

Success Story: Coordinated School Health Program New Albany School District

Many factors contribute to the overall health picture of children. When they are served nutritious meals, have opportunities for daily physical activity, feel safe in their environments and have access to health care, their chances of academic success are increased as well. In fact, studies have linked physical activity with an increased ability to concentrate in the classroom (Symons, Cinelli, James, and Groff, 1997) and an improvement in student scores in mathematics, reading, and writing (Sallis, McKenzie, Kolody, Lewis, Marshall, and Rosen-gard, 1999). Eliminating junk foods and substituting more nutritious choices in school cafeterias also may contribute to an increase in positive behaviors among students as well as an increase in concentration on school work (as cited in Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). It's kind of like the old fashioned game of "Connect the Dots." Eating healthy foods, participating in physical activity, having access to counseling services and physical health services all must be connected in order to provide a healthy environment for a child. When some of the "dots" are not connected, less than optimal results may occur.



In Mississippi where obesity and poverty rates are the highest in the country, many policy makers, communities, schools and families are connecting their "dots" in a collective effort to raise healthier generations. The passage of the Mississippi Healthy Students Act of 2007 jumpstarted the process when school districts were required to provide 150 minutes per week of physical activity-based instruction and 45 minutes per week of health education instruction for students in Kindergarten through the eighth grade (S.B. 2369, Mississippi 2007, enacted). Additionally, nutrition standards in Mississippi have increased, and the positive results are telling. In just a two year period, Mississippi increased the number of schools that do not allow soda or fruit drinks (other than 100% juice) from 22% to 75% (as cited in Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

In New Albany, a 4A school district in north Mississippi, promoting healthy lifestyles for students, staff and faculty is a way of life. "It's imperative that we teach our children those things that make them healthy individuals and then provide them an atmosphere that's conducive to the retention of that education," says Phil Nanney, Executive Director of the Union County Development Association. "From an economic developer's standpoint, if we don't have healthy kids, 20 years from now I don't have a healthy workforce." The development association is just one



Lance Evans, Principal, New Albany High School

"It's imperative that we teach our children those things that make them healthy individuals and then provide them an atmosphere that's conducive to the retention of that education."

Phil Nanney, Executive Director, Union County Development Association

of the many partners that the New Albany School District has joined forces with to ensure that all students are given every opportunity to adopt a healthy lifestyle that they may carry with them throughout their lives.

"When you look at Mississippi's track record, it's time for organizations, schools and parents in Mississippi to step up," says Lance Evans, the Principal at New Albany High School. Evans himself has lost 90 pounds by cutting fried foods from his diet and increasing his daily exercise routine. Evans' commitment to healthy living along with the commitment of other staff and faculty members resonates with the students. Haven Boyd, a senior

at New Albany High School, says that having the faculty and staff "walk the walk" means so much more than a lecture. "Not only are they telling us about healthy living, but they are also getting involved personally. They want to be a part of it themselves. That shapes us into a better school district."

The change in mindset has been a gradual process among school district personnel and community members. Seventeen years ago, Tammie Reeder, RN, BSN was the district's only school nurse. "Most of what I was doing was putting out fires. I stayed in my vehicle going from one school to the next and had no time for preventive work." Today Reeder is the School Health Services Coordinator for the district and oversees numerous grants including the John D. Bower School Health Network at New Albany Elementary as well as a Centers for Disease Control grant which provides a staff wellness program. She also works with the district-wide Carol M. White Physical Education SHAPE Up! Grant. The school district itself also has been recognized by the Mississippi Office of Healthy Schools as the recipient of the Mississippi Healthy School Board award.



Tammie Reeder, RN, BSN, School Health Services Coordinator

Healthy Schools



Warner Creekmore, Parent

So how did New Albany go from being reactionaries to visionaries? Reeder insists that it took a little bit of creativity and a lot of collaboration. "My motto in the beginning was 'Make Yourself Indispensable'. We looked at the district as an open field and knew we could do so much with it." With little money in the district budget for health promotion, Reeder began to solicit the help of health professionals in the community. Partnering with Baptist Memorial Hospital-Union County and the local health department enabled Reeder to obtain free classroom materials and classroom speakers free of charge as well. "My goal was to add something new each year that didn't cost anything." In the meantime, Reeder began to apply for health related grants which over the years have brought in thousands of dollars for the effort. Warner Creekmore, a parent of three children and New Albany's tennis coach says that the go-getter

attitude of the district in seeking out grants is commendable. "We don't just sit around on our hands waiting for things to drop in our laps," she says. "We have to go get what's out there."

