

Project Fit America



Rear Admiral Steven Galson, M.D., Acting U.S. Surgeon General, presents an award for exemplary health improvement to Pecan Park Elementary school in Jackson, Miss.

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Mississippians suffer the devastating effects of obesity more than perhaps any other state in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 51.4 percent of Mississippi’s population was overweight or obese in 2007 – the highest percentage in the country. Obesity-related illnesses accounted for nearly half of the state’s healthcare budget, and the population suffered the highest death rate from diabetes in the country.

In spring 2007, the Mississippi Legislature enacted a law requiring elementary and junior high school students to participate in 150 minutes of exercise and 45 minutes of health education per week. The passage of the law was a landmark for the state, but the economic reality was that many schools did not have the infrastructure or instructors to meet the requirements.

The **Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation** recognized the importance of providing exemplary school-based fitness and education equipment and programming to serve the needs of all students in Mississippi. To achieve this objective, the Foundation collaborated with Project Fit America (PFA) to build exercise stations and provide academic programs for schools, grades K-8.

The Foundation’s charitable direction and focus emerged as PFA began working with communities throughout Mississippi. The staff conducted evaluations of the state on a county-by-county basis to determine the areas of greatest need. PFA and the Foundation conducted conference calls and readiness tests to determine which schools

were the best candidates to receive grant money. The project began on a pilot program basis in 2006, launching in 20 schools in Mississippi’s northern and southern regions. In 2008, PFA was implemented in 45 additional schools. The pilot programs have been very successful and created a template for statewide rollout and implementation.

PFA has been working for 18 years with schools in more than 300 cities and 40 states. Utilizing their “brain trust,” PFA selects schools that are dedicated to becoming fitness-forward and want to transform their playgrounds, curricula, cafeterias and classrooms to change the sedentary culture of their students. Foundation and PFA staff met in late 2008 to select 40 more Mississippi schools to receive Foundation funding.

Pre- and post-PFA testing outcomes from Mississippi’s pilot schools have revealed significant health improvements. Students’ upper body strength has improved by over 25 percent, cardiovascular endurance has increased by over 20 percent, and abdominal strength has improved by over 20 percent. The schools will track additional health indicators in the coming year, including body mass index, absenteeism and behavioral occurrences, along with changes in state testing outcomes, which will be reported to the Foundation for analysis. The United States Surgeon General recently presented an award for exemplary health improvement to one of the Mississippi schools targeted by the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation and Project Fit America. ■