The Healthy Kids, Healthy Mississippi initiative called on state agencies, local school districts, community organizations, and private groups to maximize its POWER, as the state’s Preventing Obesity with Every Resource initiative was named. Building on several years of legislative and regulatory momentum with schools, POWER established a Governor’s Task Force on Childhood Obesity to develop policy recommendations for coordinated child wellness across all agencies, held a statewide policy-prioritization summit to rank those recommendations, and developed the blueprint for childhood obesity policy actions moving forward. Mini-grants to 20 schools resulted in wellness-centered success stories illustrating the need and potential for further change. Crucial support, plus funding, came from a prominent Mississippi health foundation. As the Governor’s Task Force continues to elevate the childhood obesity issue, Mississippi could be seeing the first nascent signs that it is turning a corner.

The Big Picture

The initiative aimed ambitiously to be both a catalyst for policy change as well as a cross-sector collaborator, and its prime objective through the POWER project was a comprehensive plan that could direct state and local efforts to reverse childhood obesity. POWER announced six overarching goals:

- Provide consistent messages about the obesity epidemic and ways to combat obesity in children;
- Match program areas in state agencies to maximize resources;
- Promote legislative and state-level policies for physical education, health education, and nutrition standards;
- Identify promising obesity prevention efforts for schools and ways to encourage parental and community support;
- Seek funding opportunities at the federal, state, and private levels; and
- Decrease Mississippi’s childhood obesity rates.

Implicit in these goals was an understanding that state leadership was essential, especially for broad policy implementation, and that successful interventions would need to be sustained, especially through financial investments.

With Governor Haley Barbour declaring very publicly that the health of Mississippians was a top concern, the project enjoyed a high profile from the start. Still, it faced equally visible challenges. Survey after survey labeled the state as the heaviest in the nation, with nearly a third of adults either obese or overweight and more than 44 percent of youth ages 10 to 17 in those categories.

Yet the timing ultimately proved fortuitous. Repeated identification as the “heaviest state” greatly heightened people’s awareness of the problem. Recent legislative and regulatory actions laid important groundwork. In the assessment of a key state official, there was a tremendous degree of readiness statewide.

Since 2004, for example, Mississippi had made marked progress on the dual fronts of nutrition and physical activity in its 1,000 public schools. In that same year, the state Department of Education created an Office of Healthy Schools, which plays a major role in child wellness and obesity across the state. In 2006, the state education superintendent and state board of education adopted language allowing only healthy beverages and snacks in school vending machines.

Moreover, the legislature in 2007 passed the Mississippi Healthy Students Act, part of a package of measures put forth by the governor. The new law required 150 minutes of physical activity-based instruction and 45 minutes of health education weekly in kindergarten through 8th grade as a requirement for graduation. It also instructed the state board of education to develop stronger nutrition standards and guidelines on healthy meal preparation—a directive targeting the fried foods still common in school cafeterias across the state.

In a 2009 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Mississippi was one of two states that reported the largest increases from 2006 to 2008 in the percentage of schools that do not sell candy, salty snacks, and soda. Statewide nutrition standards for foods in schools outside the school meals program helped to contribute to this gain.

POWER launched against this backdrop. Two integral partners came from outside of government—the Bower Foundation, which had already provided millions of dollars to support a variety of child-wellness initiatives in the state, and the Center for Mississippi Health Policy, an independent, nonpartisan organization involved in the analysis and application of research. It was, in fact, a 2006 center study that helped propel debate at the state capital by tracking the public’s changing attitudes. It found that a majority of Mississippians thought government should play a significant role in reducing childhood obesity. Two-thirds supported BMI screenings in the school, and nearly 60 percent favored soda taxes.

The Office of Healthy Schools oversaw the project. And in little more than a year, it could claim as POWER accomplishments: an environmental scan; the school mini-grants; engagement across state agencies to develop the Mississippi Action Plan; a Governor’s Task Force convening; and one statewide planning summit. The latter event, which Governor Barbour and First Lady Marsha Barbour helped to host, resulted in a top-10 ranking of policy initiatives that immediately began to fortify obesity prevention work on state and local levels.

The final list addressed an array of approaches from tax incentives for farmers to restricted advertising of unhealthy foods. But the leading priorities were to:

- Improve the built environment to promote physical activity in communities;
• Replace fryers with combination oven/steamers in school kitchens; and
• Increase the number of nurses in the schools.

Step by Step

Given the breadth and depth of the latest wellness-related policies affecting Mississippi students, it was little surprise that the state education department had chief responsibility for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Mississippi initiative through its Office of Healthy Schools. The office’s unique reporting channel—direct to the deputy state superintendent—ensured that its work would be supported at the highest level.

