



Oak Grove Lower Elementary: Committed to Reducing Childhood Obesity

Oak Grove Lower Elementary School serves 875 second and third graders in a rural community just west of Hattiesburg, the fourth largest city in Mississippi. Oak Grove is a Title 1 school that has achieved Gold certification in the United States Department of Agriculture's HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC). The Together Counts™ program supports the HUSSC through an annual incentive program that further rewards participating schools. In 2012, Oak Grove won the Grand Prize.



“If they are eight or nine years old and already obese, we owe it to those children to help them lead a healthy lifestyle now.”

— *Principal Teresa Jenny*





Oak Grove Lower Elementary: Committed to Reducing Childhood Obesity

Oak Grove Lower Elementary School, part of the Lamar County School District, serves 875 second and third graders in the Oak Grove Community. The school is located in a rural community just west of Hattiesburg, the fourth largest city in Mississippi. Oak Grove is a Title 1 school that has achieved Gold certification in the United States Department of Agriculture’s HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC). The HUSSC is a voluntary initiative established in 2004 that recognizes schools participating in the National School Lunch Program that are creating healthy school environments through the promotion of nutrition and physical activity. **The Together Counts™ program supports the HUSSC through an annual incentive program that further rewards participating schools.** In 2012, Oak Grove won the Grand Prize in the HealthierUS Schools Challenge Sweepstakes, earning a \$10,000 grant to help advance their school’s physical education and food service programs.

Snapshot of Oak Grove

Community Snapshot	Oak Grove is located in a rural community that’s both racially and economically diverse. Former NFL quarter-back Brett Favre lives down the street from the school and his children attended Oak Grove; yet also close to the school are pockets of homeless residents. The city of Hattiesburg is 52.8 % African American, 40.5% white, and 4.3% Hispanic. The median household income is \$31,548. About 28.3% of Hattiesburg residents live below the poverty line. Its most common industries are manufacturing, retail trade, construction, and food service.
School Type	Public
Enrollment	875
Grade levels	Second and Third Grade
School overview	Oak Grove is a Title 1 school with 49.8% of students on free or reduced lunch. 59.6% of students are white, 32.2% are African American, and 4.3% are Hispanic.
How Physical Education and Health are taught	All students in grades two and three participate in Physical Education twice a week for 40 minutes. Health concepts are addressed in regular classrooms, as appropriate.



Background about Oak Grove and the HealthierUS Schools Challenge

According to Oak Grove Lower Elementary’s principal Teresa Jenny, obesity is an “epidemic” in Mississippi. Combating childhood obesity has been a personal passion for Jenny for a long time. **“If they are eight or nine years old and already obese, we owe it to those children to help them lead a healthy lifestyle now.”**

“Most kids are only active during PE class. This community doesn’t have a lot of money for extracurricular activities.”

**— Amy Reesor,
School Nurse**

Jenny was not alone. When school nurse Amy Reesor joined the staff in 2008, she was alarmed by the 15% overweight/obesity rate of students. “As the school nurse, I felt like it was my responsibility to help lower this rate and to educate students on being active and helping students balance food choices with activity,” she said. “We live in a somewhat healthy community, but to have 15% of second and third graders qualify as overweight or obese is startling.” When asked to what she attributes the statistic, she said, “Most kids are only active during

PE class. This community doesn’t have a lot of money for extracurricular activities. When our students go home, their parents are usually working so they get their own snack and often sit and watch TV until their parents come home.” She observed the PE classes and saw how those students who were obese or overweight shied away from activity, standing in the back of every line and having trouble breathing when they did participate. She knew she needed to help.

Luckily, her goal was shared by Lamar County’s central office leadership. The county’s Child Nutrition Director Becke Bounds had been making the shift toward becoming a healthier school system for a while. She put out a challenge to all Lamar County schools to apply for the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) HealthierUS Schools Challenge Grants. The grants require a stringent set of guidelines related to food and physical activity.

Every Lamar County school applied for an HUSSC grant and, in 2010, Oak Grove Lower Elementary received recognition of Gold status. According to Jenny, this was a “significant accomplishment” for the school and a “proud moment” for her. “The HUSSC grant is not just an award. It has opened up many doors for us.” One such door that Jenny did not expect opened up at a very famous house! In October 2011 Becke Bounds was honored by First Lady Michelle Obama at a White House ceremony celebrating HUSSC winners. The HealthierUS Schools Challenge is a key component of Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign.



