

CITY OF PETAL

PROGRAM

Excel by 5

FUNDING MECHANISM

Property Taxes and
County/School District Funding

OPPORTUNITY

Petal, Mississippi has 370 children under the age of five, 19 percent of whom live in poverty. The school district's enrollment is 3,600 students. The district has a 53 percent free and reduced lunch rate. However at 61 percent, the rate is higher for children in kindergarten through second grade.

SUMMARY

In 2006, Petal, a rural community of 10,600 located outside of Hattiesburg, became the first community in Mississippi to achieve Excel by 5 certification (a community-based designation that sets a framework to improve child well-being by age five). Funding sources include a portion of local property tax revenues and funding from the Petal School District, the County Board of Supervisors, a local education foundation and private grants.

CHALLENGES

Rural Community, Small Budget // It is difficult to allocate resources to address the needs of children from low-income families in a rural community when the overall size of the budget is small. By working to achieve the Excel by 5 designation, a plan was developed, partnerships were formed and efforts to meet the needs of young families were better coordinated.

GETTING TO ACTION

Petal united behind an effort to achieve Excel by 5 certification and leveraged the certification to secure new funding. The Petal School District served as the lead agency within a broad coalition of community leaders, which included the Mayor, the Board of Aldermen, the Superintendent of Schools, the Chamber of Commerce, religious leaders, child care and Head Start directors and others.

In addition to funding, the city reorganized its infrastructure to better serve children and families. The School District relocated its Center for Families and Children to a larger facility, which allowed it to create a one-stop gateway to community programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, Child Care Resource and Referral and an Early Intervention Specialist.

2005	Petal convened a coalition to pursue Excel By 5 certification.
2006	Petal became Mississippi's first certified Excel By 5 early childhood community.
2007	The Board of Aldermen allocated a portion of city revenues to assist in funding an early care and education coordinator.
2014-2015	In an overall budget squeeze, funding was reduced in 2014 by \$25,000, but was restored in 2015. In addition in 2015, the Forrest County Board of Supervisors allocated \$8,000 to install heating, air conditioning and a generator for the Backyard Bus (a classroom on wheels that takes learning to neighborhoods).

RESULT

The Excel by 5 designation process enabled the school district to work with the business and the health and early childhood communities to build a broad-based effort with a common vision for young children. Petal's Center for Families and Children now houses services for families in one location: Head Start, Early Head Start, Child Care Resource & Referral, Parents as Teachers and First Steps (early intervention). The Excel by 5 designation also was a springboard to initiate other funding ideas to increase resources for young children. Playshops are offered weekly where parents bring young children to play in small groups observed by speech pathologists, occupational therapists and other early childhood specialists. The Center has launched the "Backyard Bus," designed and painted by a local artist, to visit neighborhoods twice a week, offering hands-on activities for young children to foster social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ▶ *Support from the Mayor and Board of Aldermen*
- ▶ *Community-building: Connecting services for young families*
- ▶ *Obtaining Excel by 5 certification*
- ▶ *Uniting and coordinating school district and social service interventions/programs*
- ▶ *Broad coalition support*