





# FOCUS **on** **teen** WELLNESS

WRITTEN BY LEEANNE JONES, RACHEL ORVINO, & EMILIE WHITE

**EAST BAY HIGH SCHOOLS & RELATED PROGRAMS  
ARE COMMITTED TO IMPROVING STUDENTS' PHYSICAL,  
MENTAL, AND FINANCIAL HEALTH.**

## **GETTING PHYSICAL**

**When it comes to what's new in the realm of physical wellness efforts at East Bay high schools, two clear themes emerge: improved school lunch menus and expanded opportunities for female athletes.**

BY LEEANNE JONES

### **+ FRESH FOOD IS BACK**

Depending on your age, memories of school lunch are often negative, from pans of mystery meat to piles of fast-food packages. But today's cafeterias are in the midst of a culinary throwback with a contemporary twist.

Thanks to the popularity of California's Universal Meals Program—which in 2022 became the first permanent statewide plan to provide free breakfast and lunch to all children—and related funding, East Bay schools have the support to upgrade their offerings. Many are taking this opportunity to bring back on-site cooking and to explore local and ethical ingredient sourcing.

At Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, the daily scratch-made special is steadily increasing in popularity while more

processed options, like burgers and burritos, are decreasing. For example, spaghetti now features meatballs hand-formed using grass-fed beef. Pizza has gone gourmet, assembled atop bread from a local bakery.

Food service manager Shelley Carmichael says the changes have been embraced by students, who are not only better fueled for their studies but enjoy trying new flavors. "We made a poke bowl with cooked tuna, edamame, and rice," she says. "One of my students said, 'This is the greatest thing you've ever come up with!'"

Zetta Reicker, director of child nutrition for San Ramon Valley Unified School District, has led such developments at four high schools. Daily specials made on-site with regenerative beef and halal chicken

include pasta Bolognese and buffalo mac and cheese. Plus, they're serving locally grown produce such as stone fruit from Brentwood's Frog Hollow Farm.

Reicker says it's clear the program is successful by the number of participants and lack of parent complaints, some of whom used to DoorDash a replacement lunch. "When the kids are participating, it creates a nice vibe," she says. "I remember one day we served Mediterranean chicken, the commons area was quieter—because the students were eating!"

#### **+THE RISE OF GIRLS FLAG FOOTBALL**

Interest in women's sports is booming throughout the United States: Game attendance and media coverage are breaking records, the WNBA's Caitlin Clark is a household name, and the Women's Pro Baseball League is launching in 2026. Likewise, opportunities for female athletes are increasing at the high school level.

The overwhelming success story in the East Bay is girls flag football. Building on NFL support and the buzz of being included in the 2028 Olympic Games, the sport was approved by the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) for the 2023–24 school year. With additional infrastructure established by CIF's North Coast Section, nearly every high school in the East Bay is fielding a team this year—sometimes two.

At Northgate High, interest doubled following flag football's inaugural season, and both a varsity and junior varsity team formed this fall. Coach Lauren Lahey, a teacher who had been playing flag football in Bay Area adult intramural leagues, jumped at the opportunity to build the school's program. Many of her athletes are new to the sport, coming from soccer and softball.

"Girls are stepping into a space that's been traditionally male-dominated, and they're showing they're really knowledgeable—and really good," says Lahey. "There's also big camaraderie, a culture of helping each other. We're learning together and growing the sport for future generations."

Jared Muela was also already involved in football when the coaching opportunity

**“What’s cool about playing football is that there is a skill set for each position, so it gives [girls] a chance to find their niche.”**

**— JARED MUELA**

opened at Livermore's Granada High School: He had leveraged his experience with the San Francisco 49ers' community outreach programs to cofound Wishbone Sports, which runs a local youth flag football program. Like Northgate, Granada High is responding to interest with an added JV team and a focus on education.

"We're finding that any sport translates. We see success with soccer, basketball, softball, and volleyball players, but we've had a handful of wrestlers, too," says Muela. "What's cool about playing football is that there is a skill set for each position, so it gives [girls] a chance to find their niche."

Fans and families are learning, too. At Granada, the game announcer spends additional time talking through rules and calls. And with most fields booked Friday nights for tackle football, families are establishing new midweek football traditions, too. "The best thing is seeing dads who grew up playing football having this point of connection with their daughters," says Muela. "It drives everybody's affinity for the game."

## **MONEY MATTERS**

**How personal finance classes in our schools support the financial wellness of teenagers.**

**BY RACHEL ORVINO**

Reading, writing, and investing? While many high schools in the East Bay already offer classes on personal finance as an elective, a semester-long course on the subject will now be a graduation requirement for all California high schoolers by the 2030–31 school year.

"Saving for the future, making investments, and spending wisely are lifelong skills that young adults need to learn before they start their careers, not after," said Governor Gavin Newsom in a statement after signing AB 2927 in June. California is part of a growing

number of states that are implementing such graduation requirements.

