COMPREHENSIVE CITY-SCHOOL STRATEGIES TO REDUCE CHILDHOOD OBESITY

A Report on the City and School Leaders Collaborating on Local Wellness Policies Project
funded by Leadership for Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) is a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC).

NLC is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal government throughout the United States. Its mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance.

The YEF Institute helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers, and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

Through the YEF Institute, municipal officials and other community leaders have direct access to a broad array of strategies and tools, including:

- Action kits that offer a menu of practical steps that officials can take to address key problems or challenges.
- Technical assistance projects in selected communities.
- The National Summit on Your City’s Families and other workshops, training sessions, and cross-site meetings.
- Targeted research and periodic surveys of local officials.
- The YEF Institute’s Web site, audioconferences, and e-mail listservs.

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The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA members range from chief executive officers, superintendents and senior level school administrators to cabinet members, professors and aspiring school system leaders.

AASA members are the chief education advocates for children. AASA members advance the goals of public education and champion children’s causes in their districts and nationwide. As school system leaders, AASA members set the pace for academic achievement. They help shape policy, oversee its implementation and represent school districts to the public at large.

Through the Educating the Total Child advocacy campaign, AASA members are committed to creating the conditions necessary for all students to become successful, lifelong learners.

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community wellness

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youth obesity, and Leon T. Andrews, the YEF Institute’s program director for youth development, are the primary authors of this report. Michael Karpman, the YEF Institute’s senior associate for outreach, provided editorial assistance. Clifford M. Johnson, executive director of the YEF Institute, and Sharon Adams-Taylor, AASA’s associate executive director for children’s initiatives and program development, provided overall editorial direction for this report. Alexander Clarke was responsible for design and layout. Megan Martin, former associate for youth development at the YEF Institute, and Rebecca Roberts, former project director at AASA, were both pivotal to the success of the technical assistance initiative.

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Introduction

In a relatively short period of time, childhood obesity has emerged as one of the nation’s most significant public health issues, with dire implications for children, families and the communities in which they live. More than 23 million children and adolescents in the United States are currently obese or overweight.\(^1\) The tripling of childhood obesity rates in the last 30 years means more children are at risk of developing serious, chronic health problems, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and orthopedic conditions. Rising obesity rates will accelerate the increase in health care costs absorbed by families, businesses and government.

As one of the nation’s largest employers, and as important safety net and first-response health care providers, local governments have a major stake in improving children’s health. They are also in a prime position to find solutions to the childhood obesity epidemic. In partnership with local school districts, municipal leaders can influence the extent to which their communities and schools encourage physical activity and healthy eating, rather than promote sedentary lifestyles and poor nutrition habits.

During 2007-08, six city-school district teams participated in a two-year technical assistance initiative aimed at reducing and preventing childhood obesity in their communities. Sponsored by the National League of Cities (NLC) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) through its Leadership for Healthy Communities national program, the initiative helped each city develop and implement local wellness strategies emphasizing policy change and collaboration over single-program responses.

Project cities included:
- Charleston, S.C.;
- Jackson, Tenn.;
- La Mesa, Calif.;
- Oakland, Calif.;
- San Antonio, Texas; and
- Savannah, Ga.

This report describes the most noteworthy initiatives these six cities have launched to promote health and wellness in their communities, including, but not limited to, the efforts undertaken by teams of munici-

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\(^2\) For children, overweight is defined as a body mass index (BMI) at or above the 85th percentile and lower than the 95th percentile and obese is defined as a BMI at or above the 95th percentile, based on a sex- and age-specific BMI chart for children. For adults, overweight is defined as a BMI between 25 and 29.9 and obese is defined as a BMI of 30 or higher.
pal and school district officials as part of the NLC-AASA project. Their motivations for confronting the issue varied greatly, and while many of the cities began the project with existing initiatives, they were often not connected to a broader, city-wide action plan. The project created new opportunities for municipal and school leadership to open a dialogue on how to build upon their wellness programs and policies. In each case, mayors and superintendents played critical roles in forming and sustaining local collaborations among diverse stakeholders.

Opportunities for City and School Leadership

Decisions made by municipal and school district officials about policies, budgets, regulations and zoning can shape young people’s behavior, from the food they eat to the amount of exercise they get each day. For example, the City of San Antonio has created zoning regulations whereby mobile food vendors may not sell food within 300 feet of any school during school hours or one hour before or after school. In some cases, these efforts followed a comprehensive needs assessment and culminated in formalized policies, such as Charleston’s “complete streets” resolution and La Mesa’s sidewalk master plan and new street design standards. A number of project cities expanded local parks and established or connected greenways and walking trail systems. Municipal leaders also partnered with school districts to make it easier for children to walk or bike to school, drawing upon federal Safe Routes to School funding to support their efforts.

- Designing a more walkable city: Cities such as Charleston, La Mesa, and Savannah took steps to reconfigure the built environment and implement planning guidelines to promote walking and biking. In some cases, these efforts followed a comprehensive needs assessment and culminated in formalized policies, such as Charleston’s “complete streets” resolution and La Mesa’s sidewalk master plan and new street design standards. A number of project cities expanded local parks and established or connected greenways and walking trail systems. Municipal leaders also partnered with school districts to make it easier for children to walk or bike to school, drawing upon federal Safe Routes to School funding to support their efforts.

- Improving access to healthy food: Many of the project cities provided funding, city-owned land, or other support for community gardens and farmers’ markets offering fresh, local produce. The cities of Jackson and San Antonio formed partnerships with local restaurants to develop and promote healthy menu items. The City of Oakland, in particular, honed in on the dearth of nutritional food choices in disadvantaged neighborhoods. By providing loans to local food cooperatives and food service contractors and supporting community gardens, the city was able to bring healthier foods into underserved schools and neighborhoods. School districts in Oakland, San Antonio, and other cities instituted healthier school lunches and vending machine options in fulfilling new school wellness policies.
Promoting physical activity in school and during out-of-school time: City officials and other partners worked with school districts to integrate physical fitness into the school day and afterschool programs. San Antonio afterschool and summer programs even have a physical activity requirement. The project cities and school districts also established or began exploring joint use agreements that would open school facilities (e.g., athletic fields, running tracks) to the community after school hours and would allow schools to use city parks, recreation centers, sports complexes, and public pools.

Using city-school leadership and broad-based community coalitions to engage residents: Cities such as Jackson and Savannah benefited from broad-based, high-level, city-school leadership collaborations, which enabled project teams to engage residents in improving community health habits. In Jackson, the mayor and superintendent now lead an annual community wellness walk to kick off “Jumpstart Jackson Month,” which engages 1,000 residents and many local businesses. Both Jackson and Savannah encourage community partners to co-brand their fitness programs to enhance the visibility of the broader Jumpstart Jackson and Healthy Savannah partnerships. Other project cities used a variety of techniques to raise awareness and participation among local residents. Nonprofit organizations in Charleston encourage at-risk children to walk a local bridge trail and visit a downtown farmers’ market. Youth in Oakland play a lead role in promoting a “soda-free summer” to steer residents toward healthier beverages.
Lessons Learned

Motivating Factors for Implementing Wellness Strategies

Although local officials in each project city recognized the importance of children’s health and the impact of rising childhood obesity rates, there was no single factor that motivated project teams to make community wellness a priority. In many cases, mayors and other municipal leaders were already focused on a public health agenda that stressed overall quality of life. For example, in Charleston, the mayor’s emphasis on livability and economic development and his attention to urban design yielded a better walking environment. Several superintendents, including the head of the Jackson-Madison County School System, drew a connection between students’ health and their ability to learn, a connection confirmed by recent studies linking academic achievement to physical activity and nutrition. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

In some instances, mayors and superintendents felt a strong personal connection to the issue of health and wellness. This was a principal factor motivating Savannah Mayor Otis Johnson to help residents live healthier lifestyles through the support and development of a city-wide wellness coalition. Similarly, in San Antonio, former Mayor Phil Hardberger placed a strong priority on preserving open space, while his wife provided strong backing for the creation of community gardens. In Charleston, the county school district superintendent’s interest in incorporating tennis into physical education classes led to new joint use opportunities for city-owned tennis courts.

State and federal mandates also prodded local leaders to take action. As of the 2006-07 school year, school districts that receive federal funding for school meals programs must have a wellness policy in place. These school wellness policies have helped lay a foundation for the development of city-wide and regional wellness policies in Jackson and other cities. Many of the communities featured in the report also stepped up their


efforts in response to state mandates requiring a given amount of time for physical activity during the school day (Charleston), the creation of school health advisory councils (San Antonio) or the completion of annual fitness assessments (Savannah).

Local officials frequently mobilized around a recognized community challenge, using data to assess the scope of the problem and identify potential solutions. The La Mesa Community Wellness Program stemmed from an assessment of the many barriers to walkability, which led residents to rely too heavily on their cars. The city and school district responded to these data with a set of policies and improvements to local sidewalks and streets that would make it easier to travel by foot or by bicycle. In Oakland, the city took a number of steps to expand access to healthy food in neighborhoods with too many fast food outlets and not enough supermarkets.

Finally, in every project city, municipal and school district leaders realized the importance of connecting disparate efforts, maximizing limited local resources, and collaborating with each other and with other stakeholders more effectively. During the project, mayors and superintendents used their influence to convene key partners and encourage them to work together in pursuit of the common objective of improving health and reducing obesity.

Key Elements for Success

Several important lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the six project cities over the past two years. The following factors were especially critical to the success of local teams:

- **High-level leadership:** First and foremost, the city stories in this report underscore the importance of high-level leadership by the mayor and superintendent to anchor a comprehensive local wellness strategy, engage public, private and community partners and hold everyone accountable for improving outcomes. Municipal and school district leaders can formalize agreements and wellness policies, commission needs assessments, raise or direct funding and help establish and promote a vision of success. Elected officials can also support the city and school district staff who do the ground-level work in promoting local wellness. Each project city benefited from dedicated and skilled staff, who often went above and beyond their job responsibilities to organize and sustain a community-wide wellness effort.

- **A shared, city-wide vision for community wellness:** Other key elements for success include a city-wide focus that aligns existing programs and policies with a shared vision. Many of the project cities began with parks and recreation departments, school districts and community organizations working separately on the issue of childhood obesity. By the end of the technical assistance initiative, most cities had formed a cohesive structure to engage the community and sustain progress over time. For instance, the La Mesa Community Wellness Program expanded into the “ready, set...Live Well” initiative, building on an initial policy
team to branch out to a set of tactical teams focused on promoting health through neighborhoods, schools, faith groups and public health and health care coalitions. Both Jackson and La Mesa envisioned their communities becoming the healthiest in their state or region, and this vision drove the development of each city’s goals and objectives.

- **Broad-based partnerships with a diverse group of stakeholders:** A corollary to the city-wide focus is the need to engage a diverse coalition. Key partners that strengthened project city and school district efforts included YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, county health departments, restaurants and other businesses, area hospitals and medical colleges, United Ways, community organizations, national and local foundations and many others.

  Mayors can get started by forming a core planning group, as Mayor Otis Johnson did in creating the Healthy Savannah Advisory Team, and as Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr., did in launching a youth master planning process.

- **The use of data to set goals and measure progress:** Once a planning team is in place, a useful first step in determining priorities, goals, and strategies is gathering data to define the scope of the challenge. La Mesa’s initial needs assessment and use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology and digital mapping programs laid the groundwork for a comprehensive effort to repair sidewalks, establish walkability criteria, create safe freeway crossings and school walking routes, add new bike lanes and adopt new street design and mixed use zoning standards. La Mesa youth helped collect additional data on the number of fast food restaurants and the number of stores selling fresh produce in local neighborhoods. In Charleston, the youth master planning team used surveys and focus groups to solicit the perspectives of both young people and adults in the community.

- **A strategy built upon existing local assets and resources:** The existence of high-quality programs already operating in the community offered project cities another important local asset upon which to build. Municipal and school district officials found ways to leverage these programs and align them with city and school wellness policies. For instance, the Harlandale Independent School District in San Antonio incorporated the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) program into its health education curriculum. Charleston benefits from Louie’s Kids, a locally-based, national nonprofit that works with individual obese children to identify their best treatment options. In Savannah, the YMCA was already doing important work in promoting healthy living and later helped form the nucleus of the strong Healthy Savannah partnership. Groups such as Oakland-based Urban Gardens and City Slicker Farms helped
advance Oakland’s goal of improving the food choices available to residents.

