



Text for August 2010 Update

## **ED Note**

### School Work

For school children across Mississippi, August marked the beginning of a new year of school work. For us here at Mississippi First, the school work has never stopped. In fact, the summer of 2010 has been the busiest summer for us yet. Since May, we have helped write three federal grant proposals, hosted an intern, made trips to colleges, launched a new initiative, began important analysis for the Mississippi Department of Education, moved forward with our new website's development, and made plans to host a thesis student, among other things.

In this Update, you will find news about our work from August and major happenings in Mississippi education. These include developments in our Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens (CHART) Initiative, information about the national results of Round II of Race to the Top, plans for new Mississippi First analyses for the Mississippi Department of Education, and the results of our Member Interest survey.

Those of you who completed the Member Interest survey will begin to receive emails specifically tailored to your interests. If you didn't have time to fill out the survey in August and would like to do it now, please email Sanford Johnson at [Sanford@mississippifirst.org](mailto:Sanford@mississippifirst.org) for the link.

Have a great September.

Rachel Hicks

Executive Director

*Rachel can be reached via email at [rachel@mississippifirst.org](mailto:rachel@mississippifirst.org).*

## **POLICY ADVOCACY**

### **Race to the Top**

#### Mississippi: At Least We Beat Alabama

The U.S. Department of Education announced the ten winners of Race to the Top Round II on August 24. Joining Tennessee and Delaware in the winners' circle were the District of Columbia (450), Florida (453), Georgia (447), Hawaii (463), Maryland (450), Massachusetts (471), New York (465), North Carolina (442), Ohio (441), and Rhode Island (452). Along with the winners, the Department of Education also posted all of the scores from Round II entrants. Out of 36 applicants in Round II, Mississippi placed 34th and had a final score of 263 out of a total of 500 possible points. We

placed higher than Montana (238) and Alabama (212). See below for how Mississippi's scored in each area.

<b>Race to the Top Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Available Points</b>	<b>Mississippi Score</b>	<b>% of Available Points</b>
<b>A. State Success Factors</b>	125	80.4	64.3%
1. Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participating in it	65	48	73.8%
2. Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans.	30	19.6	65.3%
3. Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	12.8	42.6%
<b>B. Standards and Assessments</b>	70	56.6	80.8%
1. Developing and adopting common standards	40	40	100%
2. Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	10	100%
3. Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	6.6	33%
<b>C. Data Systems to Support Instruction</b>	47	26.4	56.1%
1. Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	14	58.3%
2. Accessing and using State data	5	2.2	44%
3. Using data to improve instruction	18	10.2	56.6%
<b>D. Great Teachers and Leaders</b>	138	55.4	40.1%
1. Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	10.2	48.6%
2. Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	29.4	50.7%
3. Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	4.4	17.6%
4. Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	5	35.7%
5. Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	6.4	32%

<b>E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools</b>	50	20.2	40.4%
1. Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	10	100%
2. Turning around the the lowest-achieving schools	40	10.2	25.5%
<b>F. General</b>	55	24.4	44.4%
1. Making education funding a priority	10	7.8	78%
2. Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	14.6	36.5%
3. Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2	40%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>263.4</b>	<b>52.6%</b>

Note: Our Race to the Top (R2TT) scores include two additional items. The first was a bonus item, in which states would receive 15 extra points for creating an education reform plan that emphasized science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). To earn the bonus, a majority of the committee had to agree that STEM was emphasized in our reform plan. The second item was an absolute priority and required states to demonstrate a comprehensive approach to education reform. A majority of committee members had to determine a state's reform plan was comprehensive for the state to be *eligible* for R2TT funds. As you can see below, even had Mississippi scored a lot higher, we would have been ineligible for funds because only one reviewer thought we met the absolute priority.

Priority	Yes	No
<b>Competitive Preference Priority - Emphasis on STEM</b> A state could earn 15 additional points if a majority of RTTT reviewers determined (voted "YES") that the application demonstrated an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math.	0	5
<b>Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform</b> This priority was eligibility requirement for Race to the Top funds. In other words, Mississippi would only be eligible for funds if a majority of reviewers determined that the application demonstrated a comprehensive approach to education reform.	1	4

### Try, Try Again: Race to the Top Round III?

[As we reported last month](#), Congress is working to appropriate new money for a possible Round III of Race to the Top to take place in 2011. Although the pot of funds is likely to be significantly less than the Obama administration has requested--and tremendously less than was appropriated for Rounds I & II--a third round could mean that Mississippi may have one more chance to compete for funds.

