



**PennState**  
PRO Wellness

**HIGHMARK<sup>®</sup>**  
FOUNDATION

Champions for bringing  
**healthy choices** to life.



for more information please see:  
**PENNSTAHERSHEY.ORG/PROWELLNESS**  
PHONE: 717.531.1440

**HIGHMARKFOUNDATION.ORG**  
PHONE: 1.866.594.1730