

The Youth Wellness Initiative

The problem. Chronic malnutrition is endemic among poor children. In India almost 40% of school age children are stunted or show other symptoms of chronic malnutrition. The cognitive and physical damage caused by undernutrition during the early years is significant and often irreversible. School lunches, government food programs for low-income households, and similar efforts have not had an appreciable effect on malnutrition, in part because the food offered is mostly low nourishment calories, primarily from processed grains. These lack both adequate protein and micronutrients such as minerals and vitamins, and thus are not sufficient to enable the healthy development of a child. Noting these deficiencies, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, the leader of India's Green Revolution 4 decades ago, has recently called for a shift in focus from "food security" to "nutrition security".¹

Equally importantly, tackling malnutrition in isolation is not a winning strategy: wellness issues such as the presence of worms, malaria, or other diseases, and bad drinking water that causes frequent diarrhea, undermine efforts to improve children's nutrition status, and overall vitality. Nearly 3 billion people in developing countries, most of them in Asia and Africa, lack reliable access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation; many school children are never checked for worms or similar health problems. Addressing malnutrition, health, and sanitation *together*, treating a child holistically, is thus critical to achieving the goal of healthier, stronger, more successful children. Finally, the focus of most interventions is on the supply side, rather than creating demand for wellbeing from children as well as their parents.

A Novel Initiative. Ashoka and its partners—teams of social entrepreneurs, leading nutrition experts, companies that can provide nutrition-rich products, and others—are launching the Youth Wellness Initiative to address these problems. We will at first work only with schools whose changemaker leaders recognize that wellbeing of students (and teachers) is essential to their educational mission. Together we will demonstrate how full nutrition and wellness interventions in school-age children will improve their physical growth and overall health, their fitness and athletic ability, and their performance in school -- in readily replicable models. Such outcomes will create public demand. The Initiative will:

- rapidly improve the wellbeing of every child in participating schools by (1) increasing their nourishment status, through nutritious meals, snacks, and supplements, and (2) providing primary healthcare and physical activity;
- rigorously document outcomes using standard metrics, including improvements in children's wellbeing and nutritional status, school attendance, academic achievement, and physical fitness; these latter outcomes will drive demand;

¹ M.S. Swaminathan, *Science*, Vol. 345, page 491 (August 1, 2014). Full nutrition requires both macro-nutrients (proteins, fats, oils) and micronutrients (iron, zinc, vitamin A, etc.) in addition to calories. Many diets, increasingly based on processed staple foods, lack nutrition density and diversity needed to provide full nutrition. Changing the agricultural system and peoples' dietary preferences will take time; a common alternative is to provide nutritional supplements or fortified foods, but these strategies can also fail to provide full nutrition because they frequently address only one nutritional deficit (such as iron), and/or provide vitamins and minerals in forms that are not readily absorbed by the human body.

- empower children and parents with knowledge of wellbeing, and this data on their progress;
- ensure that nutritional information and activities are part of the full educational experience, from curriculum to school gardens, through use of a Tool Kit, to inculcate broad awareness and understanding in children and, ultimately, their parents—including the “upstream” aspects of soils, farming practices, and food preparation that constitute the full nutrient value chain.
- work with partners, including the government, to take successful models to scale.

The objective is to create effective solution packages that can be implemented in schools in a variety of ways, and, leveraging the enthusiasm and innate changemaking abilities of children, to bring along younger siblings and families in improving their communities’ health and wellbeing.

Focus on Schools. Schools are a key target for addressing families and a key entry point into communities. That’s where school age children are already collected; that’s where parents focus on a child’s educational performance; that’s where sports are taught and athletic ability measured; that’s where (in many cases) a school lunch is provided. Schools provide a reasonably controlled environment for testing models that improve malnutrition and wellness, that cause behavior change, and seek to provide lifelong understanding. They also tend to be overwhelmed, so we plan on most interventions being driven by health and wellness entrepreneurs, in cooperation with effective school leaders.

Resources. The Youth Wellness Initiative effort builds on Ashoka’s global network of leading social entrepreneurs, many with deep hands-on experience working with schools, in health/wellness delivery models, in behavior change communications, in environmental efforts, in soil, water and agricultural reform, and in community engagement practices. Youth Wellness will seek to engage corporate partners (mobile IT network providers, nourishment providers, agricultural and environmental leaders, healthcare companies, providers of wellness materials) as well as philanthropic and business funding partners.

Ashoka Fellows will help lead the necessary local contextualization of the materials and programs. Production of the initial version of the Tool Kit described above and some “alpha” trials of it through a sister Ashoka Nourishing Schools Program are being funded through the generosity of Swiss Re.

The Youth Wellness Initiative will be initially trialed across schools in India and Kenya, led by teams of social entrepreneurs and their partners. The world class research team will be led by Professor Anura Kurpad, Chairman of the Nutrition Department of St. Johns Research Institute (Bangalore), and president of the Indian Society on Nutrition. He and his team will oversee research design, data collection protocols, and ongoing analysis, working with other academic partners as needed. The network will also include large companies and larger development entities such as Akshaya Patra (India’s largest NGO school lunch provider), who can take a tested service delivery model to scale. Ashoka will coordinate the development of best practice intervention systems, the selection and supervision of service providers, and organize supporting ICT systems for operations and nutritional measurements.

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