

Wyandanch

Community Advisory Board

In This Newsletter

Methodology for Success

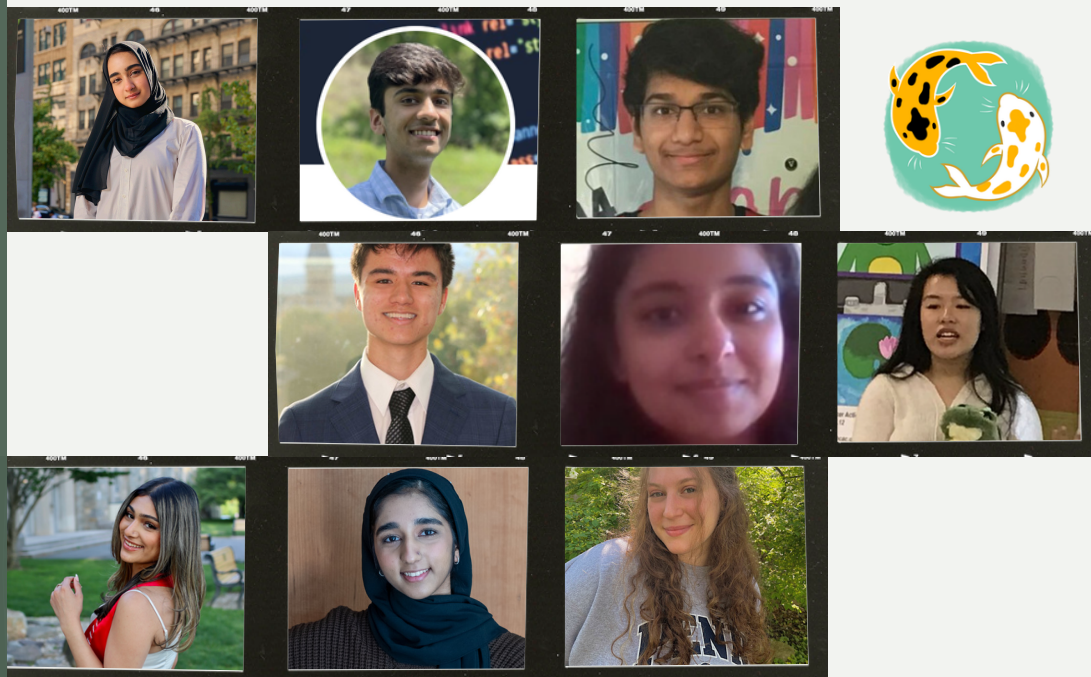
Do you get enough sleep, exercise, water, and veggies in your day?

October Events

- **Fall in Love with Community, Fall Festival**, October 4, 2026. Geiger Park, 10 am to 4 pm
- **Children's Environmental Health Day**, October 8, 2026. [NYSCHECK.org](https://nyscheck.org) for details
- **Wyandanch Public Library Fall Festival**, October 17, 2026, 11 am to 3 pm

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[NYSCHECK.ORG/Wyandanch](https://nyscheck.org/Wyandanch)



Student-Led Initiatives: Methodology for Success

Article by Moosa Awais, HBCAC Intern

Change starts when people choose to get involved. The Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition is a 34-year nonprofit organization that focuses on primary prevention through our Prevention Is The Cure campaign. A part of the NYSCHECK network alongside our Wyandanch CAB partners, we actively seek to support children's health and a healthy future for all. Part of this includes engaging youth in learning the science, participating in real-world projects, connecting with their community, and supporting community initiatives. A lot of effort goes into designing a project and seeing it through to fruition. So how do you do that?

Moosa Awais and a dynamic team of student ambassadors from our Students & Scientists Environmental Research Scholarship Program spent years developing and designing a project, highlighted below in their words. They are a shining example of what youth can achieve with motivation and perseverance. It starts with following steps that align with community-based participatory research principles in a community-oriented setting.¹

(cont on pg 2)

Step 1. Define the Problem



Is there something that concerns you in your community? Every successful project begins by identifying a need. It may be something we see, or friends and other community members. With observations and/or data, we can clearly define the problem we want to address to ensure that a project is meaningful and relevant.

In 2021, a group of us at HBCAC were concerned that we weren't able to balance everything. For a student, healthy habits aren't always easy to maintain, especially in today's fast-paced world. Go to school, participate in activities, get a job, do your homework, apply to college; the day-to-day stresses of a student pile up. This leaves less time for both the things we truly *want* to do and the things we *need* to – like sleep, eat well, drink water, and exercise. With these ideas in mind, we started on a mission; we were going to create a tool we could use and share with the community.

Step 2. Build Your Team and Initial Plan



Who do you need? What's your plan? Meaningful community projects are built through collaboration, we must bring together people with different skills, experiences, and perspectives, then create an initial plan that outlines the goals, roles, timeline, etc. Strong partnerships build trust and increase the likelihood of success.

In our case, we had a student group with the skills to design and code in a COVID-19 world. We envisioned a tool that could strengthen our community outreach and keep those conversations going beyond our initial connection with the public. We wanted to incentivize young people to engage in healthy behaviors and seek out health information without creating daily pressures of striving for perfection. To achieve our goal, we examined the research literature and connected with communication scientists to find best strategies for messaging.

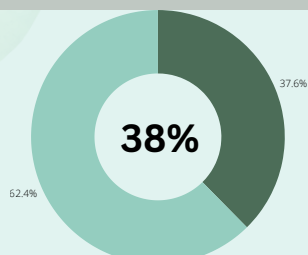
Step 3. Review the Literature



Identifying a problem isn't enough, we must explore what is already known about a topic. That starts with reviewing scientific literature and similar projects that have been done to understand what has worked, what challenges others encountered, and where opportunities remain. Combining existing evidence with the teams knowledge and lived experience leads to stronger, more informed decisions.

Armed with a strong team, we set out to understand the science and found some surprising data: many adults and teens do not meet recommended levels for sleep, physical activity, hydration, or vegetable intake.²⁻⁸

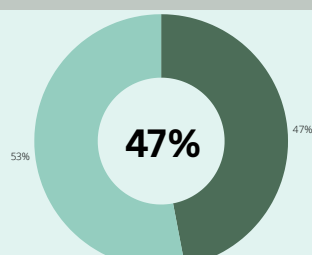
Adopting an 'Imperfectly Perfect' Attitude



38% of adults in NY don't get enough sleep. For teens, recent studies show that number is only 22%.

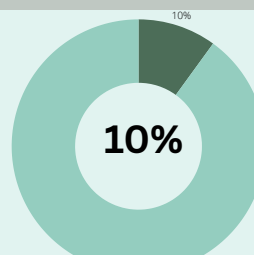
americashealthrankings.org

theguardian.com



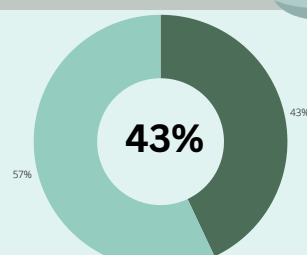
Only 47% of adults and 25% of teens achieve recommended exercise.

cdc.gov



10% of US adults and only 2% of teens eat enough vegetables.

cdc.gov usda.gov



43% of adults and 35% of teens reach their daily recommended water intake.

cdc.gov

Research shows that consistent sleep, regular movement, and a balanced diet support mental health, learning, immune and cardiovascular function, while reducing the risk of illness and chronic disease. Small, sustainable habits can make a meaningful difference in long-term well-being. So how do we create new habits? The literature guided us to encourage simple behavioral changes, and to also seek societal level changes. We also understood that populations face different daily demands and additional barriers – like lack of access or affordability. One example is food deserts—areas where fresh, healthy food is scarce due to a lack of local grocery stores. Redlining, a discriminatory and now illegal banking practice, contributed to these barriers on Long Island. We hypothesized that our app could be a stepping stone of individual engagement, community dialogue, and collective efforts to promote systemic changes.



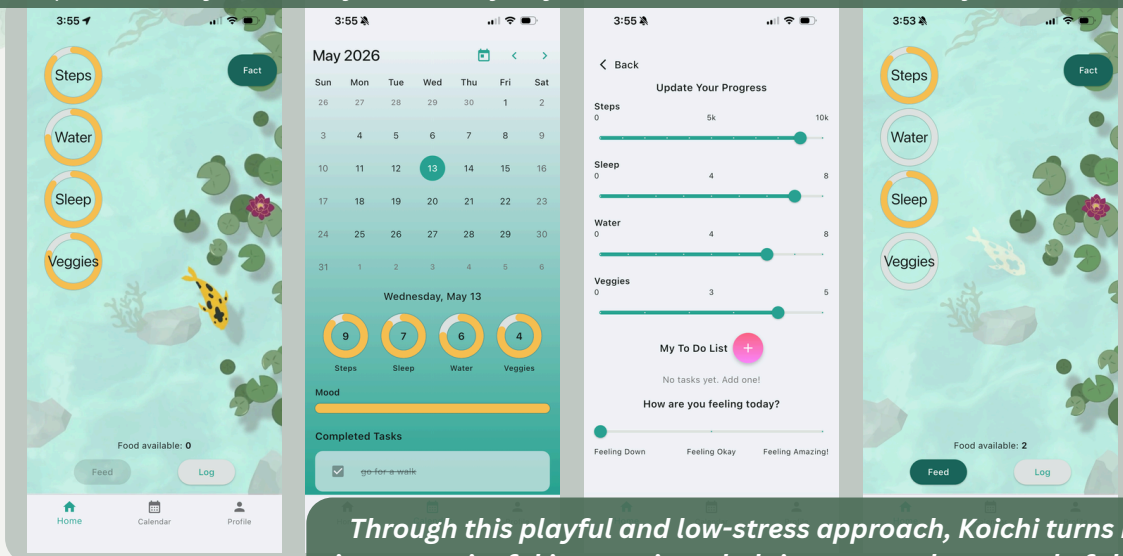
Step 4. Refine Your Strategy

Knowledge acquired, the next step is to refine the team's ideas and carve out a detailed plan that includes objectives, methods, and other components. Effective projects are flexible and continuously adapt as new information becomes available.

Understanding the science and the challenges, we sought to promote awareness of environmental health; the ways our bodies influence and are influenced by our environment, and our capacities for agency - building healthy habits with small daily changes without pressure. We wanted to promote dialogue, encourage community investment, and provide a simple tool to get started.

We designed presentations and a mobile app to promote simple ways to achieve these daily goals and encourage youth to get involved in the community. The presentations utilized storytelling, simple tips to get started, and involvement pathways. The app used the best evidence-based practices we could find for success and refined it with community feedback from multiple rounds of focus groups. These strategies included combining things like gamification, visual engagement, reminders, health app integration, & reward systems to encourage daily actions. Ultimately, we hoped that by promoting personal growth through symbolism and low pressure encouragement, the app reinforces that we are all part of a shared environment and that individual actions have a ripple effect.⁹⁻¹²

How does it work? Users care for a digital koi fish (named Wabi) by completing goals. Wabi was named after the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, finding beauty in imperfection and natural balance. Every time a goal is met, the fish can get fed. If Wabi isn't fed (or in other words, the user's set goals aren't met), Wabi starts losing color and turning ghostly, reminding users to stay engaged. But a key component is that Wabi will be okay if all goals aren't perfect. As long as users meet half their goals overall, they are able to feed their fish to keep him well, and points earned on previous days can carry over. Every day won't be the same, so how can your habits?



Through this playful and low-stress approach, Koichi turns routine tasks into meaningful interactions, helping users take control of their health in a proactive and enjoyable way.

Step 5. Take Action



Put the plan into action while documenting progress. Throughout implementation, sometimes challenges arise and require adjustments.

And so we started conversations in classrooms and created Koichi, a thoughtfully designed lifestyle-tracking app to help users build positive habits and build awareness of environmental health. The app was trickier than the presentations – we knew how to talk about it, that was easy. The process of designing the app, however, was difficult, though the goal was simple: to inspire small, consistent changes that improve both individual health and the world we live in. Challenges included learning curves for programs, trial and error with coding, platform adaptation, and setting realistic goals.

Step 6. Sustain & Evaluate



After completing the initial project, it's important to reflect on what worked well, what could be improved, and whether the goals were achieved. Then, identify what future steps could be taken for improvement.

We adopted a rigorous, evidence-informed approach to addressing a problem identified among our group of students, but that's not the end. We have ongoing data analysis of app use trends and plans to improve the app based on that data and initial development limitations. This includes things like adding more customizable features (to reduce pressure further and enhance personal connection) and expanding access. The app is now available for free on the iOS App Store. We hope to see that our project encourages users to more intentionally engage in healthier habits, while highlighting the need for societal changes and fostering a deeper understanding of the connection between personal health and the environment.

Supporting this project is a dedicated, multi-state team that has worked tirelessly to bring this vision to life. I led the development process, overseeing backend architecture, Firebase integration, and UX design, while collaborating closely with creative minds across the country. The research team identified stressors, statistics, recommendations, graphic design concepts, and evidence-based strategies. Together, we ensured the project not only went smoothly but delivers a meaningful, educational experience. This project is a stepping stone to healthier community norms, and we hope to see more like it.

None of this would have been possible without the contributions of that team, whose creativity, technical expertise, and dedication shaped the outcomes over the years. HBCAC has a lasting legacy to creatively engage the next generation of environmental stewards by sharing intergenerational and transdisciplinary knowledge. Our legacy includes HBCAC staff, Zero To MVP (our software partner), and high school interns: Muhammad Awais, Huda Ayaz, Maliha Ayaz, Agranya Ketha, Justin Lanot, Matthew Miller, Ashley Moon, Claire Parks, Caitlyn Parrish-Lewis, Tanish Parlapall, Ryan Yuen, Subhana Zafar, and Tryphena Zareif.

There are many ways to seek out change, for ourselves and the public. We encourage strong regulations to ensure everyone has access to healthy foods, clean drinking water, and clean air; and workers have jobs that pay a living wage. We hope that students and parents can use the information in this newsletter to talk about public health and work with our CAB network to strengthen environmental health.

Change starts with an individual or a team sharing information with a friend, a classroom, or a legislator. It is imperative that we all seek out societal and legislative changes to improve health trajectories — such as creating more walkable communities to increase physical activity. This project is an example of one of many student-led initiatives. Over the years, HBCAC students have driven the passage of bills such as the Toxin-Free Toddlers and Babies Act to get BPA out of baby bottles and the Safer Sales Slip Act to remove BPA from thermal receipts, conducted needs assessments, removed styrofoam from school cafeterias, started clubs to incentivize other students to get involved, and more. HBCAC believes that youth are the “Guardians of Our Future.” Let’s get anyone with interest and motivation on a path to build their skills, create positive impacts, and achieve success.

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Sources

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