- **Efforts to tap and blend the range of funding sources that can be used to promote wellness:** Several cities utilized local, state and federal funding sources to put tangible resources behind their wellness initiatives. La Mesa’s city-school collaboration – and its strong efforts to engage youth in the process – brought more than $1 million in federal Safe Routes to School funding to the city for both infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects. Charleston relied on a mix of state transportation funding and federal Rails to Trails grants to improve its greenway system. Oakland, San Antonio and Savannah all used special local option sales taxes to pay for park improvements, greenway projects and afterschool programs. In addition to tapping into public funding, most of the project cities garnered additional funds from national and regional foundations and private donors to support their work.

**Challenges in Moving Forward**

The six city-school project teams made varying levels of progress in creating a sustainable plan for improving community wellness. However, the teams encountered some common struggles along the way. One of the challenges involved moving from a focus on programs to a broader policy effort. Jackson was able to do this successfully in crafting a regional wellness policy, which will go into effect with the approval of the county; this county-wide policy has been approved by the city council and aligns with a school wellness policy already approved by the Jackson-Madison County School Board. Yet other cities were not as successful in incorporating a large number of beneficial programs into one unified strategy, often due to coordination and communication barriers among different stakeholders that were not fully overcome in the course of the project.

Each of the cities also faced challenges in sustaining their wellness collaborations and defining clear roles and responsibilities to keep stakeholders engaged. Cities such as La Mesa and Savannah have clear structures to move the work forward. The city governments and school districts in Jackson and Savannah are exploring the option of hiring full-time wellness coordinators to staff the Jumpstart Jackson and Healthy Savannah efforts. To continue making progress, all of the project cities will need clear lines of accountability for planning and promoting initiatives and monitoring outcomes.

Finally, in many communities, there are existing coalitions already addressing one or more aspects of the childhood obesity epidemic. The challenge that city and school leaders must confront is how to align multiple, related efforts into one cohesive structure. Healthy Savannah was able to achieve this alignment by overcoming initial concerns that its activities would compete with those of other community organizations. Instead, Healthy Savannah became a forum for promoting best practices and policies, sharing information and building a strong, collaborative network of all of the groups working on childhood obesity and community wellness in the city.
Project Activities

On February 1-2, 2007, with funding from RWJF through its Leadership for Healthy Communities national program, the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) hosted a leadership academy in Nashville, Tenn., for 30 municipal officials and school district administrators representing 15 communities. This leadership academy focused on how cities and school districts could use federally-mandated school wellness plans as the basis for city-wide wellness policies to combat childhood obesity.

Following this event, the YEF Institute and AASA issued a request for proposals in April 2007 encouraging their respective members to jointly apply for an intensive, two-year technical assistance initiative subgrant designed to help cities and school districts develop and implement local wellness plans. The purpose of the project was to identify effective city-school partnership strategies for reducing and preventing childhood obesity by assisting each city-school team with the implementation of an effective community wellness strategy. One month later, the YEF Institute and AASA competitively selected six cities for the City and School Leaders Collaborating on Local Wellness Policies project. In selecting cities, the YEF Institute and AASA evaluated applications based on several criteria, including evidence of city-school collaboration, a commitment by mayors and superintendents to reducing childhood obesity and readiness to embark upon an intensive technical assistance process. Cities also were selected to ensure diverse representation by region, population, and size.

Most of the selected cities had sent city-school teams to the leadership academy to learn and discuss potential areas of collaboration in promoting healthy eating and physical activity. As the project began, each city convened an expanded leadership team that included senior-level municipal and school district staff, as well as other community partners. At the inaugural cross-site meeting, held in Washington, D.C., in July 2007, the YEF Institute and AASA presented project teams with a framework for developing a local wellness action plan. This framework outlined five key steps that cities can take to implement a successful plan:

- Developing a shared vision;
- Engaging diverse stakeholders;
- Creating a comprehensive strategy (as opposed to a set of single-program responses);
- Using data to share accountability for outcomes; and
- Establishing an infrastructure (e.g., staffing, financing) to coordinate and sustain local efforts.

The YEF Institute and AASA provided assistance and facilitated regular communication through the following activities:
Cross-Site Meetings

The three-day, July 2007 cross-site meeting brought all city-school teams together to discuss collaborative efforts to combat childhood obesity. Teams heard presentations by RWJF and the Food Research and Action Center about the causes of childhood obesity and its effect on children’s health. Meeting participants also learned about a broad range of strategies and city-school partnership opportunities from national experts representing the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, National Recreation and Park Association, National Parent Teacher Association and the California Cities, Counties and Schools Partnership. Participants focused on ways to educate and engage communities, and how to form cost-effective joint use agreements for city and school district facilities.

In August 2008, city-school teams were invited to participate in a second cross-site meeting in Boston to discuss strategies for sustaining implementation of the city-wide wellness policies that had been developed over the previous year. Attendees had the opportunity to learn about successful wellness strategies like the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, a partnership that has refurbished 71 deteriorating public schoolyards. Participants also learned about Somerville, Mass., where Mayor Joseph Curtatone worked with Tufts University to develop the research-based, comprehensive, city-wide Shape Up Somerville campaign that has achieved measurable results in reducing childhood obesity. In addition, city-school teams learned about the multi-year investments by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, California Endowment, Nemours Health and Prevention Services and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention focused on local wellness and returned home with new ideas for how to build a coordinating structure to sustain their strategies.

“Sister-City” Peer Exchange and Site Visits

During the inaugural cross-site meeting in July, the YEF Institute and AASA separated city and school officials into smaller groups to have focused discussions around specific issues they faced within the city or school district. This arrangement allowed city-school teams to begin to identify cities with which they would like to work as a “sister-city.” Teams were given a chance to vote on which city they would most like to work, and YEF Institute and AASA staff weighed in on which pairings would be most beneficial to both cities, based on city size, geographic location, similar city-school issues and the existence of current health and wellness initiatives. This exercise resulted in the following sister city/school groupings: Jackson and La Mesa, San Antonio and Oakland, and Charleston and Savannah. Each team visited its sister city-school site to get an in-depth perspective on their approaches, challenges and progress made toward addressing childhood obesity in their community YEF Institute and/or AASA staff attended all of these meetings, which enabled local teams to witness firsthand the efforts taking place in similar cities.

In addition to these meetings, staff from the YEF Institute and AASA made separate site visits to participating cities to meet with a larger team of stakeholders from each community and learn what kind of assistance would be effective in facilitating local wellness planning efforts.
Regular Communication and Resource Information

Beginning in September 2007, the YEF Institute and AASA began hosting bi-monthly conference calls for all six cities to allow each city and school district to highlight their work and progress, identify specific challenges and receive advice and support from the other project sites. These calls helped establish stronger peer-to-peer relationships between city and school officials from each team. The calls also connected teams with national experts who were able to highlight promising practices and answer questions.

The YEF Institute and AASA also conducted individual calls with the primary contact for each city and school team to learn about successes as well as challenges facing the city and school district. The monthly check-in calls provided staff with opportunities to highlight best practices and provide practical advice about opportunities for cities and school districts to strengthen their partnerships, raise awareness within the community, energize the planning team and sustain the commitment of city and school leaders.

Local and National Visibility

The YEF Institute highlighted the experiences and progress of participating cities through articles in its Nation’s Cities Weekly newspaper, which has a circulation of more than 30,000 local officials across the nation, and in a nationally-distributed 2009 report, The State of City Leadership for Children and Families. In addition, speakers representing the project cities participated in panel discussions at various national conferences, including NLC’s 2007 Congress of Cities in New Orleans and the YEF Institute’s 2009 National Summit on Your City’s Families in Boston. The national attention helped put a spotlight on local efforts in each of the project sites, serving as a motivating force for the formation of local partnerships targeting childhood obesity.

Access to National Experts and Resources

Throughout the project, YEF Institute and AASA staff connected project sites with helpful resources, such as the YEF Institute’s Action Kit for Municipal Leaders on Combating Childhood Obesity and AASA’s School Governance & Leadership – School Policy and Practice: Taking on Childhood Obesity. National experts from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Leadership for Healthy Communities national program, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Safe Routes to School and Action for Healthy Kids provided advice and assistance to the project teams at the leadership academy, cross-site meetings, and on conference calls. The YEF Institute and AASA also linked project sites to local experts from cities such as Somerville, Mass., Boston and Nashville.
City Stories
Under the longstanding leadership of Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr., city-led revitalization and redevelopment strategies in Charleston, S.C., have earned the acclaim of municipal leaders across the nation since 1975. Mayor Riley has been recognized by his peers for taking a visionary approach to economic development, and for paying close attention to city design and livability, walkable public space and multi-sector partnerships that have transformed the city. During the mayor’s tenure, the city has restored its historic downtown to attract businesses and families, increased tourism, redeveloped public markets, parks and playgrounds, supported the arts and created a Mayor’s Office for Children, Youth and Families. In addition to bolstering economic development and improving quality of life, these city actions have helped to both promote healthy lifestyles and lay a strong foundation for Charleston’s community wellness efforts.

The mayor’s and city council’s efforts to ensure the accessibility of the city’s waterfront and the development of “complete streets” in local neighborhoods expand opportunities for residents to be physically active. A major downtown farmers’ market not only strengthens the city’s economic vitality, but also increases the availability of healthy food. A strong city-school partnership complements these efforts by promoting the joint use and strategic location of municipal and school district recreation facilities.

Although many of Charleston’s most significant projects were completed before the technical assistance initiative – and were not necessarily designed to address the childhood obesity problem – the initiative strengthened collaboration between the city, schools and other stakeholders around this new city-wide priority and raised awareness about how projects in place and under consideration could help address childhood obesity in Charleston. In leveraging local infrastructure...
Investments to promote active living and healthy eating, the City of Charleston offers an example of how a city can incorporate a community wellness agenda into existing economic development plans.

### Charleston, South Carolina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
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<tr>
<td>% White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>65.8 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Individuals Below Poverty Level</td>
<td>18.8 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Free or Reduced Price Lunch Rate** 51.8 %

Source: Charleston County School District

**South Carolina: Adult Overweight and Obesity Prevalence** 65.5 %

**South Carolina: Children (ages 10-17) Overweight and Obesity Prevalence** 33.7 %


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**Investing in a Physically Active City**

Recent infrastructure projects in Charleston – from the construction of the Arthur Ravenel, Jr., Bridge to the development of riverwalk trails and greenways – have made the city more pedestrian – and bike-friendly.

In 2005, the city finished construction on the 2.7 mile, eight-lane Ravenel Bridge, replacing older structures that connected the cities of Charleston and Mount Pleasant. The decision by the city to approve plans for pedestrian and bicycle lanes created a variety of opportunities for physical activity. In addition to the number of residents who walk, run and bike across the bridge on a daily basis, the city hosts a popular annual 10 K foot race, the Cooper River Bridge Run, which attracts more than 40,000 participants at the start of each year and serves to jumpstart a city-wide commitment to physical activity. Local organizations, such as the nonprofit group Louie’s Kids and the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), have also used the bridge to incorporate physical activity into their afterschool programs for children and youth. The MUSC Lean Team program, which was launched after the project’s inaugural cross-site meeting in July 2007, offers weekly activities, and encourages residents to walk across...
the bridge as part of an effort to be more physically active. Founded in 2001, Charleston-based Louie’s Kids serves economically-disadvantaged, obese children nationwide by seeking the best treatment options to meet the needs of each individual child. In that regard, Louie’s Kids stands out as a national nonprofit organization that treats obesity one child at a time. Like the MUSC Lean Team, Louie’s Kids programs in Charleston take advantage of the Ravenel Bridge by encouraging young people to build their confidence and get physically active by using the bridge and programs like the Cooper River Bridge Run for exercise.

In addition to promoting exercise on the Ravenel Bridge, the city has also built several interlinked trail systems and greenways. Using state transportation funding and federal Rails to Trails program funding, the city developed the Ashley Riverwalk, the West Ashley Greenway and Bikeway, the Ashley River Road Bikeway and the East Bay Bicycle and Pedestrian Path. The Ashley Riverwalk is a path system connecting different parts of Charleston’s waterfront and continuing to the East Bay path and the Ravenel Bridge pedestrian and bicycle lane. The Ashley River Road Bikeway is a two-mile trail built along historic Highway 61 that connects two neighborhoods with local schools. Built along abandoned utility and railroad lines, the West Ashley Greenway and Bikeway also connect various city neighborhoods. The West Ashley Greenway is an important link in the East Coast Greenway, which upon completion will form a continuous recreational trail spanning the entire East Coast of the U.S. – from Calais, Maine, to Key West, Fla.

Although the trail systems are still a work in progress, the city is building on these investments to make pedestrian and bicycle accessibility an essential component of future transportation and recreation projects. In 2008, the city council passed a complete streets resolution emphasizing the importance of streets that are designed to match the character of the existing or planned neighborhood. The resolution underscores the city’s commitment to promote walking, biking and the use of public transit when making decisions about planning, design and maintenance of public street projects. The mayor and city council further strengthened this commitment by launching the Bicycle Friendly Community Campaign in May 2009. The city also has a Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee to review and provide input for relevant city planning issues.