In Mississippi, few school districts are able to employ full time nurses at every school site (see **Figure 6**). The New Albany School District has managed to provide full-time nurses in each of the three schools as well as an additional part-time nurse at the elementary school site. In the beginning, the nurses' salaries were made possible by various

grants; now the district has maintained its commitment to keep them using district funds. The nurses are no longer "putting out fires". Instead they are actively providing health care services to students and staff and conducting regularly scheduled classroom educational programs with topics based on student suggestions. The nurses even assist families with applying for health care coverage. School nurses also provide CPR, AED, and First Aid training to all coaches and to any staff member who would like to become certified in CPR.



Haven Boyd, Student and Mary Margaret King, Teacher, New Albany High School

The district also has a genuine interest in keeping its personnel healthy and fit. Every year, all employees are offered flu vaccinations at no charge. Typically, about 75% of all school employees receive the vaccine (M. Shannon, Public Relations Director New Albany School District, personal communication, April, 2010). In the fall of 2010, employees participated in a new staff wellness vaccination program that provided the flu vaccinations along with hepatitis vaccinations. The local healthplex offers discounted membership fees to school employees through payroll deduction, and every school in the district has a Bulldog Health and

Healthy Schools

Fitness Center equipped with treadmills, elliptical machines, exercise bicycles, and weight machines which are available to any employee. "If we keep our faculty healthy, then I think it just makes us better teachers," says Mary Margaret King, an English teacher at New Albany High School. "I think it shows that the district cares about the health and well-being of the teachers as well as the students, and that's important to me."

District officials believe that having a healthy faculty and staff translates into a better academic performance for students because teachers will have a decrease in absences. "What's encouraging to me is the amount of faculty and staff who are making lifestyle changes," says Jamey Wright, the Principal at New Albany Elementary School. "When the cafeteria workers have finished serving lunch, they are back on the treadmills. The teachers are at school because they are healthier." Stephanie Simmons, a teacher at the elementary school agrees that the faculty and staff commitment has been encouraging to the students as well as the community. "The kids started seeing the teachers change into their aerobics clothes after school. We started as a school to get fit, and that's when the community came in."



Stephanie Simmons (Teacher, NAES), Jamey Wright (seated, Principal, New Albany Elementary School), Angela Spencer (Teacher, NAES), and Jonna Shaw (Teacher, NAES)

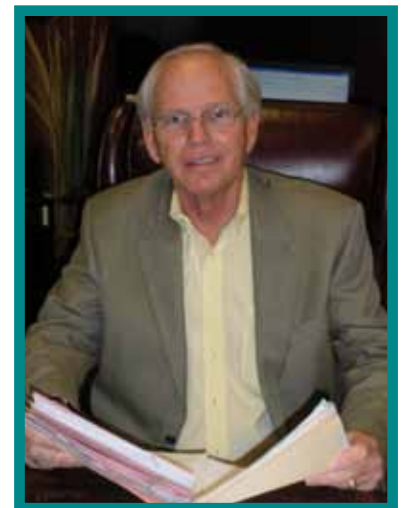


Eydie Pullman (Parent), Phil Nanney (Executive Director, Union County Development Association), Crystal McBrayer (Community and Occupational Health Coordinator, Baptist Memorial Hospital-Union County)

"We are trying to model in every way possible a lot of things to help people put an emphasis on being healthy."

Dr. Charles Garrett, Superintendent, New Albany School District

The community plays an important role in providing support to the students of the district. For example, local physicians conduct annual athletic screenings for all students at no cost. The Lions Club conducts vision screenings as well. "I have most of the doctors in town on speed dial," says Dr. Charles Garrett, New Albany's School Superintendent. "If we have students who need help, we get



Dr. Charles Garrett, Superintendent, New Albany School District

Healthy Schools



Rush Butler, Student



Hannah Harris, Student

them help.”

