

# Alabama's Southeast Region Steps Program

Promoting healthy behaviors among students and staff members



## What is the public health problem?

Chronic disease rates in Pike and Barbour Counties are among the highest in Alabama.

- Five selected schools in these counties revealed that there was no wellness policy in place for students and staff members.
- In Alabama as a whole, 2005\* Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System data show that nearly 33% of the state's high school students are overweight or at risk for overweight, 24% have doctor-diagnosed asthma, about 24% are current smokers, and about 85% eat fewer than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

## How Steps is responding

The Steps Program is actively working with schools to help prevent or control chronic diseases among young people. In partnership with district PE teachers, nutritional program personnel, and students, the Steps Program helped implement the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *School Health Index* (SHI)<sup>†</sup> at the five schools without wellness policies. Concerted efforts are now being made to improve students' and staff members' diets and physical activity levels and provide tobacco-use prevention and asthma education activities.

## What is the impact?

- A local vending company and individual schools began working together to begin offering juices, smaller food portions, and healthier snacks.

- Steps Program funding allowed the PE department at one high school to offer an adaptive PE class for disabled children for the first time. At another school, Steps funding was used to implement a special curriculum that focuses on developing lifelong, enjoyable sports skills among students of all ability levels.
- All five selected schools have implemented policies that ban staff members from smoking on campus.
- Students who participated in the American Lung Association's Open Airways for Schools curriculum gained important knowledge—a 13% increase in the percentage of students who could identify when they were having an asthma attack, a 24% increase in knowing what to do when they were coughing or sneezing, and an almost 40% increase in being able to tell someone when they needed to go to the hospital.

## Why this program is working

The SHI, developed by CDC, is a self-assessment tool that includes research-based guidelines for school health programs. Evidence indicates that it is an effective tool in establishing the policies and practices needed to improve health-related behaviors of youth.

\* Most recent data available

<sup>†</sup> <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/shi/default.aspx>