

# Generating rural options for weight-healthy kids and communities

## A \$4.8 million research grant funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agriculture and Food Research Initiative

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January 13, 2011*

- Many risk factors have been associated with children being overweight or obese, including rural residency. Rural community features pose unique challenges for rural residents that differ from those faced by individuals residing in more metropolitan regions. The remoteness of rural towns and distances between destinations can make it difficult for children to walk or bike to school and participate in physical activity and recreational sport programs. While it seems that rural places, rich with natural resources, would provide an abundance of healthy food choices, the reality is that many rural communities have been described as food deserts. Features of rural schools, particularly those in under-resourced communities, are such that students often face long bus commutes, minimal/no provision of health and physical education by certified teachers, and few resources to support health and/or enrich the academic environment.
- **The overarching goal** of the *Generating Rural Options for Weight-Healthy Kids & Communities (GROW HKC)* project is to prevent obesity in rural children. Toward this end, we will take a solution-focused, two-pronged approach.
- **Our first aim** is to understand the rural obesogenic environment. To do so we will partner with Extension Services in six Western States to engage rural people in community based participatory research efforts to
  - (1) assess features of rural communities that are seen as obesity preventing/promoting, community resources and readiness to implement and support childhood obesity prevention efforts,
  - (2) create a model of rural obesity prevention using the aggregated data from community assessments, and
  - (3) develop a new eXtension Community of Practice as a vehicle to help practitioners and the public learn from and apply our research findings.
- **Our second aim** is to use our model to plan, implement, and evaluate a multi-level intervention – *GROW Healthy Kids and Communities* targeting rural home, school, and community behavioral settings to promote healthful eating and increase

physical activity, and thus improve body mass index among rural children aged 5-8 years old.

- Applying a framework that allows us to understand how attributes of people interact with attributes of place across multiple levels of environmental influence, our intervention will utilize evidence-based strategies to affect positive changes in children's and their caregivers' behaviors as well as in the family home, school, and community environments related to healthful eating and physical activity.
- **To meet these aims, the proposed integrated project has the following four objectives:**
  - **Objective 1:** Create a resident-informed profile of the rural community environment that objectively documents attributes which support or hinder healthful eating and physical activity among youth and use the data from multiple profiles to inform the development of a grounded theoretical model of the rural obesogenic environment.
  - **Objective 2:** Create a new eXtension CoP to inform, educate, and support individuals, families, schools and communities in efforts related to obesity prevention in rural communities.
  - **Objective 3:** Evaluate the impact of a comprehensive multi-level intervention to promote healthy eating and increase physical activity on obesity (change in BMI) among rural kindergarten through 3rd grade children.
  - **Objective 4:** Evaluate the effects of the intervention on changes in home, school, and community food and physical activity environments.
- We look forward to being able to report in a few years the positive impact that this research opportunity has had on rural children and their families, schools, and communities.