

healthy learning News

SUPERINTENDENT
SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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A healthy school environment is important to the well-being, development and achievement of students. Schools have the potential to influence children's food choices and daily activity levels, and present a wonderful opportunity to introduce and encourage healthy habits.

Over the Back Fence: Perspectives on Rural School Systems and Childhood Obesity

Poverty can lead to higher rates of childhood obesity as it may limit access to healthy, affordable foods.¹ Poverty rates are not equally distributed across the country and rates in non-metropolitan areas have exceeded those in cities every year since poverty was first officially measured in the 1960s.² Data from the 2008 American Community Survey included measures of poverty in all types of communities, from urban to suburban to rural. The rates varied depending on how rural was defined. When using the designation "rural," poverty was 11 percent. When using the designation "metropolitan or

micropolitan statistical area," it was 17 percent.

While the latter statistic may include areas not typically considered rural, it is a more comprehensive snapshot of rural America.³

Race and ethnicity are strongly correlated with rural poverty and play a significant role in the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity. African-American children living in rural communities have the highest levels of overweight and obesity of any racial, ethnic or geographic groups.⁴

Access to healthy, affordable food can be a problem in rural communities. Residents often must travel farther for access to grocery stores, and their choices

of healthy foods are often limited. Supermarkets have less-frequent shipments and carry a smaller array of items than suburban or urban grocery stores.⁵

Concurrently, the purchasing power of rural school systems – with fewer numbers of students – is limited, further affecting children's access to affordable, healthy foods. Smaller school systems receive fewer discounts and thus pay more for the food they purchase to serve breakfast and lunch than their larger, urban counterparts. The research is mixed on rural schools and "economies of scale," though a February 2009 policy brief by Cornell University's New York State Center for Rural Schools encouraged districts with

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what's inside:

- ◆ **The South Carolina Lowcountry:**
 - Beaufort County School District, Beaufort, S.C.
 - Jasper County School District, Jasper, S.C.
- ◆ **Jackson-Madison County School System, Jackson, Tenn.**

The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States.

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Over the Back Fence — Continued from cover

enrollments under 1,000 students to merge with another district in an effort to reduce expenses, including food purchasing.⁶

The geographic expanse of rural communities also has an impact on children's opportunities for physical activity. Students often live too far away from school to walk or bike to school, and instead are bused or driven. Similarly, road conditions are often not conducive to bike riding or walking, as many lack sidewalks, street lamps or other safety measures.⁷

As a community can only eat as healthy as their food system allows, likewise physical fitness is determined in part by the degree to which the community provides safe, fun opportunities for organized and recreational activity.⁸ In rural communities, there are fewer places for recreation and physical activity such as recreation centers, parks, green spaces and bike paths and lanes.⁹ Rural communities have a smaller tax base and fewer workers to build or staff places for children to play, such as recreation centers. To offset this, rural school districts and governments could benefit from federal and state grants to improve access to healthy foods and safe places to play. However, smaller, more rural districts often do not have a full-time dedicated staff person to write grant applications, many of which require hours of preparation that may not be possible for staff with multiple responsibilities.

In spite of all these issues, the policy environment in rural communities is amenable to change and can be positively impacted to enable access to physical activity and healthy foods. School systems are critical to these central environmental changes. This issue of *Healthy Learning News* features

three rural school systems that, through commitment and collaboration, have taken on the issue of childhood obesity in the face of poverty and inequality. They have implemented policies and programs that encourage students, district staff and administrators to exercise more and consume healthier foods.