Now that we know the winners from Round II, we know that competition in any Round III is likely to be stiff: among education pundits, the Round II story has been less about who won and more about who didn't win--namely, Louisiana and Colorado. Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina were also finalists twice but not winners. Then there's New Jersey, which came in 11th, but would have edged out Ohio had it not been for a [data error](#) in the state's application.

Mississippi First has been asked by the Mississippi Department of Education to review Mississippi's Round II proposal, analyze its strengths and weaknesses, and make recommendations for how the application could be re-written for a possible Round III. We will be undertaking this work in September, so read next month's Update for our in-depth analysis.

### Race to the Top Winners by the Numbers

The following is a list of facts about winners in Rounds I and II of Race to the Top (RTTT):

- 12 Number of winning states
- 7 Number of winning states that received Race to the Top technical assistance grants from the Gates Foundation technical assistance [Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee]
- 4 Number of winning Southern states [Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina]
- 1 Number of winning Round II first-time applicants [Maryland]
- 1 Number of winning states selected as a finalist for the first time in Round II [Hawaii]
- 0 Number of winning states without a charter law

### **Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens Initiative**

#### MSF Partners with the Coordinated School Health Program at the Department of Health

Mississippi First is excited to announce a new partnership with the Coordinated School Health Program, a joint effort by the Mississippi Department of Health and the Mississippi Department of Education, to reduce rates of teen birth and sexually transmitted infections. This month, MSF helped the Coordinated School Health Program write its application for funding from the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), a federal grant program for states that includes money for comprehensive sex education. If this grant is awarded to Mississippi, local school districts will be able to apply for funds to implement research-based comprehensive sex education programs as well as other "adulthood preparation topics" like career development, goal-setting, and healthy relationships.

In order to participate, school districts must adopt a personal responsibility education policy, such as the model policy crafted by MSF this summer. Mississippi First has



## **School Turnaround**

### School Improvement Grant Award Received But Mississippi List Revised

In July, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) announced the 8 winners of the School Improvement Grant competition at the State Board of Education Meeting. [As we reported last month](#), these 8 winning school proposals were each slated to receive three-year grants for their school improvement efforts. This month, the U.S. Department of Education [finally disbursed Mississippi's \\$47M](#) in grant money. However, MDE also announced an error in determining the final list that meant that Amanda Elzy High School would be replaced by Port Gibson High School on the list of grantees. Because the award to Port Gibson is slightly higher than the award was to Amanda Elzy, each school's grant has been altered as well. MDE did not provide a list of the final numbers, although one may be forthcoming.

### About the Winners

As the list now stands (see below), every winner is either a failing school (4) and/or a school in a failing district (4), with the exception of Wingfield High School, which is labeled at-risk-of-failing. There are 7 school districts represented, 3 of these are municipal districts and 4 are county districts. 3 districts under conservatorship won grants. Districts range in size from 1500 students (Hazlehurst) to 30,000 students (Jackson). There are approximately 5,300 students total in the SIG schools; 97.7% are black and 86.4% are living in poverty. MSF is completing a full analysis of the SIG application process and of the winners, which should be released in late September or early October.

Here is the revised list:

Hazlehurst High School (Hazlehurst School District)  
Hazlehurst Middle School (Hazlehurst School District)  
Wingfield High School (Jackson Public Schools)  
North Panola High School (N. Panola School District)  
Gentry High School (Indianola School District)  
W.A. Higgins Middle School (Clarksdale School District)  
Leflore County High School (Leflore Co. School District)  
Port Gibson High School (Claiborne County School District)

## **Pre-Kindergarten**

### Mississippi First Welcomes Ole Miss Thesis Student

This fall, we are pleased to welcome Rachel Willis, a double major Public Policy Leadership and Political Science, who is completing her honors thesis this fall. A senior from Memphis, TN, Rachel is writing her thesis about whether pre-K collaborations between public schools and non-public school entities like churches, private childcare,

and Head Start can be an effective tool for expanding access to early education in Mississippi. She writes, "I'm very excited to be collaborating with Mississippi First on this project. It's giving me the opportunity to get my thesis out there in a useful way, and it's exciting to be working with people who think early childhood education is important for our state." After she graduates this spring, Rachel hopes to teach in Mississippi and eventually become a superintendent. Mississippi First is very happy to be part of her journey. Welcome, Rachel!