So, too, did Governor Barbour’s leadership and attention to the issue. Well before the POWER project and its task force, Barbour had stepped out personally on the issue. With his wife, he taped the kick-off public service announcement for an extensive Let’s Go Walkin’ Mississippi campaign funded by BlueCross & BlueShield of Mississippi. He repeatedly stressed the connection between obesity and the state’s long-term health and economic productivity.

POWER’s initial task was the environmental scan. Conducted in partnership with the governor’s office and the state health department’s Office of Preventive Health, it revealed the scope of programs underway—many funded by the Bower Foundation—as well as the gaps and duplication. It made clear that more coordinated activity and capacity building was needed.

The $1,000 seed grants awarded to 20 schools served a parallel purpose. Each successful practice identified, such as fitness testing and vegetable gardens to name two of the most popular, established a “change agent” that helped drive policy change in those schools and potentially throughout the state. In addition, these grants and subsequent efforts facilitated numerous partnerships among schools, the private sector, and local community organizations.

The convening by the Governor’s Task Force on Childhood Obesity took place in spring 2008 and drew about three dozen representatives from virtually all state agencies, ranging from pensions to parks. With the Center for Mississippi Health Policy supplying the background on policy initiatives elsewhere in the country, the group considered various obesity prevention approaches in light of the scan’s conclusions and culled the best potential strategies for Mississippi. Eighteen made the cut.

By late 2008, more than 275 stakeholders came together for a statewide planning summit. Directors from state agencies and other state officials along with teachers, doctors, parents, and lawmakers winnowed the 18 strategies to 10, then prioritized them highest to lowest. The outcome showed a reordered ranking from half a year before, when the top preferences had included menu labeling, improved access to supermarkets in underserved communities, and day care standards encouraging healthy lifestyles. Now, improvements in the built environment to increase physical activity, school kitchen upgrades, and more school nurses placed one, two, and three, respectively.

POWER’s policy development activity is continuing through the Governor’s Task Force. Several departments are reviewing regulatory language that could advance the identified priorities. Additionally, public will is growing, and the groundwork is laid to support potential future legislation.

Making a Difference

Without question, the legislative and regulatory progress that pre-dated POWER was substantial. It was achieved despite opposition from the food industry and some concerns voiced by teachers, administrators, and school food service directors. It demonstrated a firm commitment by state leaders to tackle obesity in order to safeguard children’s well-being.

But as the Healthy Kids, Healthy Mississippi initiative got under way, many elements of the state’s new law were still being implemented. Various grants, most from non-state sources, were underwriting a small flurry of activity within individual schools, such as buying better equipment for physical education or better training of PE teachers, establishing school health councils, and purchasing the kitchen slicers and other machines that might boost students’ fruit and vegetable consumption.

Through the POWER project, the initiative demonstrated how much greater the sum of these parts had to be than the whole for Mississippi to reverse its obesity epidemic. Indeed, the initiative highlighted the connections that must be made among programs and agencies. It brought together many of the officials most necessary for doing so, and the governor’s involvement bolstered efforts.

POWER’s approach gave Mississippi’s obesity prevention work an overall, organizing context. Particularly within state government, it stimulated new relationships and furthered existing ones.

Among the early results were the creation of a standing joint subcommittee for the state board of health and the state school boards association to discuss obesity prevention collaboration, and a unified marketing campaign developed by the Division of Medicaid, the departments of Education and Human Services, and Mississippi Public Broadcasting. The momentum also helped Mississippi garner a five-year, $3.4 million CDC grant to strengthen its coordinated school health program.

According to the director of the Office of Healthy Schools, a network is now at the ready, one that can both develop and assist future legislative proposals. It is armed with a powerful combination of well-vetted policy priorities, supporting health data, and compelling anecdotes. Unexpectedly, those priorities were immediately useful as education officials were deciding how to allocate $1.7 million from the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. They opted to hasten the replacement of school fryers by buying dozens of combination oven/steamers and covering their installation in school cafeteria kitchens.

Though the network does not have ready sources of new state funding identified—the one critical issue that POWER was unable to address—it knows that obesity prevention in Mississippi likely will continue to benefit from the generous backing of the Bower Foundation. The latter is the singular element of the state’s initiative that other states cannot easily replicate.

While Mississippi cannot rewrite its past several decades of obesity, it can move beyond them. The state’s most recent survey of childhood obesity prevalence showed modest decreases in middle school and high school rates and only a slight uptick among younger students.

If the numbers reflect the early impact of tougher school nutrition and physical activity standards, as officials are hoping, then the accomplishments of the Healthy Kids, Healthy Mississippi initiative will be even more meaningful.
Mississippi’s initiative was sponsored by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. Through funding by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, grants of up to $110,000 were awarded to 15 states to help them develop policies to prevent childhood obesity.

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