- (1) Olson, C.M., "The Relationship Between Hunger and Obesity: What Do We Know and What Are the Implications for Public Policy," Proceedings of the Roundtable on Understanding the Paradox of Hunger and Obesity, Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), Washington, D.C., 2005.
- (2) U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Rural Poverty at a Glance. Rural Development Research Report 100, July 2004.
- (3) As a derivative of U.S. Census Data, we cautiously use this poverty indicator, as the U.S. Census Bureau itself has readily indicated that its data is unreliable for populations under 20,000, which would include many rural towns and areas. U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey. Available at: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?_geo_id=01000US&_mt_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_GCT1701_US37&-ds_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_
- (4) Levi J., Vinter S., St. Laurent R. and Segal L. "F as in Fat 2008: How Obesity Policies Are Failing in America." Trust for America's Health, August 2008. Available at: healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2008/Obesity2008Report.pdf.
- (5) Larson, N.I., Story M.T. and Nelson M.C. "Neighborhood Environments: Disparities in Access to Healthy Foods in the U.S." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 36(1), 74-81, January 2009.
- (6) Cornell University New York State Center for Rural Schools. "Expanding the Options for Small Rural School Districts in New York State." February 2009. Available at: www.ny ruralschools.org/downloads/Policy%20Brief-Reorganization.pdf
- (7) U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. "PEDSAFE: Pedestrian Safety Guide and Countermeasure Selection System," September 2004. Available at: www.walkinginfo.org/pedsafe/crashstats.cfm#areatype
- (8) Blankenau, Joe. "Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity in Rural America." Center for Rural Affairs, Lyons, Nebraska, 2009.
- (9) Powell, L.M., Slater, S. and Chaloupka, F.J. "The Relationship Between Community Physical Activity Settings and Race, Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status." *Evidence-Based Preventive Medicine*, 1(2):135-144, 2004. ◆



Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson.

First Lady Michelle Obama Tackles Childhood Obesity

First Lady Michelle Obama has unveiled an initiative called Let's Move, aimed to curb the childhood obesity epidemic in a generation. The campaign has four goals. They are to:

- ◆ Create healthier schools
- ◆ Increase physical activity among children
- ◆ Help Americans make healthy food choices
- ◆ Make healthy, affordable food available in every community.

To that end, the First Lady and AASA encourage every school to become part of the Healthier U.S. Schools Challenge Program. The program, from the USDA, establishes rigorous standards for schools' food quality, participation in meal programs, physical activity, and nutrition education, which are the key components that make for healthy and active kids. To learn more, go to www.letsmove.gov. To tell AASA about your intention to apply for the Healthier U.S. Schools designation, go to www.aasa.org/schoolschallenge. ◆

School Systems in the South Carolina Lowcountry

Beaufort County School District

Superintendent: Valerie Truesdale • Total Number of Schools: 30
Total Number of Students: 19,530 • Free/Reduced Lunch Rate: 53%

The South Carolina Lowcountry is a geographic and cultural region along the state's coast. Composed of eight counties in the state's southernmost region, it is known for its down-home cuisine and tourist destinations — most recognizably, Charleston and Hilton Head. With beautiful landscapes, old homes and rich history, tourists do not often witness the unmet needs and challenges facing the area's full-time residents. The Lowcountry region's school systems, including Jasper County and Beaufort County school districts, address many of these issues daily — including childhood obesity.

Nearly 34 percent of children in South Carolina are overweight or obese.¹ Both Beaufort and Jasper County school districts face rates of childhood obesity at least as high as the state average and have had leaders, including educators, who have a strong desire to address the problem. Superintendent Valerie Truesdale of Beaufort County School District was the 2009 South Carolina Superintendent of the Year and is a leader on this issue in the state. Truesdale sees herself as a leader in childhood obesity prevention, but also says she has a lot to learn. She believes that modeling good behavior for students and staff plays a large role. *"If we don't walk the talk, it affects the children,"* Truesdale says.