**Redeveloping Public Space into a Vibrant Farmers Market**

Marion Square occupies a crucial position in the Charleston city plan. This park serves diverse residents from a number of adjacent neighborhoods and serves a wide variety of purposes. In 2000, Charleston spent more than $3 million of the city’s tax increment
financing dollars to renovate the seven-acre park, which now accommodates a performance area, historic monuments and the popular weekly Charleston Farmers’ Market. In addition to generating commercial activity in the Central Business District, the market supports local farms and provides families with healthy food.

The Charleston Farmers’ Market ranks as the fifth best farmers’ market in the country, according to a 2008 survey by Travel and Leisure magazine, with up to 5,000 visitors each Saturday. As a project of the city’s Office of Cultural Affairs, the market not only offers fresh local produce, but also an assortment of arts and crafts, live entertainment and sidewalk café dining. Groups such as the MUSC Lean Team and Louie’s Kids use the market to teach healthy eating habits to children and their families. The farmers’ market is also accessible to low-income families who use electronic benefit transfer cards.

Forming a Strong City-School Partnership

Consistent with Charleston’s careful attention to design and land use, many city parks, pools and recreation centers are located near schools, and the city and Charleston County School District have established joint use agreements to share facilities. These agreements opened the door to opportunities like the school district’s Lowcountry Gets W.E.T. (Water Education Training) program, which offers swimming lessons to students during and after school. The city’s Recreation Department provides access to the pools, along with instructors and lifeguards. The Recreation Department also helped Superintendent Nancy McGinley, Ed.D., incorporate tennis into physical education classes by offering access to tennis facilities near the schools and helping the district hire local tennis professionals to provide instruction at several elementary and middle schools.

The school district also worked with the city to develop innovative programs to increase physical activity and prevent the onset of overweight and obesity among children. In order to meet a state mandate to have students participate in 60 minutes of daily
exercise, the district introduced a kinesi-
thetic learning pilot program to Mitchell
Elementary School. The pilot program at
Mitchell, which is located in a lower-income
neighborhood, targets the most at-risk
students through an action-based learning
lab, ExerLearning Lab, the PE4Life physical
education program and “deskercise” activi-
ties.

These innovative curricula seek to improve
both physical activity and student learning.
PE4Life is a national program that aims to
re-focus traditional physical education classes
toward fitness and wellness rather than
student competition. As part of this program,
students participate in “deskercize,” a
technique of incorporating movement into
classroom lesson plans. Students at Mitchell
also have access to an action-based learning
lab – geared toward children in kindergar-
ten through third grade – that incorporates
brain-based research and active learning
strategies. For older children, Mitchell has an
ExerLearning Lab, which uses technology to
encourage physical activity through the use
of Exergaming bikes and interactive video
games such as “Dance Dance Revolution”
and XaviX, an interactive gaming system.
School district staff learned about some of
these action-based learning models through
the technical assistance initiative and are
currently evaluating their impact on academ-
ic outcomes. Mitchell also established a joint
use agreement with the city to offer in-school
and afterschool programs at city parks and
other public spaces.

In spite of nearly $35 million in budget cuts
for the 2008-09 school year and consistent
pressure to improve academic standards,
the superintendent has shown a steadfast
commitment to improving student health
and recognition of the link between health
and student achievement. Superintendent
McGinley has made great strides to commu-
nicate with the different groups involved
with district schools to understand their roles
and the potential for partnerships between
groups. The district has been aggressive in
improving healthy eating behaviors and
options in the classroom and cafeteria and
at vending machines on school campuses.

“On the strengths of these partnerships, we
promoted physical activities like running
the [Ravenel] bridge,” said McGinley. “Our
students are active in this activity. We have
replaced high-fat, high-calorie foods in our
school cafeterias with healthy alternatives.
We have encouraged the growth in participa-
tion by students in lifetime sports, like tennis.
And, we have brought in nationally known
experts…to not only review our school
menus but also give tips to our school staff
on how they can lead a healthier lifestyle.”
Incorporating Health and Wellness Goals into a Youth Master Plan

Building on its cutting-edge land use plans and policies, Charleston is among a group of more than two dozen cities that have taken the familiar process of developing a comprehensive city plan and applied those principles toward improving outcomes for children and youth. In the fall of 2005, the City of Charleston joined the neighboring cities of Mt. Pleasant and North Charleston in embarking on a youth master planning process for Charleston County. This process brought together various constituencies, including young people, the school district, the county, law enforcement, health care professionals, recreation directors, parents, businesses and other community leaders to establish a set of priorities and specific action steps to improve the lives of young people in the county. Mayor Riley appointed the Charleston Area Youth Master Plan Team, which developed a process for creating the plan.

One of the team’s first tasks was to create a shared vision to guide their overall goals. This vision pictures Charleston as “a community where youth feel safe and secure; have the values, skills, and resources to reach their highest potential; are optimistic about their future; and take responsibility for their actions in order to become good citizens.”

Through an intensive set of youth and adult focus groups and a survey of 900 youth in Charleston County School District, the planning team developed seven focus areas with between four and six specific action steps for each area. The seven focus areas are:

- Behavioral and Social Skills;
- Education;
- Employment;
- Health and Wellness;
- Leadership and Communication;
- Recreation and Entertainment; and
- Transportation and Mobility.

The plan’s health and wellness goal aims “to provide youth with the information, services and resources they need to increase and maintain their physical and mental health and wellness.” To achieve this goal, the team outlined six specific strategies, including improving access to information on obesity and other health risks and increasing access to programs that help youth develop the coping
skills needed to avoid negative behaviors.

Both the City of Charleston and the City of North Charleston have officially adopted the plan, and it has the continued support of the Charleston County School District and the Town of Mt. Pleasant. Bolstered by this public support, the plan offers a framework for continuing to improve city-wide wellness policies and expanding collaboration with other stakeholders working to address childhood obesity.

Because NLC had worked with Charleston throughout the youth master planning process as part of a previous technical assistance initiative, NLC staff recommended using the youth master planning coalition as the appropriate structure for coordinating the efforts of multiple organizations and coalitions working on health and wellness.

In response, participants in the youth master planning team used an NLC assessment tool to identify several existing coalitions and organizations focused on this issue, including St. Francis hospital, a group of nonprofits led by Trident United Way, the school district and a county-wide collaboration. Currently, a new city-led health and wellness coalition is forming that will include many of these partners. Once developed, the health and wellness coalition plans to align their work with the full youth master planning team. The city hopes these two groups will eventually combine to form one collaborative force that will coordinate local efforts to combat childhood obesity and other health issues that local youth face.

“The health and safety of the children of Charleston County School District is a top priority.”

— Superintendent Nancy McGinley
Moving Forward

Going forward, the Charleston city-school team remains committed to developing policies and programs that promote healthy lifestyles. The city plans to continue encouraging residents to use pedestrian and bike lanes on the Ravenel Bridge through the MUSC Lean Team’s weekly bridge walk and annual events such as the Cooper River Bridge Run. As it implements its complete streets policy, the city will create a more comprehensive network of trails, paths and sidewalks to ensure that all citizens have adequate access to grocery stores, schools, parks and neighbors.

The Charleston County School District will be conducting Fitnessgram measurements for third, fifth and eighth grade students and will continue to promote the adoption of the PE4Life program within the district and create more on-site action based learning and ExerLearning labs at schools. To address healthy eating, the school district is working to increase the procurement of local produce and collaborate with other districts across the state to increase local spending when possible. The city and school district will also continue maximizing the use of city and school recreation facilities through joint use agreements, which expand both facilities usage and programming opportunities. The district, in partnership with the MUSC Lean Team, has also initiated use of the School Health Index, a self-assessment and planning tool created by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that schools can use to improve their health and safety policies and programs.

Most importantly, Charleston is working to engage a larger, more diverse group of city, school and community stakeholders in the issue of health and wellness. “All along the way we are working together and sharing ideas,” says Superintendent McGinley. As stated earlier, Charleston plans to develop a community-wide coalition that will include the school district, county, state, city, nonprofits, faith-based community, local foundations, business leaders and community residents. The coalition’s focus will be to secure future funding for policy development while working to “connect the dots” in terms of what current partners contribute to the improvement of health in the community and determining what gaps will require future partnerships. Upon obtaining a clearer picture of local efforts, the coalition will continue to strengthen health and wellness efforts and seek to reduce duplication of programs and services. “We know that by partnering together our work has more impact because we can bring to bear all the city resources and those within the county school system that stretches across 100 miles,” said Mayor Riley. “Recognizing the connection between health, nutrition and learning, we...[are] expanding our partnership to include the many world class hospitals, businesses and nonprofits organizations that make up the rich fabric of our city.”
Jackson, Tennessee
City-School Collaboration to Engage the Community in a Local Wellness Campaign

In pursuing their goal to make Jackson, Tenn., the “healthiest community in Tennessee,” Jackson Mayor Jerry Gist and Jackson-Madison County School Superintendent Nancy S. Zambito, Ed.D., demonstrated the power of a strong city-school partnership in promoting health and wellness. The joint leadership of the mayor and superintendent, combined with the dedication of municipal and school district staff, has been the driving force behind Jumpstart Jackson, a community-wide initiative coordinated by the local health council that helped key stakeholders coalesce around a shared vision.

City and school leadership have been evident on many levels. Mayor Gist and Superintendent Zambito provided visible support to an annual kickoff event and community wellness walks, serving as the public faces of the initiative and urging the active participation of community and business partners. They also worked together to shepherd a local wellness policy through the city council and school board. In addition, they made clear that community wellness is among their top priorities and followed through by dedicating high-level staff time to “Jumpstart Jackson,” a community-wide wellness initiative led by the city and school district. The City of Jackson’s superintendent of recreation and the Jackson-Madison County School System’s coordinated school health administrator and school nutrition director led the initiative’s implementation.

Jumpstart Jackson has created new opportunities for healthy eating and active living throughout the community. With city, school, community and business partners collaborating under the Jumpstart Jackson “brand,” the initiative led to the development of community gardens, the promotion of healthy options at local restaurants and the creation of additional recreational opportunities for children and families. As the mayor and superintendent expand local efforts
and continue to build support for a regional wellness policy, they are showing how important city-school leadership and partnerships can be in advancing a community wellness agenda.

Getting Started

In 2005, the Jackson City Council passed a resolution to promote health and wellness, paving the way for the formation of a task force on childhood obesity in 2006 and the eventual creation of Jumpstart Jackson. This community-wide effort focuses on improving fitness, health and wellness and reducing obesity among children and adults, primarily through increased recreational opportunities and educational programs.

Prior to the start of NLC’s technical assistance project, the city, school district and other community groups were engaged in similar wellness initiatives, but were often unaware of each other’s efforts. The leadership academy hosted by NLC and AASA in 2007 brought Jackson city and school officials together for the first time to discuss opportunities for collaboration in improving the health of children in Jackson. As they evolved, these initial conversations led to the broader and more formal Jumpstart Jackson partnership, which now includes the Jackson-Madison County Regional Health Department, the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club, 4-H, Boy/Girl Scout organizations and several faith-based after-school and summer day camp facilities. The shared vision of these diverse partners – first articulated at the project’s inaugural cross-site meeting in Washington, D.C. – is to make “Jackson-Madison County the healthiest community in the State of Tennessee.”

Jackson, Tennessee

Population 59,507
% White, non-Hispanic .............................. 50.3 %
% Black ............................................. 43.9 %
% Hispanic/Latino .................................. 3.4 %
% American Indian and Alaska Native .............. n/a
% Asian-American .................................. 1.1 %
% Individuals Below Poverty Level .................. 22.1 %


Free or Reduced Price Lunch Rate 73 %
Source: Jackson-Madison County Schools

Tennessee: Adult Overweight and Obesity Prevalence 66.9 %

Tennessee: Children (ages 10-17) Overweight and Obesity Prevalence 36.5 %

Improving Coordination and Building a Jumpstart Jackson “Brand”

From the beginning, city and school district leaders saw the importance of helping multiple stakeholders – who were often working on parallel tracks to address health and wellness – see the bigger picture. The initial city-school partnership motivated these other stakeholders to join a community wellness action team that would combine and maximize their individual resources, thereby enhancing their overall impact on the community.

One example of this enhanced coordination is the Jackson Parks and Recreation Department’s partnership with 12 community organizations, including the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club and 4-H, to streamline and improve programming for summer camp activities. The partnership helped each organization incorporate healthy eating and exercise into the summer camp curriculum. The Parks and Recreation Department conducts a six-week fitness program that offers lessons on nutrition and physical activity for children in the summer camps, culminating in a Youth Olympics at the end of the summer.

