Preventing Childhood Obesity One Community at a Time
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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this project was to institute a school-based, age-appropriate curriculum to reduce and to prevent childhood obesity in elementary schools. The goal was to increase awareness and to empower students to make behavioral changes that would reduce rates of childhood obesity. The curriculum provided an age appropriate presentation, instruction on eating a healthy diet, and encouraged students to play actively in a safe environment, while limiting television time. The sessions allowed children and families to increase awareness of the significance of eating and exercising as a means to eliminate risks of childhood obesity and to live a life that is free from chronic diseases and/or illness.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
The aim of this project was to engage families with children, ages 5-12, in sessions where healthy living information and activities can be demonstrated. In the 38126 zip code, there are no affordable healthy options (grocery stores, fresh fruit markets, walking trails) for residents. Therefore, vulnerable residents, who have no or limited access to transportation, are forced to eat whatever is available. Available food choices include fast food restaurants and corner stores that are not the healthiest of options. Fast food restaurants and corner stores offer affordable meals that are fried, starchy, and high sodium packed foods.

Schools and school districts are increasingly implementing innovative programs, focusing on improving nutrition and increasing physical activities among students. Families with children at Cummings Elementary School, contiguous to LeMoyne-Owen College, were invited to participate in this study. The community environment influences the number of opportunities for physical activity and access to affordable, healthy foods. For example, a lack of sidewalks, safe bike paths, and parks in neighborhoods can discourage children from walking or biking to school, as well as from participating in other kinds of physical activity. Additionally, lack of access to affordable, healthy food choices in neighborhood food markets can be a barrier to eating healthy foods.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES
A five question survey was given to 26 students, prior to the beginning of the educational intervention (pre-test) and at the end (post-test). The health session was held at The Boys and Girls Club. Each participant received age appropriate presentation and instruction that provided instructions about nutritional and physical lifestyle. Session included references to terms such as Body Mass Index, Obese, Overweight, and Underweight etc. Enrolled participants were invited to a presentation by University of Tennesse/Shelby County Extension Services for follow-up and food demonstration.

OUTCOMES
Participants level of knowledge increased about of the daily nutritional intake and they learned simple yet beneficial exercise activities. The session allowed children and families to increase awareness of the significance of eating and exercising to eliminate the risk of childhood obesity and a lifetime of chronic diseases and/or illness.

DISCUSSION
Although the intervention was geared toward school aged students, parents/caregivers were able to hear and to understand the need and the urgency to prevent childhood obesity. Parents/caregivers learned of the need to provide healthy meals and to encourage children to become more physically active. Additionally, parents/caregivers had an increased level of knowledge about the need for policy changes to enhance community to make it conducive for physical activity and to include food markets with fresh fruits and vegetables, actions that would further reduce the rate of obesity in the community. Finally, participating in this program, participants understood calorie intake and the significance of reducing obesity, which limit their risk of the following conditions coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancers, hypertension and stroke.

- 83% of students reported participating in bike riding, jumping rope or some outdoor activity
- 85% reported eating fast food more than three times a week
- 92% reported drinking more juice/sugary drinks than water

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FURTHER INFORMATION
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