

School-Health in Mississippi

The demographics of Mississippi families have changed greatly in recent years. Mississippi has the highest percentage of children living in single parent families in the nation; nearly one in ten children lives with a grandparent, almost double the national average. Seventy-three percent of school-aged children here have working moms. We have the tools that we need before us. We have state agencies whose missions are to prevent disease and poor health outcomes; to promote health and to educate children and youth in school settings. What is new in this effort is a collaborative effort to tie health and education together. By forming a network, our state and the enhancement of health programs can influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that relate to health.

The state's commitment to school health is evident in law and the effort that is exhibited by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) to disseminate its information and offer technical assistance to all school districts. In 1994, the Mississippi legislature passed and the governor signed HB 1019 to strengthen certain components of the school health program and authorize the position of physical education and fitness coordinator. The bill addressed school health education, health services, physical activity and healthy school environment. Comprehensive school health is mandated in Mississippi schools for ninth grade students commencing with the 1994-95 school year. Since 1998, ninth-graders have been required to have from 1/2 to 1 Carnegie Unit in comprehensive school health to graduate.

MDE's Office of Academic Education has primary responsibility for comprehensive school health education. The curriculum it has developed includes community health, nutrition, environmental health, consumer health, disease prevention/control, family life, drug abuse prevention, mental health, human growth and development, safety and first aid, and personal health.

In some Mississippi school districts, MDE's school health education instructional efforts are augmented by school nurses and school based clinics programs. There are over 300 school nurses serving in 128 of the 152 school districts throughout the state. School nurse programs are funded in several ways, including, but not limited to Title I, II, IV and IDEA federal funds; family/community health clinics; and, tobacco settlement funds.

School health in Mississippi faces several challenges. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are slow to accept and allow dissemination of accurate health education information into the schools due to the diverse needs of the varied district committees. There is also a history of fragmentation in coordinated efforts by all state agencies involved in school health and such a network would enhance efforts. Progress has been made in this regard, but improvement is still needed.

However, there is also a high level of commitment to school health. MDE has devoted several years toward the CSHP through sponsorship of school health and wellness education conferences and workshops, HIV/AIDs prevention training sessions, and ongoing Universal Precautions Seminars/Staff Development and technical assistance to school districts and communities. MDE collaborates with many organizations and agencies initiating health related education to school districts and the communities throughout the state. Collaboration between MDE and the Mississippi

State Department of Health has created the formation of the Mississippi Alliance for School Health (MASH) initiative, a non-profit organization comprised of health related affiliates.

Several critical areas of school health are in need of review and improvement. Mississippi students need more quality mental health services. Other areas include school safety, the need for more formalized health education at the elementary and middle school levels, and K-12 physical education programs.

Aside from improving the health of students now, a mission exists to preserve their future health. School health programs stressing skills for healthy living can increase student knowledge about health issues and insures lifelong health. Healthier students will be more likely to attend school and to graduate. Mississippi is concerned with both health and education as a realization of our children's potential.