While staff from the parks and recreation department and the school district play vital roles in sustaining Jumpstart Jackson, the Jackson-Madison County Community Health Action Team (CHAT), one of the local health councils that exist in all of Tennessee’s 95 counties, is responsible for overall coordination of the initiative. NLC and AASA resources, conference calls and site visits helped the city-school team identify and select CHAT as an appropriate coordinating entity.

Though based on three clear areas of focus – childhood obesity, substance abuse and mental health – CHAT in its original incarnation lacked clear direction, particularly on the issue of childhood obesity. With the mayor’s leadership, the establishment of Jumpstart Jackson created an opportunity to restructure CHAT. Jumpstart Jackson became a vibrant subgroup of the childhood obesity focus area, turning CHAT into a much stronger coordinating body for local wellness initiatives. Current CHAT members include representatives from nearly 25 agencies and organizations, including the city, school district, the University of Tennessee Extension and the YMCA. “It really helps to have these people sitting around the table together and sharing insights,” said Sandra MacDiarmid, superintendent of recreation for the Jackson Recreation and Parks Department.

“Whatever the city does affects the health of the community. Jumpstart Jackson fosters community relationships because it is part of a common goal that helps to build personal relationships in the community and improve overall quality of life.”

— Jackson Mayor Jerry Gist
The new structure enabled stakeholders to rally around a single cause and set of objectives. City, county, school district and community agencies now co-brand most wellness events, as well as their individual health and fitness programs, under the Jumpstart Jackson banner. They also participate in Jumpstart Jackson Month, which includes a wellness event every weekend hosted by one or more city, school or community organization partners.

Crafting a Regional Wellness Policy

Under the umbrella of Jumpstart Jackson, and motivated by their participation in the second cross-site meeting in Boston, Mass., Mayor Gist and Superintendent Zambito worked together to shape and support a wellness policy for Jackson-Madison County. The city council approved this policy, which closely aligns with a school wellness policy approved by the school board, and discussions are underway to garner official support from the county.

The regional wellness policy is comprehensive in scope, bringing independent local efforts together under one cohesive plan. The policy calls on the city and county to improve pedestrian access to schools and support school health services. The policy also recommends improvements to city streets that will promote physical activity, such as the addition of sidewalks and bike lanes to future commercial and residential streets, new sidewalks to connect pedestrian-oriented destinations that are within one-half mile of residential areas, designation of bike routes and planning principles that emphasize pedestrian connectivity within neighborhoods.

Other provisions focus on upgrading city and county parks and ensuring they are accessible by public transit, increasing public awareness of health-focused programming in the city and county, focusing recreational opportunities on high-need populations and encouraging healthy snack choices at city and county facilities and events. These provisions track similar provisions in the school wellness policy that are designed to promote healthy eating and physical activity. Finally, the regional policy calls upon its signatories to seek private, state and federal funding, and to develop a systematic and data-driven method for evaluating success, with regular reporting to the city council, school board and county commission.

In advancing the wellness policy, Mayor Gist took inspiration from other examples of cities that have developed strong obesity prevention initiatives with mayoral leadership, such as Somerville, Mass. At a project cross-site meeting in Boston, the mayor networked with peers, including the mayor from Somerville, and learned how city officials have improved walkability by building “complete streets” and creating walking and biking trails.

Likewise, the Jackson-Madison County School System played an integral role. Superintendent Zambito champions strategies to combat childhood obesity because she recognizes the direct connection between children’s health and their ability to learn. Through Superintendent Zambito’s support and the efforts of the coordinated school health and nutrition departments, the school system helped guide the development of the regional wellness policy and adopted many Jumpstart Jackson initiatives.

Engaging the Community through Public-Private Partnerships

In addition to their policy efforts and their encouragement of staff who function outside the scope of their assigned responsibilities to plan wellness activities, the mayor and superintendent provide visible support to Jumpstart Jackson and work to ensure “buy-in” from local business partners.
For example, Jumpstart Jackson Month takes place annually in April, and commences with a mayoral proclamation. The mayor and superintendent also make themselves visible by joining the county mayor in leading the annual three-mile community wellness walk through downtown Jackson at the Jumpstart Jackson Month kickoff event. In 2009, more than 1,000 participants and 25 vendor booths participated in this event. The growing scale of the event since its inception in 2008 has attracted local sponsors and the involvement of the business community. In 2009, Sam’s Club contributed t-shirts and pedometers and local businesses and the city’s contract vendor donated healthy snacks and beverages for community walk participants.

The Jumpstart Jackson team also found other ways to build and strengthen community awareness of its health and wellness efforts. The team established a partnership with the nonprofit Downtown Development Corporation, which guides the revitalization efforts of historic downtown Jackson through comprehensive promotional campaigns and strategic economic restructuring and redevelopment initiatives. The Downtown Development Corporation worked with Jumpstart Jackson to create and distribute table tents highlighting healthy menu options available at local, non-chain restaurants. Jumpstart Jackson worked with restaurants to design the table tents, and the corporation helped convince restaurants to participate. In exchange for displaying the table tents, which include the Jumpstart Jackson logo, restaurants received free advertising via the city Web site and promotional pamphlets.

In a separate effort, representatives of the local First United Methodist Church, Tharon Kirk and Grady Neeley, contacted the Jumpstart Jackson team to suggest the establishment of a community garden to improve food access in lower-income areas. The idea grew into a program that, with neighborhood input, builds community gardens on abandoned lots throughout the city. The city initially identified 58 potential lots, which Kirk and Neeley helped narrow down to seven city-owned lots that have since been repurposed, tilled and made ready for planting. The city’s Department of Public Works provides access to the vacant lots and tills the soil using city resources and donations from local businesses to cover supplies, including signs, seeds, fertilizer and compost for the gardens.

Additional programs developed under Jumpstart Jackson include a daily walking program in schools that engages more than 1,500 teachers and students, a “Walk Across Tennessee” community competition, a series of workplace wellness workshops involving more than 50 local businesses, and two team weight-loss competitions. Combined with the summer camp physical fitness program, these efforts collectively involve more than 5,000 residents.

“If kids are going to learn, they have to be healthy. If teachers are going to be effective, they have to be healthy.”

— Superintendent Nancy Zambito, Jackson-Madison County School System
Jumpstart Jackson has received attention at the national, state and local levels, including the Governor’s Council on Health and Physical Fitness “Shining Star” Award for community action in the area of health and wellness. South Elementary, considered a Jumpstart Jackson “model school” due to its on-site “Lifetime Fitness and Wellness Center” facility and high rate of participation in breakfast in the classroom, was named one of the “Ten Healthiest Schools in the U.S.” by Health magazine in 2008. In addition, the Jackson-Madison County School System received a $10,000 grant from General Mills to promote physical activity and good nutrition in local middle schools.

Although the city-school partnership and a shared vision among community partners have contributed to Jumpstart Jackson’s initial success, municipal and school district leaders see additional room for progress. County adoption of the regional wellness policy will be essential for effective implementation and expanding Jumpstart Jackson’s reach. The city also hopes to increase investment in specific initiatives endorsed in the wellness policy. For example, the mayor has a long-term vision to create a nine-mile greenbelt trail system that will connect five major anchor points (city parks) within Jackson. The city currently incentivizes municipal employees with extra time during their lunch break to use the walking trails.

The city and school are also working to institutionalize Jumpstart Jackson by securing funding for a dedicated wellness coordinator to manage and sustain the work. Although the support of city and school leaders and their presence at community events builds community connections to Jumpstart Jackson, a full-time wellness coordinator would increase the initiative’s strength and sustainability. In the interim, the Jumpstart Jackson group is working to ensure that all wellness-related initiatives and events in the city are branded with the Jumpstart Jackson logo to promote community recognition of the initiative.

Although they are still working to ensure the sustainability of local wellness initiatives, the mayor and superintendent in Jackson have taken many important first steps in institutionalizing Jumpstart Jackson’s work within city and school departments. The regional and school wellness policies will continue to drive local efforts despite future changes in leadership. City and school efforts to engage the community around a shared vision will promote an ongoing emphasis on reducing childhood obesity and improving health and wellness in Jackson.
Recognizing that local planning and street design encouraged residents to travel by car rather than by foot, municipal leaders in La Mesa, Calif., concluded that one of the first steps to making their community healthier was to tackle the issue of walkability. Guided by an in-depth needs assessment, the City of La Mesa focused their local wellness efforts on making improvements to the built environment. By addressing this observable community challenge, the city was able to gain consensus from school and community partners on the need for a broader effort to improve local wellness in San Diego County’s La Mesa-Spring Valley region.

A goal of improving walkability, along with a desire to combat childhood obesity in the community, resulted in the formation of the La Mesa Community Wellness Program. The city-led program linked and supported three parallel efforts by the city, school and community organizations aimed at promoting walkability, bikeability and access to recreation and active living opportunities. Each of these efforts relied on a careful analysis of the physical barriers that made it difficult to walk and bike the city: lack of sidewalks, safe routes to school and walking and biking trails; unsafe freeway crossings; inadequate access to parks and recreation sites; and zoning laws that separate residential, commercial and school development.

Together with school and community partners, the City of La Mesa, led by Mayor Art Madrid and supported by the City Council, confronted these issues one by one. After the initial walkability study was conducted in 2005, these partners developed walkability criteria for various community sites, formed joint use agreements for parks and recreation facilities, and created...
La Mesa, California

Population 55,274
% White, non-Hispanic .................66.1 %
% Black .......................................6.3 %
% Hispanic/Latino .....................16.5 %
% American Indian and
Alaska Native .........................0.4 %
% Asian-American .....................5.6 %
% Individuals Below
Poverty Level ..........................10.3 %
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008
American Community Survey: La Mesa, CA.
Retrieved January 20, 2010, from
http://factfinder.census.gov

Free or Reduced Price
Lunch Rate 56.3 %
Source: La Mesa-Spring Valley School
District

California: Adult Overweight
and Obesity Prevalence 59.7 %

California: Children (ages 10-17)
Overweight and Obesity
Prevalence 30.5 %
Source: Levi J., Vinter S., Richardson L.,
et al. F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies Are
Failing in America, 2009. Washington,
D.C., Trust for America’s Health, July 2009.
research/20090701tfahfasinfat.pdf

a sidewalk master plan and a walking trails
program. The robust city-school collabora-
tion attracted more than $1 million in federal
Safe Routes to School funding to bolster
these efforts. The technical assistance initia-
tive also helped La Mesa partners formalize
the structure of their wellness collabora-
tion through the “ready, set…Live Well”
initiative. As a city striving toward a more
walkable environment, La Mesa shows the
significant influence that local policy changes
can have on building healthier communities
and beginning to curb the childhood obesity
epidemic.

Assessing Barriers to Walkability

La Mesa is an aging, built-out urban commu-
nity with rolling hills, narrow streets and
a patchwork of development with spotty
sidewalk access. In 2005, the city’s Public
Works Department partnered with the
nonprofit, California-based Local Govern-
ment Commission (LGC) and a grassroots
organization called Walk San Diego to assess
barriers to the city’s walkability, with funding
provided by the San Diego Association of
Governments. The goal of the assessment
was threefold: to determine the current level
of walkability; gauge how walkable residents
wanted La Mesa to be; and determine the
steps to improve walkability. To assist with
this work, the city performed an infrastruc-
ture inventory, using Geographic Informa-
tion Systems (GIS) mapping to determine
the location of existing sidewalks and ramps
and to identify neighborhoods with well-
established walking and biking routes. The
city surveyed residents on their aspirations
for walkability through a combination of
ad-hoc committee, neighborhood and town
hall meetings advertised on the city Web
site and in the local quarterly newsletter.
Following this broad community outreach
effort, the city and its partners completed the
walkability assessment in February 2006.
Findings from the assessment showed that several key components of La Mesa’s transportation infrastructure lay at the core of the city’s walkability problems. Multiple freeways with massive interchanges – Interstate 8 and state highways 54, 94 and 125 – bisected neighborhoods and created barriers to safe walking and biking. Community meeting participants echoed the findings, voicing concerns about the safety of children walking to school through areas with congested streets or high-speed vehicle traffic. The study also found that portions of La Mesa-Spring Valley had inadequate access to parks and recreation facilities.

With information from the 2006 walkability study in hand, the city prioritized a list of areas for walkability upgrades. Priority areas included streets and corridors within one-quarter mile of a school, senior center or residential complex, bus or trolley route, parks and recreational center, civic center or pedestrian-oriented retail space. Criteria outlining reasonable walking distances for children were also determined: one-quarter mile for grades kindergarten to three, one and one-quarter mile for grades four to eight, and one and three-quarter miles for grades nine through 12. The city worked with school and community partners to identify four school locations that did not meet the determined criteria and needed immediate funding for walkable school routes. The assessment led directly to the planning and construction of new sidewalks and better walking paths to these four schools, as described below.

