

## Count DeSoto among Excel By 5 sites

### Early childhood program adds 8 Northwest Mississippi counties

By Henry Bailey

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The Excel By 5 program, designed to boost crucial early learning for Mississippi children, is moving into an eight-county Northwest Mississippi area including DeSoto.

The program was made possible through a \$150,000 commitment from the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi.

"Research shows that 90 percent of a child's brain development occurs before age 6," said Bob Clay, Excel By 5 state sites coordinator. "You've got to reach out and grab them intellectually at a young age, to help set a successful pattern for all future learning."

A collaborative model, Excel By 5 sets forth standards involving parent training, community involvement, child care and health -- all designed to support young children from birth to age 5 and their families.

Crystal Blackmon of Southaven has been named as the program coordinator for Coahoma, DeSoto, Marshall, Panola, Quitman, Tallahatchie, Tate and Tunica counties. Over the next three years, under the Excel-Community Foundation partnership, she'll be growing from her own base in Hernando the first-of-its-kind program that links families and communities to achieve "child-friendly" certification for cities and counties.

"Blackmon joined our team in mid-June, and now she's set up in Hernando where she's already established contacts in that area and in Clarksdale," Clay said. "Some informational meetings have been held to get started and more are planned."

The program "will have far-reaching impacts," said Tom Pittman, foundation president. "Excel By 5 engages families and communities by promoting best practices in early learning, child development and education."

Excel By 5 already is working in 26 other communities in the state. Petal, West Point, Pascagoula, mid-Jackson, Moss Point, Monroe County, Cleveland and Biloxi have achieved certification.

Excel By 5 president Steve Renfroe welcomed the Northwest Mississippi foundation as the newest player: "It has been very encouraging to see the enthusiasm communities have for their youngest citizens. We certainly look forward to working with the foundation."

Excel By 5 was launched in 2004 with the support of Mississippi first lady Marsha Barbour, the State Early Childhood Institute and other groups.

Parents, educators, child care professionals, physicians, churches and social service organizations form coalitions and pursue goals based on specific standards. The process, designed to help make the most of existing resources, usually takes two years; Excel By 5 certification is awarded for three years.

"It really does take a community to raise a child," Clay said.

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