

RISE Program Helps Underserved Youth with Self-Esteem, Nutrition

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A grant-funded program administered through The University of Southern Mississippi's Department of Nutrition and Food Systems is helping underserved fifth-grade students in a tri-county area of the state improve their self-esteem and develop better eating habits.

The Raising Inspiration Sons of Excellence (RISE) pilot project is funded by a \$231,986 grant from Families First for Mississippi. With oversight by USM faculty, the project also includes participation from Men in Black and Blue Community Health Advisors (CHAs), a group of trained lay volunteers, and members of the Mississippi Valley State University men's basketball team.

Dr. Jennifer Lemacks, assistant professor in the Department of Nutrition and Food Systems at USM, serves as principal investigator for the project. She points out that the RISE educational program teaches youth the importance of eating properly, while enabling them to think smartly, and ultimately encouraging them to make choices that will have a positive impact on their health.

"The State of Mississippi has repeatedly been at the top of the nation for rates of obesity, and the RISE program hopes to reduce obesity and obesity-related health issues," said Lemacks. "In addition, this program has mentor and etiquette components to enhance students' self-efficacy and social skills in various environments and circumstances of life."

The program calls for CHAs to serve as mentors, role models and nutrition coaches for the Mississippi Valley State basketball players – who in turn – take on the same roles for the young students. The CHAs recruited fifth-graders from Leflore, Carroll, and Montgomery counties in northwest Mississippi as program participants.

Children engage in one-hour RISE program sessions twice a month. Designed to be fun and interactive, the sessions highlight healthy habits and ways of thinking. Parents receive newsletters that provide updates on the program.

"The program is based on the social cognitive theory, which advocates that increasing an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy and social support to attain healthy diet behaviors will influence behavior change intention and ultimately, result in behavior change," said Lemacks. "The research team will measure self-esteem, social support, self-efficacy, eating behaviors, and eating intentions."

Lemacks notes that the program's development team began outlining the blueprint in June with implementation beginning in September. She estimates that by December, at least half of the program will have been delivered.

To learn more about the program and the Department of Nutrition and Food Systems and USM, call 601.266.5377 or visit: <https://www.usm.edu/nutrition>

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