Joining Forces with School and Community Wellness Efforts

After the city had determined the areas needing the most improvements, the next step was to connect to parallel efforts to address health and wellness by the school district and community organizations. A confluence of factors, including the study results and concurrent federal mandates affecting the school district, created a climate that was particularly conducive to collaboration between the city and these various groups, and ultimately led to the formation of the La Mesa Wellness Task Force and the La Mesa Community Wellness Program, which the City Council endorsed in July 2006.
In response to a federal mandate stemming from the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District had already developed a school wellness policy during the 2005-06 school year. The school board approved the proposed policy developed by the district’s school wellness council in June 2006. The policy includes specific sections on providing safe routes to school and joint use of school facilities outside of school hours. The school district also makes a formal commitment to partnering with the city to:

“assess and make needed improvements to make it safer and easier for students to walk and bike to school. When appropriate, the district will work together with local public works, public safety and/or police departments in those efforts. The school district will explore the availability of federal ‘safe routes to school funds,’ administered by the state department of transportation, to finance such improvements.”

The city supports the school district’s efforts by committing planning and law enforcement staff to serve on school-based safety advisory committees. With regard to joint use of school facilities, the policy states that “school spaces and facilities should be available to students, staff, and community members before, during, and after the school day, on weekends and during school vacations [as well as to] community agencies and organizations offering physical activity and nutrition programs.”

The other key partner that the city engaged to work on the walkability issue was a group of La Mesa youth participating in the Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (CX3) civic engagement program. The California Nutrition Network (now called Network for a Healthier California) developed CX3 as a statewide initiative to promote physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption. The La Mesa CX3 project involves collaboration among the La Mesa Park and Recreation Foundation, the Community Services Department, Helix Charter High School, the San Diego County Maternal Child and Family Services Department and the East Region Office of the county’s Health and Human Services Agency.

Policy Changes to Promote a Walkable Environment

Responding to recommendations for project improvements from the previous year’s walkability study, the most robust component of the Community Wellness Program is the provision on “developing design strategies that support an active lifestyle.” The Community Wellness Program called for the expansion of park green spaces by improving quality and access, and possibly increasing park acreage, in La Mesa. It also became a vehicle for requesting funding for immediate

— La Mesa Mayor Art Madrid

“Local government impacts residents more than any level of government, and it is also the most accessible level of government.”
improvements to the four school locations identified in the walkability study.

Through the Community Wellness Program, the city and school district worked with CX3 to improve students’ ability to safely walk and bike to school. Funded by a grant from the Grossmont Healthcare District, phase one of CX3 began in June 2007 with the recruitment of six high school students. Volunteer adult mentors helped the youth collect and analyze data to measure four community wellness indicators in the community: density of fast food restaurants, availability of fresh produce, density of unhealthy food advertisements and walkability of schools, markets and recreational areas in West La Mesa. In the next phase of the project, three students created an advocacy plan to promote improvements to Helix High School, one of the four target schools.

With the help of adult mentors, the youth documented barriers to walkability and created an impressive presentation that used digital map layering to illustrate potential sidewalk and landscaping improvements to the area around the school. As a result of their work, the La Mesa CX3 Project received a gold medal in the 2008 Governor’s Council of Physical Fitness Spotlight Awards. The CX3 project has since been fully integrated into the work of the La Mesa Youth Commission. The high school and middle school students who serve on the Youth Commission continue to conduct similar “walk audits” in other areas of the city.

Federal funding magnified the benefits of these efforts in February 2008. The school district’s adoption of the school wellness policy enabled the city and school district to receive two federal Safe Routes to School (SRTS) infrastructure grants totaling more than $1 million for sidewalk improvements to Helix High School and Lemon Avenue Elementary School and one non-infrastructure grant of $450,000. The youth involved in CX3 played an instrumental role in securing the SRTS funding for sidewalk improvements around Helix High School, which were completed in the summer of 2009.

The four-year, non-infrastructure grant will pay for implementation of the La Mesa Kids Walk & Roll to School program, which will encompass education, encouragement, enforcement, engineering and evaluation activities in six elementary schools and two middle schools in La Mesa. Program activi-
ties will range from tracking the number of children who walk to school for evaluation purposes, conducting community walk audits, creating walking maps, and traffic education and enforcement. The program is a partnership between the city, school district, Walk San Diego, and county Health and Human Services Department.

The coordination of efforts by city, school and youth groups in La Mesa led to other important policy and environmental changes to address walkability. The city adopted a comprehensive sidewalk master plan in 2008. The first step of the plan involved the creation of a sidewalk map to visually demonstrate the existing network of sidewalks and planned projects. The sidewalk map also illustrates streets where the city does not plan to add sidewalks due to sidewalk construction constraints (hillside areas) or community requests (preserving rural roads). Once the city completed the sidewalk map, the Public Works Department determined the scope and specifics for rehabilitating school sidewalk routes and creating safer freeway crossings. Some of these project improvements are now underway.

The City of La Mesa also revised its design standards and adopted a “mixed use urban overlay zone.” These urban design guidelines encourage pedestrian orientation of buildings and outdoor spaces. In addition, the city is in the process of updating its bicycle master plan, which promotes the addition of bike lanes to major roads in the city.

To engage residents in taking advantage of the new walkability improvements and to encourage walking in the downtown area, the city created the La Mesa Urban Walking Trails program. The project received a $10,000 grant from the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, but its completion was in large part due to partnerships with community groups. Local students from a Helix High School marketing class came up with names for each of the walking trails: “The Stroll” beginner route, “The Stride” intermediate route and “The Challenge” advanced route. A local Eagle Scout created and installed colored directional trail markers for the routes, and Fit X San Diego hosted inaugural walks to promote use of the trails.

Joint Use Agreements for the Junior Seau Sports Complex

In addition to walkability improvements, the city and school district partnered to improve access to parks and recreation facilities. A major accomplishment was the establishment of an agreement between the city and school district to share use of the Junior Seau Sports Complex. Completed in 2005, the sports complex features an artificial turf football field, soccer field, tennis courts, baseball fields, a skate park and play areas for children and youth. As a result of the joint use agreement, the facility is open for use by school physical education classes, school sports teams, and afterschool programs and

“I think there is nothing more important than education, but our kids cannot learn if they are not healthy.”

— Superintendent Brian Marshall, La Mesa-Spring Valley School District
camps run by the city, school and community organizations. The NLC-AASA technical assistance project provided La Mesa officials with a sample joint use agreement from Oakland that helped them develop their own agreement.

La Mesa’s Public Works Department handled the design and construction of the project and maintains the fields. The city’s Community Services Department and Sports Athletic Council coordinate scheduling after school and on weekends. The sports leagues pay for janitorial services, staffing supervision and lights, and the school pays for watering the fields. The city, county and school district have also established joint use agreements for elementary, middle and high schools across La Mesa-Spring Valley to allow community use of school sports fields. In recognition of La Mesa’s accomplishments in improving access to places to walk, bike and play, the city was selected as a Playful City USA by KaBOOM!, a national organization devoted to the promotion of play, in September 2008 and again in 2009. La Mesa officials credit the technical assistance initiative for the city’s successes in gaining recognition and funding for its wellness efforts.

Formalizing the La Mesa Community Wellness Program

To sustain the momentum of the La Mesa Community Wellness Program, the city embarked on a strategic planning process to address additional barriers to active living and healthy eating. During the 2007 project cross-site meeting, the Community Wellness Program evolved into the “Ready, set….Live Well” initiative, which created a more formal structure built on previous efforts. With an 18-month planning grant from the California Endowment, a leadership team made up of staff from the city’s Community Services Department solicited participation in a policy team tasked with formally defining La Mesa’s strategic vision for health and wellness. In addition to the initial stakeholders involved in the Community Wellness Program, the policy team includes representatives from the county, as well as a broader range of education, health, public works, parks and recreation, academic, faith and youth and family stakeholders. Similar to Jackson, this team set a goal of making La Mesa and Spring Valley the healthiest and most livable communities in the San Diego region.

The policy team formed five tactical teams
to create action plans for different segments of the community: the La Mesa and Spring Valley neighborhoods, La Mesa-Spring Valley School District, faith communities and public health and health care settings. Each tactical team then created an action plan that would become a component of the overall Live Well strategic plan. The city borrowed the idea of creating both a policy team and tactical team from San José after NLC shared how the city uses this model to guide its gang prevention efforts. The finalized strategic plan aims to support healthy eating and active lifestyles in neighborhood, school, afterschool and professional settings and contains goals for promotion, tracking and evaluation of the initiative. The La Mesa City Council, the La Mesa-Spring Valley School Board and the Spring Valley Revitalization Committee approved this plan in the fall of 2009. This strategic plan aligns with county-level initiatives, such as the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative.

A final component of the Live Well strategic planning process seeks to develop a community-driven approach to sustain the initiative. To fulfill this goal, the city created the Community Ambassador Program, in which a group of committed residents will spread information about health and wellness resources and issues to the larger community. City, school and community groups will work to cultivate these community leaders to sustain La Mesa’s wellness efforts. In this respect, La Mesa’s efforts will come full circle, beginning with efforts in 2005 to involve residents in assessing environmental barriers to walking and continuing with ongoing resident leadership and engagement.

Moving Forward

With the formal adoption of the “ready, set…Live Well” strategic plan, the City of La Mesa is continuing to work with school and community partners on implementation. The Live Well group is also seeking endorsement of the strategic plan from additional community groups. Local organizations that are expected to endorse the plan include the La Mesa Collaborative, County Service Area Advisory Board 128, Spring Valley Youth and Family Coalition and the Spring Valley Planning Group.

As part of the strategic plan implementation, the city is ramping up efforts to help La Mesa-Spring Valley School District offer the La Mesa Kids Walk & Roll to School program in La Mesa schools. This program will provide local leaders with a framework for identifying and developing future infrastructure projects that will make it easier for students to walk to school. The city is also helping the school district implement its school wellness policy and recognize schools for their wellness efforts. Additionally, the city will soon complete an updated bicycle master plan connected to regional efforts to promote bikeability, and the city is encouraging local restaurants to offer healthier children’s menus. Finally, the Live Well team plans to use its strategic plan as a springboard for adding a health and wellness component to the city’s General Plan, which will ensure that future city initiatives take health and wellness into account.
Oakland, California
Promoting Public Health in Underserved Neighborhoods by Expanding Access to Healthy Food

In large urban areas throughout the country, disadvantaged neighborhoods lack access to the healthy food options that more affluent communities take for granted. For many families, grocery stores and other places to purchase fresh produce are inconveniently located, while fast food restaurants abound. In response, cities such as Oakland are taking action to expand the range of healthy food choices available to local residents.

A number of initiatives to improve access to healthy food are now underway in Oakland. With support from Mayor Ron Dellums, the city’s parks and recreation department has played a lead role in establishing community gardens and urban “community market farms,” and in running the unique Dinner at Six meal program for lower-income youth. The city has also provided loans to new food co-ops opening in underserved areas and worked with the school district to set up produce stands at elementary schools. Oakland leaders have recently decided to take a more comprehensive look at the city’s food system by creating a new Oakland Food Policy Council.

Efforts to increase the number of healthy food choices in Oakland are part of a broader city focus on a public health framework for addressing the needs of vulnerable youth. In addition to the focus on healthy food, the city and school district have developed joint use agreements to create safe places for young people to go after school, refurbished deteriorating local schoolyards, provided school-based health services, and sought to identify new strategies to reduce violence among youth. Overall, Oakland’s community wellness initiatives seek to change the health outcomes for children and youth who are more vulnerable to childhood obesity in
Community Wellness: Comprehensive City-School Strategies to Reduce Childhood Obesity

Oakland, California

Population 362,342
% White, non-Hispanic ..................25.4 %
% Black .........................................29.5 %
% Hispanic/Latino .........................25.2 %
% American Indian and Alaska Native.................................0.3 %
% Asian-American .........................15.4 %
% Individuals Below Poverty Level ....................................18 %

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008
American Community Survey: Oakland, CA.
Retrieved January 20, 2010, from
http://factfinder.census.gov

Free or Reduced Price Lunch Rate 66.9 %
Source: Oakland Unified School District

California: Adult Overweight and Obesity Prevalence 59.7 %

California: Children (ages 10-17) Overweight and Obesity Prevalence 30.5 %


Many of Oakland’s wellness efforts in recent years have addressed the lack of access to healthy, affordable food for lower-income residents. These efforts have brought new food options into local neighborhoods through the establishment of community gardens and community market farms, incentives for cooperative ownership of grocery stores and programs to bring healthier food into schools. Meanwhile, another set part because of their lack of access to healthy food and safe places for physical activity.

