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### **ABSTRACT**

The Sankofa Health, Education, Agriculture, and Leadership (HEAL) Project, based in the Ninth Ward area of New Orleans, Louisiana teaches adolescent youth gardening, nutrition education, and life skills, and recognizes them as stakeholders who are integral to the development of their community. Through a combination of indoor and outdoor classroom work, HEAL students explore their roles as peer leaders, study the foundations of nutrition and agriculture, and learn hands-on gardening techniques. The students have elected officers within their group for five leadership positions, including president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and reporter, which serve as opportunities for their personal development and responsibility outlets. The students' knowledge is also directly applied through their work in a paid internship program to work at the weekly Sankofa Farmers Market and within the three Sankofa Learning Gardens and Farms. They are learning the processes of growing and nurturing plants in a garden, with job responsibilities that include harvesting produce, maintaining compost and soil, irrigation of plants, and clearing of blighted land in the community on blocks adjacent to the garden spaces. In addition to growing and nurturing plants in a garden, the youth increase their awareness of the health benefits of eating fresh produce, whole grains, and protein. HEAL students are educated about the significance of vitamin-rich diets and adequate physical activity, as adolescence is a critical period for their social, physical, and cognitive development. They work with a registered dietician to increase their awareness of the health benefits of eating fresh produce, whole grains, and protein products, and the relationship between cardiovascular risk factors and one's diet. Additionally, the youth perform outreach in the community to disseminate information about healthy lifestyle choices and nutritious eating habits. Through their work with the HEAL project, adolescent youth work together to develop vacant and blighted land into sustainable agricultural spaces, become educated about healthy living, and provide accessible and affordable food in underserved communities, and transform them into healthier and safer societies.