Dr. Lindsey Turner knows that healthy kids are better learners and that’s why she works every day to improve children’s health, as well as their academic outcomes.

Turner joined Boise State in 2014 as a research associate professor in the College of Education. Previously, Turner held a similar position as a research scientist at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In that role, she was a project director on the Bridging the Gap Research Program — a long-running project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to examine how policies can improve student health and wellness across the country. Building on that work, Turner has continued to conduct research on student wellness in her new home at Boise State.
Soon after joining Boise State, Turner founded the Initiative for Healthy Schools in the College of Education. The initiative has grown rapidly and is now home to 10 projects focused on wellness and academics.

“We focus on a variety of topics that help schools create healthy environments, including good nutrition, physical activity, and social and emotional programming,” Turner said. “Kids learn best when they are healthy, safe and engaged, and we are studying how to best create those settings.”

The projects at the Initiative for Healthy Schools include several research studies on these topics, as well as collaborations with local schools and districts to help them implement programs and then evaluate their outcomes. Turner also works with several teams across the country who are conducting rigorous large-scale research programs on school wellness, including collaborations with the University of Maryland, University of Illinois at Chicago and Emory University.

One of Turner’s research projects here in the Gem State is the Physically Active Classrooms with Energizers (PACE) project, which is studying the implementation of brief physical activity breaks in local elementary school classrooms. With funding from the Institute for Education Sciences (part of the U.S. Department of Education), the PACE team works with local teachers to learn more about how activity breaks throughout the day can help students stay on-task and focused on learning.

Turner said PACE project researchers are interested in learning more about what works well for teachers, and testing out supports to help teachers add these breaks into their day. “Other research has shown that these brief breaks help kids stay focused and also to stay more physically active during the day, which are

“The research conducted by Turner and her colleagues from the national Bridging the Gap project has helped shape policy around school nutrition, including the revision of national standards for school meals.”
both important outcomes,” Turner said. “What we’re hoping to do with this project is to learn directly from teachers about what helps them use these breaks more effectively, then we’ll create a toolkit that can be shared freely to support teachers all across the country.”

Another initiative project focuses on school nutrition. The research conducted by Turner and her colleagues from the national Bridging the Gap project has helped shape policy around school nutrition, including the revision of national standards for school meals.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act passed by the United States Congress with bipartisan support in December 2010 spurred many changes in school nutrition. Each year, more than 30 million U.S. students in grades K-12 receive lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Turner has been studying how meals served at schools across the country have become healthier as a result of those new school lunch standards, including the addition of more fruits and vegetables. Some of that work has been published in top journals, entered into the Congressional Record and featured by media outlets including TIME, CNN, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.

As Turner notes, “the changes in school nutrition stemming from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act have been enormous, benefitting millions of children and teens. This is one of the most profound public health success stories of the past decade.”

In addition, Turner’s ongoing work on school nutrition is documenting the ways that policy changes have made school meal programs more accessible for many lower-income students. “School meal programs are a crucial part of the hunger safety net in this country,” she said. “By ensuring that all kids have access to a healthy breakfast, these programs help kids start the day ready to learn. School nutrition programs are a key part of a healthy school environment.”

Dr. Rich Osguthorpe, dean of the College of Education, said Turner’s research serves as a great example of why the college has experienced a recent rise in national rankings. “Dr. Turner is engaged in cutting-edge research on what works best to optimize every child’s opportunity to learn in schools. Her commitment to improving children’s health and to studying the intersection of wellness and educational outcomes is exemplary,” Osguthorpe said. “Her outstanding scholarship represents the type of high-level, externally funded research that makes Boise State’s College of Education the fastest-rising graduate school of education in the country.”

The Boise State Initiative for Healthy Schools doesn’t stop at the door of the classroom. Dr. Lindsey Turner and researchers from across the country are helping students and teachers get their hands dirty by creating school gardens and increasing learning outcomes at the same time.

In research published in the December 2016 issue of the Journal of School Health, Turner and her team analyzed nationally representative data from more than 5,000 elementary schools and showed that during the 2013-14 school year, 31 percent of schools had a garden, more than double the 12 percent of schools from 2006-07. Turner credits this increase to the encouragement of several agencies and organizations across the country, such as the United States Department of Agriculture, which has been a strong supporter of school garden programs. Partnerships with local and regional nonprofit organizations also have helped more schools create gardens on their campuses.

“An increasing amount of research is demonstrating the benefits from school garden programs for kids, including better nutrition knowledge and healthier food choices, increased physical activity from working in the garden, and higher test scores in science,” Turner said.

Turner notes that this last point is very important for school administrators who are looking for innovative ways to help engage students in science. Turner and her colleagues in science education at Boise State are looking into ways to develop ongoing partnerships with Idaho schools to study those benefits in science achievement. The Journal of School Health research was conducted with Dr. Meghan Eliason, a former elementary school principal and assistant professor in the College of Education at Boise State, along with Anna Sandoval and Dr. Frank Chaloupka at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago.