

Making the Next Generation Heart Smart

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[see the empowers video](#)

Dr. Gerald Berenson's four decades of groundbreaking research confirming that heart disease begins in childhood has brought him international accolades. But what makes this Tulane cardiologist's heart sing is applying the lessons learned from preventive cardiology research to practical lessons for schoolchildren.



Dr. Gerald Berenson has studied the origins of heart disease for four decades. Of primary importance is integrating heart-smart lessons into elementary school curricula, he says. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Developed by Berenson and the team of the Tulane [Center for Cardiovascular Health](#), the [Health Ahead/Heart Smart program](#) has been implemented in all 16 elementary schools in Washington Parish, La., where Berenson launched the world-renowned Bogalusa Heart Study in 1973. In these classrooms, Berenson says 5,000 to 7,000 children participate in activities that emphasize having healthy lifestyles and being good students.

[Guidebooks](#) are available for teachers working with kids from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. The curricula address general health issues and healthy decision-making. The team also has developed a program for families with high heart-disease risk.

“Mrs. Obama is on a campaign about obesity, which is very good, but what are you going to do about high blood pressure, high cholesterol and social problems that contribute to heart disease?” [Berenson](#) asks. “Single-focus prevention programs don't work. As a doctor, you want to look at the total person.”

The other mission that gets Berenson's heart pumping is preparing a new generation of doctors who will spread the message of preventing heart disease by teaching important lifestyle changes early in life. Young doctors come from around the world to work with him. Working alongside Berenson this semester are physicians from Panama, Israel, India and Vietnam.

This month the 88-year-old cardiologist who has made preventing heart disease his life's work sent off his third book about lessons learned from the Bogalusa Heart Study to a publisher in the Netherlands. The book, *Evolution of Cardio-metabolic Risk from Childhood to Middle Age*, tracks the development of heart disease from birth to 50.