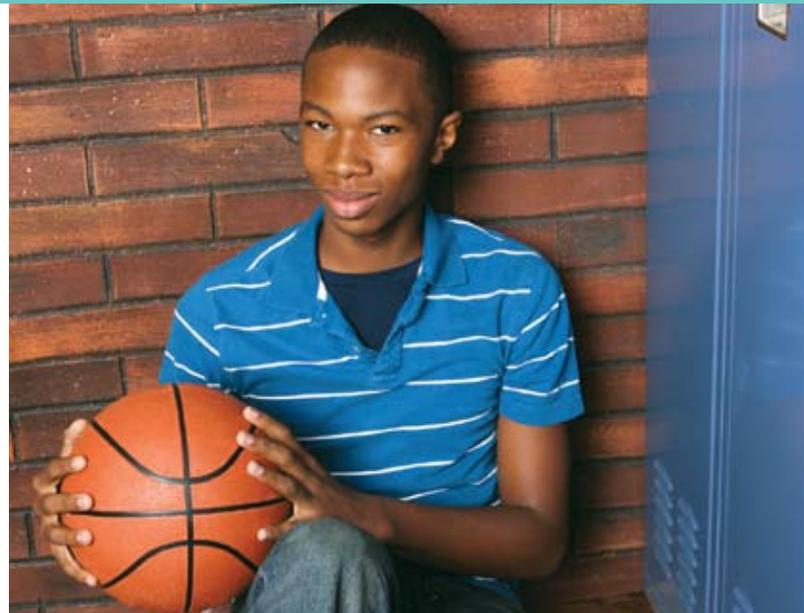
Jasper County School District is in leadership transition. The district has had interim superintendents since spring 2009. At press time, the search for a permanent superintendent was under way.

State-Level Mandates and Local-Level Successes

All school districts in South Carolina are required to have a Coordinated School Health Advisory Council. Buy-in and support from school administrators allow teachers and other staff the time to attend these important meetings. Each council responds to concerns about the health of its students and leads efforts to make changes as a result of the meetings. Through council participation, school staff take the lead on policy and programmatic changes related to health, as well as modeling healthy behaviors in the community. For example, in Jasper County, teachers have formed a walking club that meets before school, and they plan to include students in this club in the future.

Strength in Numbers

Both Jasper County School District and Beaufort County School District belong to the Eat Smart Move More South Carolina — Lowcountry Coalition. The coalition serves as a focal point for the school districts and the community to work together to address childhood obesity. In addition to advisory council represen-



tatives from both districts, the coalition has representatives from local hospitals, the regional department of health and an area health education center. They meet regularly to coordinate efforts and to strategize ways to reduce childhood obesity throughout the community.

The coalition, as well as an earlier iteration called Reducing Obesity and Chronic Disease in Our Community, helped the districts compile body-mass-index data on students in grades 3, 5 and 8 over the course of three years. The coalition provided funding for equipment like accurate scales and software for data analysis. The data revealed that in Jasper County, one-third of the students were overweight or obese.² In Beaufort County the figures were

slightly higher, with rates totaling approximately 38 percent.³

Armed with these data, which were analyzed by the University of South Carolina at Beaufort, the districts sought additional funding and initiated additional programs. For example, the districts work together annually to host districtwide school wellness conferences. The conferences have featured Superintendent Truesdale and Jasper County's former superintendent, Delacy Sanford, as well as national-level speakers and motivators, and included a special track for school administrators. All staff were encouraged to attend for professional development.

Both districts seek grants and other funding outside of their



Save the Children's CHANGE Program

Jasper County School District

Interim Superintendent: Larry B. Heath • **Total Number of Schools: 5**
• **Total Number of Students: 3,400** • **Free/Reduced Lunch Rate: 81%**

partnership with the Lowcountry Coalition to address high rates of childhood obesity. Jasper County School District has a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that provides a daily fresh fruit or vegetable snack to 5th-grade students in one of its schools. Likewise, Beaufort has a similar fresh fruit and vegetable grant in three of its schools, funded by Clemson University.

The physical education teachers in Jasper County are pro-active and seek smaller grants and in-kind gifts — and now can boast having a well-stocked closet full of basketballs and other sports equipment. They also received a Carol M. White Physical Education Program grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, which will strengthen physical education offerings in the district. Together, both districts participate in larger projects that seek to create “greenways” linking parks and trails throughout the region. They see this important project as one that provides benefit to the students who use these parks during the school day, as well as to the greater community.