#### **+INVESTING IN THE FUTURE**

Berkeley High School teacher Crystal Rigley Janis is a passionate advocate for teen financial literacy. She created a yearlong personal finance class at Berkeley High in 2020, expanding on material she had previously tried to squeeze into a four-week unit of her economics course. (Financial education proponent and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond even visited her classroom.)

"Money impacts every corner of our life," says Rigley Janis. "We should not be sending kids out into the world without the fundamental skills for managing their money. It blows my mind that we have been doing so for a very long time."

Among the topics in her personal finance class are determining students' dreams for their lives, discussing how money will impact that future, setting budgets, opening and contributing to a high-yield savings account, using credit cards to build a good credit score, and investing. "[Starting to invest] at 18 years old—that is a life-changing move," says Rigley Janis.

Her students often improve their spending and investing habits. "I had a young African American student who opened a Roth IRA and maxed it out; she was also saving for a car. Her family didn't understand what she was doing, but she is changing [their] generational history," says Rigley Janis.

## +LEARNING TOGETHER

Rigley Janis also provides parents with guidance on teaching their kids about finance through her “Raising Money Smart Teens” talks at local high schools such as San Ramon Valley; additional offerings for young people include summer camps, online courses, and one-on-one coaching.

Above all, Rigley Janis stresses the importance of parents talking with their kids about money at home. “Have family discussions around spending choices,” she says. “Be honest about what you do for a living, how much money you make, what it means for finances, and your credit score. Give your kids a budget, and don’t just let them spend carte blanche. Are you going to support [your kids] when they are 30? You need to have conversations about the realities [of money].”

## BUILDING

## MENTAL HEALTH

**East Bay schools are teaching skills that foster mental and emotional wellness.**

**BY EMILIE WHITE**

According to the World Health Organization, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges are some of the most common causes of disability and illness for youth, and 1 in 7 preteens and teenagers worldwide are dealing with a mental health disorder. Local high schools are increasingly providing resources for mental and emotional health, equipping students with stress-management tools and the means to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

## +CREATURE COMFORT

At more than a dozen regional middle and high schools, Valley Humane Society’s trusted team of volunteer dogs and humans offers encouragement and stress relief to students

through the Canine Comfort Pet-Assisted Therapy program. In partnership with school counselors, the dogs accompany students during counseling sessions, participate in wellness center offerings, provide stress relief during finals week, and give support in the wake of a death in the campus community.

Though these school site visits are just one method Canine Comfort volunteers reach local kids—they also feature in the Paws to Read program for young children and work with youth with special needs—the team receives a positive response from students and school administrators.

“Many of us have dogs at home and take for granted the support they provide each day,” says Melanie Sadek, Valley Humane Society’s president. “The dogs in our Canine Comfort Pet-Assisted Therapy program are very well trained. They understand their job is to provide comfort and support to the students.”

Walnut Creek’s Pet Hug Pack, Joybound People and Pets’ animal therapy program, also relies on volunteers and has linked students with cats and dogs for more than two decades. These kinds of services from organizations like Joybound and Valley Humane can foster calming moments of respite and unconditional affection.

“We have heard from parents that their child only wants to go to school when a dog is on campus,” says Sadek. “Mental health is a national crisis ... Teens are under pressure to perform at a very high academic level while also being great athletes, joining clubs, and

volunteering in the community. Add in their hormone changes, and now you have a child who is just trying to cope.”

## +HEALTH HUBS

At the Wellness Center at Livermore High School (LHS), information is power. Since its opening in 2020, the center has connected students to an array of services: In addition to counseling, students can learn how to meditate, join a peer-to-peer support program, and receive assistance if they find themselves in crisis. Resources are also available to help weather the effects of trauma, substance abuse, and issues specific to LGBTQ+ communities—plus academic pressures.

“Our Wellness Center has had a significant impact on supporting our students’ overall well-being,” says LHS principal Roxana Mohammed. “Mental health plays a critical role in academic success, as students who feel supported and balanced emotionally are better able to focus, engage in learning, and achieve their goals.”

The center focuses on prevention and early intervention through an appointment system and drop-in hours, and the team accepts referrals from staff, students’ classmates, and families. Student Kerigan Coates has also spearheaded initiatives to support the unique concerns of student athletes struggling with the tensions of being on the field or court, developing guidance for coaches, and leading a mental health awareness poster campaign spotlighting famous figures.

Across the Tri-Valley, pupils at Dublin’s new Emerald High can visit the Zen Den at their wellness center, among other resources, and Monte Vista High School in Danville hosts students for “reset breaks” at a center led by its counseling department. Those sites also hold support groups, professional counseling, and similar programs, like at LHS.

“Our center not only helps students navigate challenges but also empowers them with tools to manage stress and build resilience,” Mohamed adds. “This holistic approach ensures that students thrive both in and out of the classroom.” ■

**“Students who feel supported & balanced emotionally are better able to focus, engage in learning, & achieve their goals.”**

**—ROXANA MOHAMMED**