**Improving the Food Environment**

Health and wellness initiatives in Oakland connect to a larger community health perspective outlined in the mayor’s vision for a “Model City.” In addition to reducing childhood obesity, the city seeks to change the environmental factors that impede young people’s success in depressed neighborhoods. Thus, Oakland’s initiatives to promote access to healthy food and school-based health services are intertwined with efforts to improve students’ ability to learn. Promoting physical activity requires establishing safe places to walk, bike and play. Oakland’s goal to support the “whole child” entails a focus on the broader conditions that affect their health and well-being at school, at home, and in local neighborhoods. According to Mayor Dellums, “the core of the Model City plan is public health.”

![Image of peppers]
community wellness: comprehensive city-school strategies to reduce childhood obesity

of initiatives – from the Soda Free Summer campaign to the Dinner at Six program – focus on changing residents’ eating habits and awareness of health and nutrition.

The city’s Office of Parks and Recreation (OPR) often played a central role in this area in collaboration with local community groups. For instance, OPR maintains and funds seven community gardens in which members of the community, including those in lower-income areas who have less access to supermarkets, can rent plots of land. To gain access to a plot at one of the city’s community gardens, Oakland residents pay $25 per year and complete a brief application indicating their desired garden location. Oakland’s community gardening program “encourages residents of all ages, cultures and backgrounds to steward equitably distributed plots of land to grow organic vegetables, fruits and flowers… [the program also] strives to empower participants to meet their need for health, recreation, good nutrition, job skills, community security and natural beauty.”

OPR also provided resources to school and community-based gardens through its partnerships with Oakland Based Urban Gardens (OBUGS) and City Slicker Farms. OBUGS is a nonprofit organization that provides garden-based programs to elementary and high schools in West Oakland. The programs supplement the regular school curriculum with hands-on science, language arts, health, art and ecology lessons. OBUGS also harvests food for donation to participating students’ families each week. The city has a formal agreement with OBUGS to provide garden soil materials and garden waste removal, while OBUGS pays for other expenses.

After hearing about City Slicker Farms through a site visit to Oakland’s project “sister-city” of San Antonio, OPR adopted the program. This partnership provides food to underserved residents through a community market farming model that promotes intensive farming on small plots of land for high yields of produce. The partnership began in 2007 as a project to convert two blighted city parks, Fitzgerald and Union Plaza, into a community park with a garden space and a community market farm. After two years of planning, the project broke ground in November 2009 and will eventually provide organically-grown fruits, vegetables and eggs to West Oakland residents, prioritizing lower-income residents and homeless individuals. An added benefit of the market farm is its power to create a sense of community in West Oakland, which is a lower-income, historically underserved area of the city.

In addition, the city provided commercial loans to two businesses – Revolution Foods and Mandela Marketplace – that strive to create more equitable access to healthy food. Revolution Foods contracts with schools to provide low-cost, high-quality, healthy food service to students. In 2008, the city awarded two loans totaling $420,000 to Revolution Foods to support the company’s relocation to a 20,000-square-foot food manufacturing space in Oakland. The investment not only improved food access within city schools, but also created jobs for Oakland residents. Also in 2008, the city gave two commercial loans totaling nearly $250,000 to fund cooperative ownership in the Mandela Foods Cooperative for low-to-moderate income
West Oakland residents. Mandela Market-Place provides various services, including the Mandela Foods Cooperative, which sells reduced-cost staples such as produce, meat, dairy and bulk-food items in a grocery store atmosphere.

Another program that brings fresh foods to lower-income neighborhoods is the Healthy Schoolyards Initiative, which established seven produce stands at local elementary schools over a five-year period. The produce stands accept payments of both cash and electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards, which are electronic cards used to distribute federal benefits under the SNAP/Food Stamp program. The initiative also served as a catalyst for a farm-to-school movement within the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). OUSD is now in contract negotiations with its food supplier and other local school districts to provide more local produce for use in school cafeterias. The Healthy Schoolyards Initiative is a project of Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC), a six-year, multi-million dollar effort sponsored by The California Endowment. HEAC aims to fight childhood obesity in California and develop state policy changes that will reduce the risk factors for diabetes and obesity. The East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC), OUSD, and the Alameda County Health Department lead Oakland’s HEAC team in addressing school health issues and wellness policies.

Beyond expanding the number of healthy food choices available to residents, city leaders and their local partners found several ways to engage youth in changing their own and their neighbors’ eating habits. For instance, OPR holds a weekly Dinner at Six program at several community recreation centers around the city. Each week, youth at the community center plan, cook, serve and eat dinner in a family-style setting, often with local leaders and other guests in attendance. The program not only provides lower-income youth with a complete dinner that includes fresh meats, produce and other freshly prepared items, but also encourages dinnertime conversations where youth and OPR staff mentors can discuss issues ranging from dating violence to strategies for college applications. The mentors encourage each teen who wants to speak to do so. The meal and structured dialogue have been very successful, with greater numbers of local youth joining the event each week.

The city also supported the county’s Soda Free Summer initiative, a collaborative campaign targeting the entire San Francisco Bay Area. The initiative originated in 2006 as an Alameda County Health Department pilot program and then expanded to the five other Bay Area counties: Contra Costa, Marin,
San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara. The campaign urged Bay Area residents to pledge to be “soda free” for ten weeks during the summer. Campaign activities included pledge cards, promotional materials, Be Sugar Savvy workshops, local media outreach and advocacy.

The Oakland OPR, Department of Human Service and other municipal agencies that work with youth helped promote the campaign, and youth got involved as community ambassadors for the program. For example, teens from Youth Uprising, a nonprofit group that develops youth leadership, created a televised public service announcement and informational video encouraging the participation of residents in a soda-free summer. A 2008 evaluation of the program deemed it successful in engaging a variety of organizations and persuading many residents to make healthier beverage choices.

Although community partnerships focused on access to healthy food have existed for many years, local stakeholders have only recently begun to coordinate their efforts to prevent duplication of services. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, the California Endowment, Bechtel Foundation and other sources, the community created a new Oakland Food Policy Council (OFPC) to assist with this coordination.

Momentum for the creation of the OFPC began under former Mayor Jerry Brown following a 2005 research report by the Mayor’s Office of Sustainability entitled The Oakland Food System Assessment. The report recommended the establishment of a council to bring together the many stakeholders in Oakland’s food system, build stronger relationships and generate the political will needed to make the food system equitable and sustainable. Implementation of the OFPC is now occurring under Mayor Dellums’ administration. OFPC members include representatives from the city, schools, county, higher education, local business and regional farming community and national and community organizations focused on sustainable agricultural practices and access to healthy foods in lower-income neighborhoods. Planned projects include improvements to the food supply chain and the quality and nutritional value of food at city and school institutions, as well as revised land use zoning to encourage development of grocery stores in underserved neighborhoods.

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**Placing Wellness within a Broader Public Health Framework**

Oakland’s restructuring of the food environment in disadvantaged neighborhoods fits within a larger framework focused on building healthier communities. In addition to their emphasis on access to healthy food, Oakland leaders recognized that public safety is fundamental to promoting physically active lifestyles. If youth and adults feel unable to safely and freely move about the city and spend time outside in local parks and neighborhoods, they have fewer opportunities for exercise. To address this challenge, OPR seeks to create safe places for physical activity for young people and families at 24 community recreation centers and other locations in underserved neighborhoods.
The City of Oakland and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) also formed a comprehensive joint use agreement that provides access to OPR and OUSD facilities. The agreement grants priority to school- and city-led programs over other requests. One area where the city and school district utilized the joint use agreement is for afterschool and summer programming that maximized the small number of safe spaces for recreation. OUSD offers 86 afterschool programs, 73 of which receive matching funds from the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, a voter-approved measure that dedicates 2.5 percent of city general fund revenue to children and youth services. The fund awarded $8.3 million in matching dollars and leveraged additional state funding to support afterschool and summer programming run by OUSD and nonprofit agencies.

The city and school district also support the Oakland Schoolyard Initiative (OSI). Not to be confused with the Healthy Schoolyard Initiative mentioned above, OSI seeks to revitalize and transform 50 deteriorating schoolyards into safe and vibrant play spaces for youth over the next 10 years. The East Bay Asian Youth Council (EBAYC), a community-building organization dedicated to youth development, runs OSI in partnership with the city, OUSD and The California Endowment. OUSD enacted a formal resolution in December 2007 that led to a pilot of OSI at four area schools. Working with the OUSD Facilities Department, parents, students and teachers took part in a series of participatory community design workshops, moving from brainstorming and wish lists to hands-on involvement in creating models of their schoolyard. The OSI pilot resulted in the transformation of four schools from blighted concrete lots into colorful and dynamic environments filled with active children on basketball, kickball and four-square courts. The Oakland City Council and the nonprofit Unity Council Community Development Corporation are currently helping OSI expand to more schools across the district.

The various partnerships to promote healthy eating, access to nutritious food, and physical activity complement other collaborative city and school health initiatives. For example, the city partners with OUSD, Alameda County and the state to create school-based health centers through Elev8, a national initiative supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies to provide coordinated wraparound services to middle school students and their families. The city’s involvement began with
the hiring of a cabinet-level mayoral education liaison to the school district. Through a series of bimonthly meetings, the Elev8 initiative brought new physical and mental health services and extended learning and family engagement opportunities to five OUSD middle schools. Building on that success, OUSD, in partnership with Alameda Health Care Services Agency, received a $3 million grant from Kaiser Northern California Community Benefit Foundation to expand school-based health centers to 10 additional middle schools. OUSD’s ultimate goal is to establish school-based health centers in all middle and high schools.

OUSD also coordinates implementation of a school wellness policy through its Comprehensive Learning Department. A health and wellness advisory council of teachers, parents, students, administrators, guidance counselors and a school nurse created the policy in 2006 in response to a federal mandate for all school districts receiving federal funding for the school lunch program. The wellness policy addresses school nutrition, physical education and activity, health education, safe and healthy school environments, student wellness services, and staff wellness. As a testament to the strength of OUSD’s commitment to wellness, the district took action to promote school wellness prior to the federal mandate when it became the first school district in the state to adopt a policy banning sodas from middle and high schools in 2001. The technical assistance initiative encouraged the city to directly support implementation of school wellness policies through the placement of an OPR representative on the coordinated school wellness council.

Moving Forward

As municipal and school district officials continue to promote healthy eating and active living, there are many reasons for optimism that their combined efforts will increasingly make an impact. For instance, the Oakland Food Policy Council plans to strengthen and coordinate individual programs and enact policies to expand access to healthy food choices. Under the direction of Audree Jones-Taylor, the city’s Office of Parks and Recreation plans to build on existing partnerships to expand the number of community and school gardens and urban farms.

Additionally, there is significant potential for bringing to scale the school district’s initial successes in improving student health, including the expansion of elementary school produce stands under the Healthy Schoolyards Initiative, a more robust farm-to-school program and the continuation of the Soda Free Summer initiative. In addition, OUSD continues to implement its school wellness policy and frequently reviews the policy to ensure that it is adequately serving the health of students. With new ideas and partnerships gained through the technical assistance initiative, the city, school district and county and community partners have strengthened their commitment to reducing childhood obesity as part of their efforts to improve health outcomes for children, youth and families in underserved neighborhoods.
San Antonio, Texas

Using School and Out-of-School Time to Encourage Healthy Eating and Active Living

Municipal and school leaders concerned about childhood obesity can take advantage of the hours when children and youth are in school and in afterschool or summer programs by providing nutritious food and incorporating physical activity into the curriculum. San Antonio offers one example of robust local efforts to encourage healthy behavior among young people where they spend most of their time during the week. In collaboration with other partners, the City of San Antonio and the Harlandale Independent School District (HISD) took important steps to promote health and wellness at school and in out-of-school time programs.

HISD’s efforts in particular offer a useful model for school-based interventions. In partnership with the city and a broad range of other stakeholders represented on the School Health Advisory Council, the school district updated its health education curriculum and promoted healthy food policies for school lunches and a la carte items, school parties and vending machines. City officials were supportive in several ways, such as increasing enforcement of zoning regulations targeting mobile food vendors near schools. The city and HISD also require afterschool programs to encourage physical activity – a requirement that applies to summer programs as well – and have joint use agreements to keep a school running track and other facilities open to the community after school hours.