Enhancing Access Through Purchasing Power

A founding member of the School Food Service Purchasing Alliance in

1994, the Jasper County School District sought to negotiate lower food prices by creating a buying cooperative among neighboring school districts. With this group firmly in place, they are now making healthier food purchases at reasonable prices. The districts within the alliance now offer lower-fat milks and meats and offer whole-grain breads without too severe an impact on their food budgets.

In Jasper County School District, all schools do nearly all of their cooking from scratch on the premises. The Beaufort County School District contracts with a food service provider for breakfast and lunch preparation. Superintendent Truesdale encouraged the vendor to provide healthier offerings for her students. In turn, the vendor now offers the district salad bars at each school as an adjunct to the lunch program.

The history of the Lowcountry is one of perseverance and innovation. The Penn Center, located in Beaufort County, was one of the first public schools for freed slaves and also housed many meetings of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The current efforts throughout the Lowcountry and within the school districts of Jasper and Beaufort counties continue in that tradition

of providing access to all. As they build networks across districts through the Eat Smart Move More Lowcountry Coalition or on the greenway projects, school districts in the Lowcountry are working together on policy and program changes that have a positive impact on children and their long-term health outcomes.

See Also:

- Eat Smart Move More South Carolina:
www.eatsmartmovemoresc.org.

Endnotes:

- (1) Levi J., Vinter S., St. Laurent R. and Segal L. “F as in Fat 2009: How Obesity Policies Are Failing in America.” Trust for America’s Health. Available at: healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/release.php?stateid=SC
- (2) “Jasper County, South Carolina: 3rd-, 5th-, and 8th-Grade Students Body Mass Index (BMI) Report.” Eat Smart Move More South Carolina Low Country, Fall 2008. Unpublished.
- (3) “Beaufort County, South Carolina: 3rd-, 5th-, and 8th-Grade Students Body Mass Index (BMI) Report.” Eat Smart Move More South Carolina Low Country, Fall 2008. Unpublished. ♦

For more than 75 years, Save the Children has addressed the needs of at-risk children in some of the most impoverished and rural communities in the United States.

Save the Children created the CHANGE (Creating Healthy, Active and Nurturing Growing-up Environments) Program in 2005 to increase rural children’s access to regular physical activity and healthy snacks during and afterschool. During 2008-09, the CHANGE Program was implemented in more than 136 afterschool, in-school and summer schools reaching more than 12,000 children in 12 states.

CHANGE encourages children to be physically active by using the Coordinated Approach To Child Health (CATCH) Kids Club physical activity curriculum to teach life skills and combine fun with fitness. CHANGE provides children with 30 minutes of physical activity. Their healthy snack standard encourages fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, protein or low-fat dairy snacks at school and home.

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Jackson-Madison County School System Jackson, Tenn.

Superintendent: Nancy S. Zambito • Schools: 28
Total Number of Students: 13,000 • Free and Reduced Lunch Rate: 70%

The Jackson-Madison County School System encompasses the city of Jackson and the surrounding area of Madison County and spans approximately 997 square miles. Tennessee has the fifth highest rate of childhood obesity in the country,¹ and 43 percent of the district's students are obese or overweight.²

Superintendent Nancy S. Zambito is a champion of school health and student success. *"If kids are going to learn, they have to be healthy, and if teachers are going to be effective they have to be healthy."*

The Coordinated School Health mandate by the Tennessee Department of Education, in coordination with the state department of health, is designed to connect physical, emotional and social health in schools. This eight-component, coordinated approach, designed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, strives to improve students' health and their capacity to learn through the support of families, communities and schools working together. This includes physical education, nutrition services and a healthy school environment.

The mandate funds two full-time positions in each district in the state. These staff members oversee the health and wellness-related programming and policy implementation for the district. Data from 10 pilot sites over the course of five years indicate that the

Coordinated School Health model improved student success rates, including graduation.³ *"Without these two coordinated health positions, I don't know how we could keep our health-related initiatives strong. They are critically important,"* says Zambito.