Reducing Obesity at Oak Grove

Applying and achieving Gold HUSSC status was an important part of Oak Grove Lower Elementary's efforts to reduce its obesity problem. But the efforts did not stop there. Like all Lamar County Schools, **Oak Grove created a school health council to help lead its individual campus efforts and adapt the county's wellness goals to specific school needs.**

On the food side of the Energy Balance scale, in addition to following the HUSSC guidelines, they set guidelines for what students could bring in for snacks, focusing on USDA dietary guidelines recommendations. "We taught the kids about balance, variety and moderation, especially if they were choosing a snack that might not be as nutrient-filled. We didn't ban sugary snacks, but we helped them learn about moderation."

On the activity side of the scale, the wellness council set goals for Oak Grove's Physical Education teachers. Pre- and post-BMI measurements were taken for every student, and physical fitness challenges were presented to students. **Teachers created a**

physical fitness report card with benchmarks indicating where kids were and where they wanted to be. Students tracked their own progress.

According to Jenny, "It's been remarkable." Oak Grove's classroom teachers also collaborate on wellness initiatives. Adds Jenny, "We know that children are better thinkers if they move every 10-15 minutes. We ask teachers to give students frequent brain breaks and to incorporate movement as often as possible into their lessons." One example: In math class, students make 90 degree angles with their arms in addition to drawing them on paper.

Reesor also reinforces the importance of teaching these young students about Energy Balance. **"If we teach these children at an early age, that's something they can bring home to their families and something that can carry on."**





Reaching the Community

To help educate parents about the messages their children were learning, Jenny created a parent newsletter called, “Nutrition Nuggets” with specific tips for helping families balance what they eat with their physical activity. “It’s really been funny to hear stories about kids going home and teaching their parents about making choices related to nutrition and physical activity.”

Oak Grove also integrated its wellness goals with the arts. They began an annual arts festival around physical fitness. During the festival, students make paper mache fruits and vegetables, create healthy snacks, and participate in relay races around the different food groups. Jenny adds, “With state testing and such a focus on math and reading, some schools took away recess time to teach to the tests. It’s really counter-intuitive because kids need movement. **We have done a good job of integrating nutrition and fitness education into our other subject areas so the kids know that it is just as important.**”

“It’s really been funny to hear stories about kids going home and teaching their parents about making choices related to nutrition and physical activity.”

— *Principal Teresa Jenny*

The Impact of the Grant

Little by little, Oak Grove’s efforts are making a difference. “We now have fewer kids that are obese/overweight but we still have too many,” said Reesor. “We only have these kids for two years. If we can reduce their BMI by 10% in one year, it’s a step in the right direction. But 15% would be better!”

When she received the flyer about the Healthier-US Schools Challenge Sweepstakes, she thought that the grant money could be a great way to step up efforts. She entered the Sweepstakes without thinking Oak Grove would actually be the winning school but, when she received the call that the school had won the grant, she was ecstatic. Plans for using the grant money include:

- Funding an education partnership with two local universities, The University of Southern Mississippi and William Carey University. Graduate students will come to Oak Grove throughout next year to reinforce energy balance messages and teach kids about nutrition and activity choices.
- Purchasing new equipment for the Physical Education department.
- Purchasing two vegetable and fruit slicers for the cafeteria.
- Replacing the school’s pea gravel surface under the playground.



Lessons learned: How to Replicate this Success in your Community



Every school is different, but the team at Oak Grove Lower Elementary points to several key success factors that could help other schools:

Teamwork. According to Principal Jenny, **one of the best things she did was to create a school-wide health council.** The council includes representation from all stakeholders: classroom teachers, PE teachers, the school nutrition staff, parents, and community members. **“That way everyone who touches our kids is working in the same direction.”** The council sets the wellness goals and all stakeholders and students work to meet them. In addition to the school council, Reesor sits on the district wellness council alongside all of the County’s school nurses. Ideas are freely shared throughout the county.

Determine Needs. Oak Grove also did the needs assessment on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website. Jenny adds, “You might think you know your school’s needs but you might just be surprised. Once we knew our authentic needs, we asked what we could do to address them. This opened up many new avenues to help our kids.”

Tap Into Outside Resources. Jenny built partnerships with many different community organizations and businesses. She accessed the educational resources of local hospitals and tapped into the local universities’ nutrition departments. The hospital helped Oak Grove with health screenings, including an asthma screening.

Look for All Funding Opportunities. According to Jenny, money is always an obstacle, but there are many grants available. Schools just have to look for them. This additional funding helps you purchase equipment and get whatever resource you need to really help the kids.