The school district also has partnerships with the New Albany Police Department to provide crossing guards at school sites and the Mississippi State University Extension Service and Baptist Memorial Hospital –Union County to conduct educational programs for students. There is a strong sense of teamwork between the district and the community. “We’re here to add to their program and to be supportive,” says Crystal McBryer, Community and Occupational Health Coordinator for Baptist Memorial Hospital-Union County. “They [the school district] open their doors to us.” Teachers agree that having health care professionals addressing topics is welcomed by the students and taken very seriously. “My mother quit smoking because of her grandchildren and because of this school [New Albany Elementary School],” says Jonna Shaw, a third grade teacher. “It has changed the lives of students, and I’ve seen it firsthand.” First grade teacher Angela Spencer adds, “Kids go home and tell their parents, ‘I’m a healthier eater.’”

A key component in New Albany’s success is found in the school cafeterias. No fried foods are served on any campus. Deep fat fryers have been replaced by combination steam ovens, and more whole grains and green vegetables are being served daily. Fruits such as kiwi are being introduced in the cafeterias too. Middle school student Rush Butler says he now prefers baked foods and likes trying new fruits and vegetables. The student body is embracing the changes being made. Hannah Harris, a fourth grader likes the whole wheat pizza; Haven Boyd a senior won’t go back to fried foods. “When I was younger, I didn’t know you could bake foods instead of frying them.”

The effort to provide healthier foods in the cafeterias comes from the school district’s involvement in the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) HealthierUS School Challenge. USDA established the program to recognize schools which are creating healthier school environments through the promotion of good nutrition and physical activity. Schools may obtain one of four levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Gold of Distinction (United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, n.d.). New Albany’s Office of Child Nutrition participated in the rigorous application process and

has been certified to receive Silver Status (For a listing of other Mississippi schools, see **Figure 3**). The district's latest figures indicate that 80% of the student population is now purchasing meals in the cafeteria on a daily basis (J. D. Bower Foundation, 2009).

In 2000, the New Albany School District employed one nurse, spent very little of the annual budget on the

"We expect a lot from our community, and our community expects a lot from us."

***Stephanie Simmons, Kindergarten-First Grade Looping Teacher,
New Albany Elementary School***

promotion of good health, and lacked physical education equipment or even a physical education building at the elementary school. Within a ten year period, the district and the community have become one of the leaders in the health reform movement in the state of Mississippi, and they insist that more communities can do the same if they are willing to seek grants, expand existing resources, and enlist the support of the entire community. "Look at what you've got and what you can build on," says Becky Thompson, a middle school parent. "None of this came about in the last nine weeks. It has taken years, and it has just gotten better and better." Reeder agrees that tapping into available resources and setting goals will be the beginning of success for any district. "We know that making a change or a paradigm shift takes time, and so if we change the way kids are thinking and the way they are making decisions, then we can affect their lives."

Healthy meals, physical activity opportunities for staff and students, community support, and a lot of teamwork have made the New Albany School District a model for other districts to follow. From the superintendent to the student, the physician to the parent, everyone is equally involved in the effort. "We're doing everything that we know possible to do to promote health and fitness within our school system, within our staff, and within our community," says parent Warner Creekmore. It has to start with a group of individuals who are committed to connecting all the "dots" in an effort to create healthy living environments for students and their families. When that spirit of cooperation occurs, all of the community benefits. According to parent Eydie Pullman, "I'm very excited that regardless of what maybe previous generations learned in school, the generation today in New Albany and in other districts across the state is learning healthy eating and healthy skills to have a more productive educated life. I am very hopeful for Mississippi's future because we're raising a generation of healthy individuals."

*"We know that making a change or a paradigm shift takes time,
and so if we change the way kids are thinking and the way they
are making decisions, then we can affect their lives."*

***Tammy Reeder, RN, BSN, School Health Services Coordinator, New
Albany School District***