School-Community Partnership

The district is a founding member of Jumpstart Jackson, a community-wide program focused on fitness, health, wellness and the reduction of obesity among children and adults. School district staff help coordinate and promote events that engage the entire community on physical activity and healthy eating. Through their roles as the public face of the Jumpstart Jackson initiative, both Zambito and Jackson Mayor Jerry Gist encourage local buy-in of the work and its mission, including allowing staff to function outside of the scope of their assigned work to plan wellness activities. The superintendent and mayor work together to strengthen programs the city and school district were implementing independently into a cohesive school-community wellness policy, which has since been approved by both entities.

With limited resources in rural communities, collaboration is of even greater importance to ensure the provision of cohesive services to the most vulnerable children. To that end, the Community Health Action Team includes district, city and community agencies staff

who meet to better coordinate all services. Childhood obesity is one of the team's three areas of focus. The Community Health Action Team in Madison County has proven effective at improving coordination among city-county agencies and community organizations involved in implementing policies and programs to combat childhood obesity.

Through the activities of Jumpstart Jackson and the Community Health Advisory Team, local businesses have supported activities within the school district. Their involvement provides additional promotion and incentive for the greater community to get outside and play.

Joint-Use Agreements

The district uses joint-use agreements to increase the opportunity children have to be physically active. The joint-use agreement in Jackson allows the school to have priority access to the city government's parks and community centers and allows the city government priority access to school facilities. This includes partnerships and collaborations between the school system and the city's Department of Recreation and Parks. While some legal issues needed to be worked out, both the superintendent and the mayor believe the benefits of the partnership — which gives children and the community more opportunities for physical fitness — outweigh any other issue.

Leveraging Success

The district has received grants and awards to further their mission and this work. The school system has staff dedicated to grant writing, due in large part to the leadership of Superintendent Zambito and the partnerships and programs that developed internally through coordinated school health and externally with Jumpstart Jackson and the Community Health Action Team. They have focused their grant-funded projects on schools with the highest need. For example, the district received a grant from General Mills for \$10,000 to address physical activity and nutrition in its middle schools. In addition, the district received three USDA fresh fruit and vegetable grants to provide a daily fruit or

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Jackson, Tenn., *Continued from inside*

vegetable snack for children in the chosen schools and won a "Healthiest School" award from Health Magazine for South Elementary School's fitness center, which is open to students, staff and the community.

District leadership within the Jackson-Madison County School System grants staff the time to make each school a healthier place for all. Their approach to address childhood obesity makes the task at hand seem possible for any district.

See Also:

- ◆ California School Boards Association. "Maximizing Opportunities for Physical Activity through Joint Use of Facilities." Policy Brief, September 2009. Available at: www.csba.org/~media/Files/EducationIssues/Wellness/201002_JointUse_PolicyBrief.aspx.
- ◆ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Coordinated School Health Program: www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/CSHP/.

Endnotes:

- (1) Levi J., Vinter S., St. Laurent R. and Segal L. "F as in Fat 2009: How Obesity Policies Are Failing in America". Trust for America's Health. Available at: healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/release.php?stateid=TN
- (2) Jackson-Madison County School System, internal data. 2008. Unpublished.
- (3) East Tennessee State University Coordinated School Health Evaluation Team. "Tennessee Coordinated School Health Report 2007 Executive Summary." February 2009. Available at: www.tennessee.gov/education/schoolhealth/data_reports/doc/CSHO7ExecSummRevisedwPromulNumb.pdf ◆

Save the Children's CHANGE Program

Continued from inside

Save the Children has partnered with Tufts University to identify interventions to reduce the risk of obesity for poor, rural children. The CHANGE Study is testing how to create supportive school, family and community environments that enable rural children to develop healthy eating habits, increase their daily physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviors. For more information, visit www.savethechildren.org/change. ◆