Combined with efforts to improve local parks, establish community gardens and promote healthier restaurant menus, the in-school and afterschool partnerships between the city and HISD have the potential to make a significant impact in promoting healthy lifestyles among San Antonio’s
San Antonio, Texas

Population 1,277,322
% White, non-Hispanic ..............28.9 %
% Black ...........................................6.2 %
% Hispanic/Latino .........................61.2 %
% American Indian and
Alaska Native.................................0.4 %
% Asian-American ...........................2.0 %
% Individuals Below
Poverty Level.................................18.5 %
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008
American Community Survey: San Antonio,
TX. Retrieved January 20, 2010, from
http://factfinder.census.gov

HISD Free or Reduced Price
Lunch Rate 91 %
Source: Harlandale Independent School
District (HISD)

Texas: Adult Overweight
and Obesity Prevalence 64.8 %

Texas: Children (ages 10-17)
Overweight and Obesity
Prevalence 32.2 %
Source: Levi J., Vinter S., Richardson L.,
et al. F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies Are
Failing in America, 2009. Washington,
research/20090701tfahfasinfat.pdf

Healthy School and Afterschool Environments

As the second largest city in Texas and one of
the top five fastest-growing large cities in the
U.S., San Antonio faced several challenges
to improving health and wellness during
the technical assistance project. During
then-Mayor Phil Hardberger’s tenure, the
city-school project team found that the large
geographic area of San Antonio (400 square
miles) and the 16 separate school districts
presented obstacles to the development of
a comprehensive, coordinated approach.
Despite these issues, the city and HISD made
a number of key improvements. Prompted
by several state legislative mandates, HISD
made strides to incorporate wellness into
in-school, afterschool and summer programs
and policies. These efforts occurred despite
HISD’s status as the 22nd poorest school
district in Texas, with 91 percent of students
qualifying for free or reduced price lunch.

In 2001, the Texas Legislature made it
mandatory for school districts to have a
School Health Advisory Council (SHAC).
HISD responded by creating a diverse SHAC
composed of parents, teachers, city employ-
ees, HISD Superintendent Robert Jaklich,
medical professionals, community organi-
zation representatives and students. Gina
Castro, a member of HISD’s Child Nutrition
Department, chairs the SHAC, and through
her leadership the group has become a major
force in making district schools healthier.
The participation of the city’s Department
of Community Initiatives in SHAC is the
result of a partnership with HISD that was
strengthened through the technical assistance
initiative.

One of SHAC’s main responsibilities is to
make recommendations to the school board
regarding the health education curricu-
lum. The Harlandale SHAC chose CATCH
(Coordinated Approach To Child Health)
as the health curriculum for the district. CATCH is a nationally-recognized, evidence-based, coordinated school health program designed to promote physical activity and healthy food choices. The CATCH program fulfills the physical education requirements delineated in the Texas Education Code.

SHAC made other recommendations to the school board about how to improve health in district schools, including mandatory recess, healthy food policies at school parties and school board meetings and a restriction that cake be served to students only on designated holidays. SHAC also helped engage school principals in the enforcement of wellness policies and guidelines. In addition, SHAC was involved in improving the nutrition of school lunches, school vending machines and food-related fundraising and in enforcing zoning regulations for mobile school vending.

Many of these issues are priorities for SHAC’s newly formed partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and its Healthy Schools Program. The Healthy Schools Program takes a comprehensive approach to school wellness. Its areas of focus include access to healthy foods; physical activity before, during and after school; nutrition education and school employee wellness programs. To initiate the program, an Alliance for a Healthier Generation representative conducted an assessment to determine HISD’s specific needs and is now helping SHAC be more effective in connecting programs already in place.

The ultimate goal of the Healthy Schools Program is to write concrete wellness goals into the Campus and District Improvement Plan, a mandatory documentation of progress on school districts’ coordinated school health plans.

During the course of the technical assistance project, HISD reacted to other state mandates to promote health and wellness. In 2007, the state passed legislation requiring all students to participate in 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day of the school year. The legislation also requires school districts to annually assess and report on the physical fitness of students in grades three through 12. In response, HISD implemented Fitnessgram, a health-related fitness assessment that measures aerobic capacity, body composition and muscular strength, endurance and flexibility.

In tandem with the implementation of Fitnessgram, the Bexar County Health Collaborative—a county-level health coalition composed of citizens, community organizations, the San Antonio Health Department and health care businesses—created Project Measure Up (PMU). PMU serves as a resource to Bexar County independent school districts, including HISD, by making community resources available for the implementation of state fitness mandates and facilitating a collaboration with the Youth Obesity Prevention Partners Council and the School Volunteer Corps. This collaboration provides
volunteers to assist with Fitnessgram assessments, along with online access to a catalog of obesity prevention programs and policies adopted by each independent school district in San Antonio.

Complementing HISD’s efforts to promote physical activity and healthy eating during the school day, the city’s Department of Community Initiatives (DCI) maintains a focus on wellness in its afterschool and summer programming. DCI contracts with Positive Beginnings, Inc., to provide afterschool programming for HISD students. All programs must incorporate physical activity into the curriculum. Some of the creative ways in which the city engages youth in physical activity after school include interactive video games such as Wii Fit, Wii Sports Pack and Dance Dance Revolution in afterschool facilities. To expand access to these programs, the city made a large investment to eliminate waiting lists by opening more program slots and put in place a sliding scale fee system so that all children can participate regardless of financial need.

To ensure that children and youth stay active throughout the summer months, DCI partners with area organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, JOVEN, YMCA and Family Service Association to provide programming at ten sites. In addition, the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Depart-

ment partners with 50 schools in eight school districts, including HISD, to provide summer programming. The partnership enables the city and school districts to share facilities, staff and exercise equipment. The city and schools also have formal joint use agreements for janitorial services, utilities and other issues associated with sharing of facilities. As with afterschool programs, all summer programming must have a fitness component as part of the curriculum.

Finally, the city and HISD have joint use agreements for access to recreational spaces at school facilities, which are kept open to the community until 9:00 p.m. during the school year. Through a cooperative agreement with the city, HISD completed development of a running track in May 2009 on land that was jointly owned by the city and the school. As part of the agreement, the school funded construction of the track and handles maintenance of lights for the facility, while the city provides lighting free of charge until 11:00 p.m.

Improving the Built Environment and Promoting Healthy Food Choices

Beyond improving the in-school and afterschool environment, the city made other changes to the built environment and the food landscape. The beautification of city parks was an important cause to Mayor Hardberger. The San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department made a number of improvements to park and trail spaces, including the development of Voelcker Park, the River Walk Extension, and the Linear Park Development Program.

Voelcker Park is a 311-acre property three miles from City Hall that the city is turning into a major urban park for residents. A master plan for Voelcker Park was completed and approved by the San Antonio City Council in May 2008, and the development for the park is underway, with the first trail
expected to open in 2010. The acquisition of this land from local owners and preservation of the space was an important priority for Mayor Hardberger. The mayor also helped establish the San Antonio River Walk Commission in June 2007 to “provide public oversight, devise strategy and provide public policy advice regarding the River Walk and San Antonio River to preserve, protect, and enhance the history, heritage, and ambiance of the river.” The commission’s first major project was the expansion of the city’s existing river walk from a 1.3 mile downtown tourist district into a 13 mile corridor of hiking and biking trails that will connect the city from Brackenridge Park in the north to Mission Espada in the south. The city completed a 1.5 mile “Museum Reach Urban Segment” of the expansion, which connects the San Antonio Museum of Art to the Pearl Brewery Redevelopment Area, in May 2009. With a total of $270 million invested in the project, the expansion represents huge potential for economic development and increased opportunities for physical activity.

Another major city project to increase opportunities for physical activity is the Linear Park Development Program for Salado Creek, Leon Creek, Medina River and the San Antonio River. Funded through a sales tax approved by voters in 2000 and 2005, the city raised $65 million to acquire approximately 980 acres of property, with another 200 acres planned for acquisition. Currently, the city boasts 77 miles of trails; the Linear Park Development Program will add an additional 50 miles of greenways, with the eventual goal of linking all trails throughout the city by 2012.

In 2009, the Parks and Recreation Department also launched its Step Up to Recreation program, which encourages citizens to spend more time in city parks. Mayor Hardberger, City Manager Sheryl Sculley and city councilmembers created public service announcements to promote the program. An informational Web site includes a monthly activities calendar and a link to SA Active Guide to city services, programs and events. The department also redecorated a city van with the Step Up to Recreation logo to further promote the initiative. The van roams city parks looking to “catch people in the act” of participating in healthy lifestyle activities and

“From streets and sidewalks to education and quality of life, we are building a foundation for an American city that will thrive in this new economy. We are building for the future, and we shall not fail.”

—Former San Antonio Mayor Phil Hardberger in his 2007 State of the City Address
give these individuals a prize to take home.

In addition to expanding and promoting the use of local parks, municipal leaders have been involved in two initiatives to improve access to healthy, affordable food options: the Healthy Restaurant Coalition and a push toward establishing community gardens.

The San Antonio Metropolitan Health District and the San Antonio Restaurant Association (SARA) established the Healthy Restaurant Coalition in 2009. Members of the coalition include public health professionals, local restaurateurs, registered dietitians, local chefs, educators and marketing professionals interested in promoting nutrition in San Antonio. The coalition’s first initiative was to work with restaurants to improve the selection of food options on children’s menus. Under a pilot project, the coalition worked closely with the owner and staff of local restaurant Pico de Gallo. Over six months, restaurant staff worked with local dietitians and health educators to analyze the content of the restaurant’s menu items. The team then selected portion sizes appropriate for children, added foods with lower fat and drinks with less than 10 grams of added sugar and changed the cooking methods for some items. The end result was 20 healthier menu items on the children’s menu, each containing less than five grams of fat and no more than 10 grams of added sugar.

To encourage participation, SARA reaches out to its membership to encourage more restaurants to join the voluntary initiative and provide healthier menu choices. Newly elected Mayor Julian Castro is very supportive, stating that what he finds most encouraging about the program “is not only the success in getting this pilot project off the ground but the voluntary nature of it brought about through Metro Health and its partnerships. When entities are willing to work together for the greater good, tremendous things happen.”

A second initiative, led by the wife of former Mayor Hardberger, focused on improving access to healthy, affordable foods that can be cooked at home. Through the creativity and leadership of then-First Lady Linda Hardberger, residents were able to take part in a new community gardening program. Working with the nonprofit Green Spaces Alliance (formerly Bexar County Land Trust), the former first lady identified 19 blighted plots throughout the city that were converted to community gardens in less than four years. Private donors funded the transformation of the spaces, and local neighbors take responsibility for further maintenance of the gardens. Ms. Hardberger continued to support the effort after the expiration of her husband’s term as mayor and plans to expand the gardens into schools and housing projects. The project also created an opening for city involvement, with the Parks and Recreation Department currently exploring a program to create community gardens on blighted city properties.

“We don’t have all the answers, so we’re always looking for new resources to help us learn more.”

— Superintendent Robert Jaklich, Harlandale Independent School District
Employee Wellness Programs

To reinforce the impact of programs and policies that directly affect children’s health, the city and HISD adopted new workplace wellness initiatives for municipal and school staff in order to foster a personal commitment to obesity prevention and encourage adults to model healthy behaviors for youth in the community.

HISD implemented a comprehensive employee wellness program during the 2008-09 school year. The program included signs posted with healthy eating and exercise tips and advertisements for walking clubs, chronic disease support groups, employee health fairs and sports leagues. The sports leagues for bowling, volleyball, golf, cycling and softball were particularly popular.

Humana Health, the school district’s insurer, also pitched in by providing pedometers, gym membership discounts and incentives to motivate employees.

The city employee wellness program, run through the city’s Human Resources Department, includes educational speakers, teams for local walking and running events, fitness training for group events, Weight Watchers, HealthPOWER weight loss challenges, gym membership discounts, diabetes and blood pressure workshops and free health risk assessments.

Moving Forward

To date, HISD and the city’s Departments of Community Initiatives and Parks and Recreation have made significant progress in identifying opportunities to improve the health of San Antonio residents, particularly in school and in after-school and summer programs for children and youth. By making additional changes to the community’s built environment and local food options, the city, school district and their partners can strengthen the impact of these in-school and out-of-school time efforts.

