

# One Community Taking a Stand to Fight Childhood Obesity

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In 2001, the Williamstown Head Start teachers identified the rise of overweight and obese preschoolers in Grant County and the need for a countywide effort to reduce the epidemic. As mayor of the City of Williamstown, Rick Skinner grew increasingly aware of how far his community was falling short in terms of being healthy. He was so concerned that he joined a group already at work on health and wellness issues, eventually becoming chairman of its coalition in 2013. This coalition is known as Fitness For Life Around Grant County (FFLAG), and its story of success is worthy of sharing.



What was once a worn path is now a freshly paved, 650-foot-long and 5-foot-wide walking path. The Humes Ridge to Sunrise sidewalk project is completed.

Recent studies have shown that humans need more physical activity than an hour at the gym to combat sitting at a desk all day. Grant County is taking an innovative approach by installing active workstations where students have the option to raise their desk up to stand and work and or to pedal at their desk.

Founded in 2002, FFLAG is a nonprofit organization that has worked to encourage public health in Northern Kentucky. The mission of FFLAG is to educate and bring awareness to Grant County residents about physical fitness and healthy lifestyles through supporting local system, environment and policy changes that prevent children from developing chronic diseases later in life. Grant County is leading by example in addressing problems that are found throughout the state.

With encouragement and assistance from the Northern Kentucky Health Department, FFLAG members set about establishing the facts related to Grant County obesity rates. This is what they learned:

- » Nearly one in four (22 percent) Grant County residents have limited access to healthy foods (County Health Rankings, 2012).



- » Only 39.8 percent of students were physically active for a total of at least 60 minutes per day on five or more of the past seven days (YRBS data comparison – Grant County Schools data versus Kentucky state data, 2009).
- » Grant County children begin their childhood at normal weight, but by 10th grade, more than 35 percent are clinically obese.
- » Over a quarter (27.9 percent) of Grant County children live in poverty, and 64 percent are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program (2010 Kentucky KIDS COUNT County data).
- » Many areas in the county are unsafe for children to walk or bike, and play areas are minimal.
- » Grant County's per capita income is \$19,829, which is lower than that of the state (\$23,462) and the nation (\$28,155) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey).

With these dramatic figures, FFLAG decided to focus on combating childhood obesity, focusing on children ages 5 to 18, by increasing physical activity through the installation of play spaces, walking paths, active work stations in schools and complete streets\*, and by improving access to fresh

produce.

FFLAG received a grant called Investing in Kentucky's Future from the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky in July 2013. Board members, community volunteers and community consulting service advisers from the Kentucky League of Cities were at the drawing board for a year to create a three-year strategic plan to improve the health and wellness of Grant County's youth. This plan became the Starting with Children Initiative.

In researching potential solutions to the problem and developing a list of recommendations with cost estimates to bring to the community, FFLAG members talked with local parents, teachers and community leaders about what might be done about the health problems of Grant County children. Ideas poured in from children and adults on how to stem health problems and implement positive change in youth ages 5 to 18.

Once ideas were in place, FFLAG members reached out to community partners for matching funds, a requirement of the grant. Determined to see positive change, local businesses, industries, churches, civic organizations and individual volunteers began contributing.

The **Starting with Children** initiative will span three years. The goal of the initiative is to make major changes in the physical environment and policies in the schools and the community. FFLAG is using a two-pronged approach to combat obesity among children — nutrition and physical activity.

By the end of the three-year grant period, FFLAG will partner with the two local school districts, local governments and community partners to:

- » Improve and/or create play spaces on school grounds and in public parks
- » Increase access to water play within Williamstown Lake
- » Add active workstations to classrooms
- » Build walking paths on school campuses
- » Build public sidewalks linking neighborhoods to schools
- » Incorporate nutritional programs and physical fitness curricula into the classroom
- » Recommend policy changes related to food and physical activity
- » Develop a community garden at one of the schools