

## UM, Delta Health Alliance Partnership Yields Results in Fight Against Childhood Obesity

Contributed by Edwin Smith  
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OXFORD, Miss. - A partnership between the University of Mississippi and some Delta area schools is encouraging adolescents to choose healthier foods and increase their physical activity - two important lifestyle changes in the Magnolia State's ongoing battle with the bulge.

Janie Cole (left), a registered dietitian with the 'Eating Good ... and Moving Like We Should' program, and Kathy Knight, UM associate professor of family and consumer sciences and project co-investigator, talk with church members at Quitman County St. Matthew Church of God in Christ in Lambert about healthy foods and portion sizes at the church's Health Night.

Obesity in children and adults is a major factor in Mississippi's high rates of heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers.

The UM National Food Service Management Institute and Department of Family and Consumer Sciences are partners in the "Eating Good ... and Moving Like We Should" program. Funded last year by a grant from the Delta Health Alliance, the program teaches children to make healthy choices based on their individual food and nutrition needs and encourages them to engage in a more active lifestyle. The project serves schools in the South Panola and Quitman County school districts.

"The program is achieving promising results in the Mississippi Delta," said Lacy Dodd, health educator and project manager. Dodd and Janie Cole, the program's registered dietitian, spend time in classrooms educating students and in local parent centers and PTA associations educating parents, caregivers and school personnel.

Besides classroom education, Dodd and Cole have conducted workshops, training seminars and individual counseling sessions in community churches and parent centers. Topics have included general nutrition, nutrition and lifestyle factors associated with chronic disease risk factors, especially those associated with obesity.

"Many students have a family member with diabetes, so they think it's something they're just going to have," Cole said. "We're teaching them that it doesn't have to happen."

A survey of the more-than-1,200 residents served by the close of the 2008-2009 school year indicates that 77 percent of the participants either started exercising or increased their physical activity after completing the curriculum. Sixty-five percent of the respondents reported they had increased their intake of fruits and vegetables, and 40 percent said they drink low-fat milk or eat low-fat milk products.

Equally encouraging are statistics that show 53 percent of the children are decreasing the amount of food they consume. Eighty-eight percent said they learned things in the program that will influence their eating habits as an adult.

"The early results support the importance of nutrition education in the fight against obesity and disease among residents in the Mississippi Delta region," said Charlotte Oakley, project investigator and NFSMI executive director. "Healthy behavior changes begin with knowledge."

With another year's funding from DHA, the program has expanded to Bolivar County to provide hands-on nutrition education activities, including healthy cooking classes and gardens at participating schools, said Kathy Knight, co-project investigator. Students grow tomatoes, okra, squash, corn, peas and peppers.

Program administrators, school officials and dietitians are acutely aware that economics can play a role in poor nutrition. Fresh foods are often more expensive than fast foods, so while fresh is always the first choice, frozen and canned foods are emphasized as suitable alternatives.

They're also careful to remember to avoid words such as "fat" and "obese" when dealing with children at an age when appearance and self-esteem are inextricably linked.

South Panola School District Wellness Coordinator Dixie Pogue works with Pope School students planting in their school garden.

"We tell them, 'We're not here to make you skinny; we're here to help you be healthy,'" Dodd said.

The collaboration of partners is key to the program's accomplishments, Oakley and Knight said.

"The ongoing effort of Dixie Pogue at the Pope School, with additional funding from the Bower Foundation, has been essential to the project's success," Oakley said.

"Alvin Harrion, DHA contact and project manager, has also provided oversight, guidance and support," Knight said. "Dr. Margie Hobbs (UM's retired associate director of institutional research) has helped us develop educational resources and evaluation tools tailored to meet the needs of the target region."

In at least one instance, students have used tools provided by the program to influence parents to offer healthier meals.

"We had a parent call and ask if she could bring a fruit tray to her child's birthday party at school," recalled Pope Middle School Principal Susan Vance. "Cupcakes are usually what they bring, so I think they're learning and changing as well."

NFSMI takes its programs and services nationwide through seminars and workshops, satellite presentations, teleconferences, participation at professional meetings and conferences, and via its Web site. This state-of-the-art facility provides professional development opportunities to child nutrition professionals.

The Delta Health Alliance is a partnership founded by Delta State University, Mississippi State University, Mississippi Valley State University, the UM Medical Center and the Delta Council. The alliance's primary goals are to coordinate and provide oversight for community-based programs that address critical health care and wellness gaps in the Delta. The DHA strives to accomplish this by focusing on increasing access to health care, improving health education and conducting health research.

For more information about "Eating Good ... and Moving Like We Should," contact Lacy Dodd at [lamyrick@olemiss.edu](mailto:lamyrick@olemiss.edu) or Janie Cole at [jwcole@olemiss.edu](mailto:jwcole@olemiss.edu), or call 800-321-3054.