Going forward, the Harlandale SHAC continues to expand in size and scope, taking on more school health issues and involving more parents. The city’s Healthy Restaurant Coalition continues to work with local restaurants to offer healthier menus and educate their diners. The San Antonio Health Department plans to track outcomes of the Healthy Restaurant Coalition pilot project to determine whether the program is successful before expanding it. Meanwhile, the Parks and Recreation Department plans to support the long-term viability of wellness initiatives in San Antonio through its recent re-branding and Step Up to Recreation campaign. Coupled with infrastructure improvements such as the Linear Park Development Program and the ambitious River Walk expansion project, San Antonio is on its way to creating a healthier, more livable community.
Savannah, Georgia
Building a Broad-Based Coalition

S

tometimes, personal experiences compel municipal leaders to push for community-wide changes. Local elected officials are well-suited for such opportunities as visible, influential leaders who can reshape city policies and practices. Motivated by a heart attack that occurred in 2006, Savannah, Ga., Mayor Otis S. Johnson vowed to not only make personal lifestyle changes to improve his health as he recovered, but also to lead the community in a city-wide initiative to improve residents’ health and wellness. These events prompted Mayor Johnson to create the first city health challenge event between the cities of Savannah and Albany, Ga., in which 20 families competed to improve their health status over a period of 12 weeks. This event, combined with city and school participation in an NLC-AASA leadership academy, led to the creation of Healthy Savannah.

Healthy Savannah is a broad-based community coalition composed of leaders from the city, school district, county and community organizations. Since its inception, the Healthy Savannah coalition has helped each of its partners in its own way, assisting the Savannah-Chatham Public School System in changing policies around vending machines and fitness programs, expanding access to community gardens and farmers’ markets and providing input as the city updates its Civic Master Plan. With a diverse and representative network of stakeholders who are personally committed to Healthy Savannah’s goals, the city is in a strong position to fulfill its pledge to residents who seek a healthier community.

Creating Healthy Savannah
The February 2007 NLC-AASA leadership academy was the catalyst for creating the city and school partnership in Savannah. NLC and AASA provided the roadmap that the mayor and superintendent used to bring together key stakeholders in the “Healthy Savannah” community collaborative. The Healthy Savannah collaborative was initially facilitated by independent consultant Lizann Roberts.
As a broad-based community coalition, Healthy Savannah brings together leaders from the city, school district, county and community organizations such as the local YMCA in pursuit of a common objective: making Savannah “a community committed to supporting healthy lifestyles.” A core Steering Committee provides overall direction to the work, with guidance from a larger Leadership Team.

This powerful coalition overcame early concerns about duplication of effort and competition with other community organizations to play important roles in identifying resources, information, policies and practices to support local wellness efforts. To break down misconceptions about the purpose of the initiative, the core advisory team worked with these groups to acknowledge their concerns and clarify their goals. In striving toward a vision to make Savannah “a community committed to supporting healthy lifestyles,” Healthy Savannah focuses on five main activities:

- Creating an environment that makes a healthy choice an easy choice;
- Building a collaborative network that identifies and shares resources;
- Collecting and disseminating information;
- Promoting best practices and implementing innovative programs; and
- Advocating for effective policies.

This approach of serving as an intermediary helped persuade many skeptical community organizations to support Healthy Savannah. In fact, as Dr. Martin explained, in many cases, “those who [initially] said no often later became the biggest proponents of the cause.”

Healthy Savannah later expanded its core advisory team to form a Steering Committee of 30 school and community leaders,

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**Savannah, Georgia**

**Population** 127,840

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% White, non-Hispanic</th>
<th>37.6 %</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>56.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>2.9 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>% American Indian and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska Native</td>
<td>0.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian-American</td>
<td>1.3 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Individuals Below</td>
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</tbody>
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**Poverty Level** 23.0 %

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2008


**Free or Reduced Price Lunch Rate** 62%

Source: Savannah-Chatham County Public School System

**Georgia: Adult Overweight and Obesity Prevalence** 63.9 %

**Georgia: Children (ages 10-17) Overweight and Obesity Prevalence** 37.3 %

each of whom is strongly committed to combating obesity. A few key members include: Kathryn Martin, Ph.D., Assistant Dean at the Medical College of Georgia, who currently chairs the Healthy Savannah initiative; Lizann Roberts, who volunteers to coordinate Healthy Savannah; Jennifer Payne, Director of the Citizen Liaison Office; and Michele Spurgeon Hartzell, Ed.D., Director of Health and Physical Education. With the support of Mayor Johnson and Superintendent Thomas B. Lockamy, Jr., Ed.D., Ms. Payne and Dr. Hartzell spearhead the city-school collaborative.

The Leadership Team, which now includes more than 100 partners from more than 60 agencies, is responsible for vetting proposals for new policies and programs, offering input to the Steering Committee on community needs and potential opportunities for action, and developing a five-year strategic plan for the Healthy Savannah initiative. The team meets quarterly to update each other on activities, share ideas and discuss how to build the Healthy Savannah network. Leadership Team members also co-brand their organizations’ work with Healthy Savannah to increase the initiative’s visibility in the community. The city selected this community engagement model after looking at several potential structures shared by NLC and AASA through the technical assistance initiative.

Supporting School Wellness

Healthy Savannah assists each partner in the broad-based coalition in different ways, and these members in turn support the larger initiative. With Healthy Savannah’s assistance, Superintendent Lockamy is working to remove barriers to health and wellness within the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS) through policy, programmatic and environmental changes.

In 2008, the state mandated new requirements for physical education under the Georgia Performance Standards, including the adoption of a fitness assessment for grades 1-12 by the 2010-11 school year. Healthy Savannah supports the implementation of these mandates through Fitnessgram, a program that San Antonio used for its fitness assessments, underscoring the value of the technical assistance initiative’s peer networking opportunities. The Healthy Savannah team also influenced the Savannah-Chatham County Board of Education’s first overhaul of school vending policies to provide healthier options and eliminate foods of low nutritional value from the vending machines. A school board member who served as an active member of the Healthy Savannah Steering Committee
hosted a contest in which local high school students created public service announcements about living a healthy lifestyle. Savannah’s minor league baseball team, the Savannah Sand Gnats, promoted the contest, along with sponsorships from WSAV television and Fitness by Reese. The PSAs were featured at the baseball games, in schools and on the district’s public access channel. A Web site allowed the community to vote on the best PSA.

Jacob G. Smith Elementary School received a grant from the Coastal Health District to increase students’ physical activity. The school wellness committee devised a plan for an exercise trail with fitness stations around the perimeter of the schoolyard. Although the grant application was successful, the initial plan was too ambitious given the amount of the grant. However, the school community rallied around the idea, which led the PTA and the district health and physical education department to step up and provide the additional funds for the completion of the fitness trail.

**Advising the City’s Civic Master Planning Effort**

With the leaders of a Civic Master Planning project serving on the Healthy Savannah Steering Committee, the Healthy Savannah team is well positioned to help municipal leaders incorporate wellness goals into a major city design process. The city embarked on its new Civic Master Plan in 2004. Savannah is unique as one of the nation’s first planned cities, with a design that dates back to the early 1700s when General James Oglethorpe built Savannah’s downtown area as a network of city blocks connected by public green spaces. This design resulted in a pattern of connected neighborhoods centered around public squares. Savannah’s civic master planning aims to further preserve the history of the city and promote...
better walkability by extending this model to the area adjacent to downtown.

Once the city fully implements the Civic Master Plan, local leaders anticipate additional private investment in this neighborhood, along with the creation of new jobs and an increased tax base. The changes will also create and preserve public space for physical activity. In addition, the implementation of the Civic Master Plan includes a partnership with the school district. Healthy Savannah has engaged a local urban design firm, Sottile and Sottile, to work with the City and the Savannah Chatham County Public School System to maximize accessibility, walkability and safety within a 5 minute walking distance and 5 minute bicycling distance around seven new school sites. In the past, the City and school system have largely planned facilities and public spaces separately which may or may not maximize opportunities to wed policy with design. The process of Civic Master Planning brings all key stakeholders together to vet multiple priorities and concerns to reach a shared development plan moving forward. On the school sites, the Civic Master Plan will focus on urban school design, public schools that are accessible to students during the school day and to the surrounding community at other times. Around the school sites, the plans will ensure the availability of sidewalks and appropriate lighting and will propose land uses in commercial zones that encourage access to a variety of healthy food options. The first Civic Master Plan for Beach High School is underway currently. Healthy Savannah supports this city-school partnership in implementing the Civic Master Plan by advocating for these and other wellness policies.

Mayor Johnson’s support for the Civic Master Plan is largely grounded in his desire to bring new resources into underserved neighborhoods. Acknowledging the city’s historical neglect of certain neighborhoods, the mayor’s redevelopment plans combine a focus on stimulating investment with commitment to a built environment that promotes community wellness. For example, the Fellwood neighborhood was the first in Savannah to have public housing units, which have since been demolished for reconstruction. The resulting reconstruction project is called Sustainable Fellwood,
a $50 million development encompassing 220 mixed use and mixed-income housing units, 100 senior housing units, 13 single-family homes and potential retail, medical and technical space. Sustainable Fellwood is currently in phase one of construction, employing local residents to work on the project.

The Civic Master Plan also incorporates the Westside Greenway Project, a plan to construct a greenway along a 14-mile canal that runs through underserved neighborhoods in West Savannah. The city owns the property on both sides of the canal and plans to locate a new public arena at the top of the canal. The director of the civic center, Marty Johnson, pushed for the simultaneous development of the greenway project and the new arena. She did not want construction of the arena to overshadow larger issues of importance to West Savannah residents. Plans for the arena and the Westside Greenway Project are now well underway, with a large portion of funding secured through an $80 million special purpose local option sales tax approved in 2006. Once completed, the greenway project will provide park access, an education center and natural habitat and the use of the surrounding waterway for recreational activities. “Healthy Savannah is a catalyst for this work,” said Johnson. “There is an excitement about the future of Savannah.”

**Leveraging and Enhancing Community Wellness Initiatives**

Apart from its involvement in school district and city wellness initiatives, Healthy Savannah is a boon to local community organizations focused on reducing childhood obesity. Inclusion in Healthy Savannah is mutually beneficial to members and the coalition. For instance, Healthy Savannah leverages the work of various organizations into successful ventures like the YMCA-Pioneering Healthy Communities partnership.

Parallel to the inception of Healthy Savannah, the YMCA of Coastal Georgia received a Pioneering Healthy Communities (PHC) grant from the YMCA of the USA to support innovative, community-based health promotion and disease prevention efforts. The YMCA-PHC process involved community stakeholders that were already participating in Healthy Savannah, including Joel Smoker, vice president of operations for the YMCA of Coastal Georgia. The partnership between the YMCA-PHC initiative and Healthy Savannah resulted in an alignment of efforts focused more on policy and environmental change rather than on individual programs. A renewed focus on policy and environmental change was an important step in helping the city recognize the link between environment and health, and raising awareness that obesity is not merely a personal choice.

In addition, Healthy Savannah’s partnership with the Savannah Urban Garden Association (SUGA) aims to increase community gardening, especially in the city’s lower-income neighborhoods. A SUGA representative serves on the Healthy Savannah Advisory Team, working internally to place
Community gardening and access to fresh, healthy foods on the Healthy Savannah agenda. SUGA also supports the Forsyth Farmers’ Market held each week at Forsyth Park, the largest city park in Savannah. The farmers’ market accepts electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards in addition to cash as a payment option. Savannah’s decision to accept EBT cards at the farmers’ market was an important step to ensuring SNAP/Food Stamp recipients have better access to fresh, local produce.

Healthy Savannah also hopes to grow the Leadership Team to include more organizations that serve diverse segments of Savannah’s population. For example, Healthy Savannah partners with the 100 Black Men of Savannah, a local chapter of a national organization that seeks to improve quality of life and enhance educational and economic opportunities for African Americans. To support the work of 100 Black Men of Savannah, Mayor Johnson participated in the group’s health and wellness events, leading a discussion on the documentary “Unnatural Causes,” which examines social inequalities in health.

Moving Forward

With a diverse and growing membership base and the support of key policymakers, the momentum for Healthy Savannah continues to build. SCCPSS has pledged to only employ certified health and physical education teachers and to actively seek funding for top-notch fitness trails on school properties. SCCPSS has also committed to serving meals at school that maximize nutrition and variety. To ensure compliance with this School Meals Initiative, the district uses nutritional analysis software to ensure that school menus offer healthy food choices.

The City of Savannah remains committed to dedicating both organizational and financial resources to wellness. The city has committed to providing annual funding support for Healthy Savannah and is seeking dedicated funds to hire a Healthy Savannah coordinator. Internally, the city provides employee wellness plans, sponsors employee and community health challenges and purchases bicycles as part of the city’s vehicle fleet. The city actively supports the establishment of additional community gardens and farmers’ markets.

Going forward, the Healthy Savannah team continues to engage a broader and more diverse group of stakeholders. Already, unlikely partners such as a local ice cream shop owner have signed on to support Healthy Savannah’s work. As the Healthy Savannah collaboration grows, the group plans to evaluate the effectiveness of city, school and county programs and policies in improving the health of Savannah residents.
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COMMUNITY WELLNESS: COMPREHENSIVE CITY-SCHOOL STRATEGIES TO REDUCE CHILDHOOD OBESITY