



DBG-Detroit

Detroit, Michigan

250

Average number of
students served

DBG-Detroit

Developing the life skills needed for healthy decision-making

From a healthier weight and improved physical fitness to better academic performance and a lower risk of depression, healthy eating and physical activity promote a range of positive outcomes for young people. However, most children and adolescents do not meet the recommended dietary and physical activity guidelines, putting them at an elevated risk for several immediate and long-term health conditions, including obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Poor nutrition and physical inactivity also have broad societal consequences. From a national security perspective, only 2 in 5 youth aged 17-24 are “weight-eligible and physically prepared” for basic military training. And the economic costs are steep: In 2019 alone, childhood obesity was linked to an estimated \$1.3 billion in medical expenses.

Afterschool and summer programs are key partners in efforts to keep young people healthy, active, and engaged. They help young people build lifelong healthy habits by providing daily meals and regular opportunities for physical activity; offering engaging experiences like gardening, cooking healthful foods, or trying out new sports; and fostering supportive relationships between students and staff that encourage nutritious eating and excitement about physical activity.

Overview

DBG-Detroit is a free, year-round youth development program serving 3rd- to 12th-grade students and program alumni in Detroit. DBG offers a sports sampling model that allows youth to explore a wide range of physical activities while also integrating educational enrichment and mentorship to instill critical life skills needed for academic success and personal well-being.

A typical day for students

Every day, students are picked up from their school by DBG’s shuttles and taken to the club facility, where they spend three hours engaging in a structured, yet dynamic set of activities. After checking in for attendance, students gather in their grade-specific cohorts (elementary, middle, and high school). Student relationship managers tell them about the activities available for the day, and each student picks the ones they want to participate in. Then, students head to the gym for a full group huddle and a chance to eat a fresh snack and play light games before jumping into activities. Programming is broken into three

enrichment blocks. One block is dedicated to athletics such as weightlifting, swimming, or cheerleading, while students can choose the remaining two activities. These can include options like tutoring; jewelry-making; and science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) lab. Between enrichment blocks, students meet with their student relationship managers again, working as a group on character development topics, such as leadership, social skills, and goal-setting. Before students are taken home, students and staff come together to enjoy a freshly cooked family style dinner, using the time to build community with one another.

Program characteristics

Through DBG's sports sampling model, students can experiment with a variety of rotating sports and physical activities, including lacrosse, karate, soccer, ballet, and badminton. Training for competition is not the focus of DBG's sports offerings; rather, it's the valuable life lessons and skills students gain from participating. DBG purposefully provides an array of physical activities so that students can push themselves to try new things, especially in activities that are beyond their comfort zone or initial interests. Not only does this approach help students discover new interests, but program staff observe that the small wins students experience when learning and excelling at a new sport give them the self-confidence needed to succeed in other areas of their lives, particularly academics. In addition, students develop a diverse set of transferable skills and attributes by experiencing a variety of sports, such as teamwork and relationship-building.

DBG's dedicated and supportive staff and mentors play a vital role in helping students develop these lifelong skills. Given the mix of sports and activities offered in 12-week cycles throughout the year, DBG looks within its network of invested staff and volunteers to lead sports and enrichment offerings from season to season, ensuring continuity of familiar faces throughout the school year that students can rely on. In addition, coaches model essential skills and qualities, such as empathy, effective communication, and conflict resolution, while encouraging students to show up as their best selves. This long-term mentorship fosters strong, trusting relationships between staff and students and supports students' life skills development.

Outcomes

As a result of its holistic approach to youth development, DBG-Detroit has helped students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Participating students experience a 12% year-over-year increase in the belief that they can succeed; an 11% year-over-year increase in their ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors; and a 10% year-over-year increase in their adaptability in the face of challenges. Parents also recognize their children's growth, with 98% of parents reporting that DBG has had a lasting impact on their child's life. Moreover, since its inception in 2007, 100% of DBG participants have graduated from high school, and 98% have gone on to pursue higher education.

Challenges

For more than a decade, the overall physical activity grade for children and adolescents has been a D-. At the same time, young people are far exceeding their recommended intakes of sodium, saturated fats, and added sugars.

Healthy eating and physical activity decline as children enter adolescence. Data from the National Survey of Children's Health found that only 26% of children aged 6-11 engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day, and this decreases to 14% among 12-17-year-olds. Additionally, 14- to 18-year-olds have the lowest Healthy Eating Index score—a measure of diet quality—scoring just 51 out of 100.

Immediate and far-reaching consequences. Children who are inactive and have a poor diet are at risk of becoming overweight or obese, which in turn places them at risk for several health, mental health, and social issues, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and bullying. Long-term consequences of inactivity and unhealthy eating include obesity in adulthood and a number of health concerns, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart attack, and stroke.

Differences exist accessing healthy foods and physical activities. Due to structural and environmental barriers, youth of color and young people from low-income families are less likely to meet recommended healthy eating and physical activity guidelines. For example, children from low-income families, Black and Hispanic children, and children living in rural areas have a higher likelihood of living in a food-insecure household than children nationally. Additionally, girls and children with disabilities have far fewer opportunities for physical activity than boys and children without disabilities.

Read [*Building Healthy Habits and Healthy Futures: How Afterschool Programs Are Supporting Physical Activity and Healthy Eating*](#) to learn more.



Program history

DBG-Detroit was established in 2007 by Khali Sweeney, a Detroit native committed to creating the safe and nurturing environment he and his peers needed growing up. Initially named Downtown Boxing Gym and launched in an old car wash with a handful of students, Sweeney used the lure of boxing to attract students, although participation came with one caveat: homework needed to be completed daily, and report cards must be turned in throughout the school year to train. DBG's motto, "Books Before Boxing," developed from this practice and has since evolved into "Whatever It Takes," to speak to the work students and staff do every day to get better. Currently located in a refurbished book-binding factory, DBG has expanded to offer a range of opportunities and support services, including literacy and math interventions; enrichment activities beyond sports, such as STEAM programs and workforce development opportunities; as well as wrap-around services for approximately 400 families. Over its 18-year history, DBG has served over 1,500 students and has an active alumni network of more than 350 individuals.

Recommendations

for helping students develop the life skills needed for healthy decision-making:

- ▶ **Prioritize building deep relationships with students.**
Relationships are an ever-evolving practice that takes time and consistent effort to grow and maintain. Focusing on developing strong bonds rooted in care and trust provides the foundation needed for students' physical, social, and emotional growth and development.
- ▶ **View sports and academics as complementary components to students' comprehensive development.**
Young people gain just as many valuable skills on the field as they do in the classroom. Integrating both sports and academic support and enrichment within programming can maximize students' transferable skills and serve as a vehicle for self-confidence, motivation, and continued growth.



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