## **DEMOCRACY REVITALIZATION**

### MSF Campus Outreach Update

Rachel and Sanford have been spending a considerable amount of time at Ole Miss over the past month. First, Rachel spoke to members of the Lott Leadership Institute on the 22nd. Three days later, Rachel and Sanford were back on campus to speak to students in Dr. Melissa Bass's *Intro to Public Policy Leadership* and *Social Policy* classes. During the discussion, students learned about MSF's policy research and advocacy work, and asked great questions about several policy issues. Many students expressed interest in taking part in our policy work, and there's a very good chance that Ole Miss may be the home of the first MSF College Chapter. The MSF staff would like to thank Dr. Bass for once again welcoming us to her classes.

Along with Ole Miss, we are continuing our efforts to reach out to students and professors at other colleges and universities. We will keep you informed about where we will end up next. If you have any questions, comments, or ideas regarding our campus outreach efforts, please contact Deputy Director Sanford Johnson at [sanford@mississippifirst.org](mailto:sanford@mississippifirst.org).

## **IN THE NEWS**

### **Common Core**

#### Common Core Adoption Finalized

At the August meeting of the State Board of Education, Board members finalized the adoption process for the Common Core Standards in literacy and mathematics. In June, the Board passed a temporary rule allowing the standards to be adopted. This month's action follows the thirty-day wait period for the Administrative Procedures Act Process and finalizes the adoption.

### **K-12 Accountability**

#### State Test Scores Released

On August 20, the Mississippi Department of Education released state test scores from 2009-2010. Although the public can now view scale scores and rates of proficiency on the MCT2 math and reading tests, the 5th and 8th grade science test, and the subject

area tests in high school on [MDE's website](#); state accountability labels will not be released until September 7. In next month's Update, we will report the results and our analysis.

### Face-Palm Moment of the Month by Sanford Johnson: Nettleton Student Council Elections

Picture: Deputy Director Sanford Johnson's face says it all.



The good news is that Mississippi recently made national headlines. The bad news is that it's once again for all the wrong reasons. As many of you have heard by now, the Nettleton School District made national news for its [racial criteria](#) for student government offices at the junior high school. Among other offices, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade class president were limited to white students. Meanwhile, offices such as 8th grade class vice president and 6th grade class reporter were off limits to students that were not black. Although the policy has been in place for decades, it only recently received national attention when a bi-racial student was unable to run for a position because she did not meet skin color qualifications. Since the news story broke, the school board voted to remove the policy.

At best, this is one of the most absurd plans to create diversity that I have ever seen. At worst, this is one of the most absurd plans that I have ever seen. The fact that the policy was in place for so long is incredibly disheartening. And honestly, many of us know that Nettleton is by no means the only place in the Magnolia State where such archaic policies are still in place.

What I find most troubling about Nettleton's student government policy is that it resembles something that was hastily put in place to avoid having a constructive dialogue about racial diversity. Having been both a student and a teacher in Mississippi public schools, I have seen how easily students of different races can work, play, and learn together when given the chance to do so. What often happens, unfortunately, is that adults get in the way, passing on their old-school ideas to future generations. Rather than throwing together quick fixes, school leaders and staff must teach students about the importance of a student body that celebrates diversity and teamwork. Most importantly, these adults must also *model* these values through the way they interact with their colleagues. This is one of those lessons that students must see and hear. I

hope the school boards in Nettleton and other parts of the state move in this direction as they work to toss out relics of the past.

## TAKE ACTION!

### MSF Member Interest Survey Results

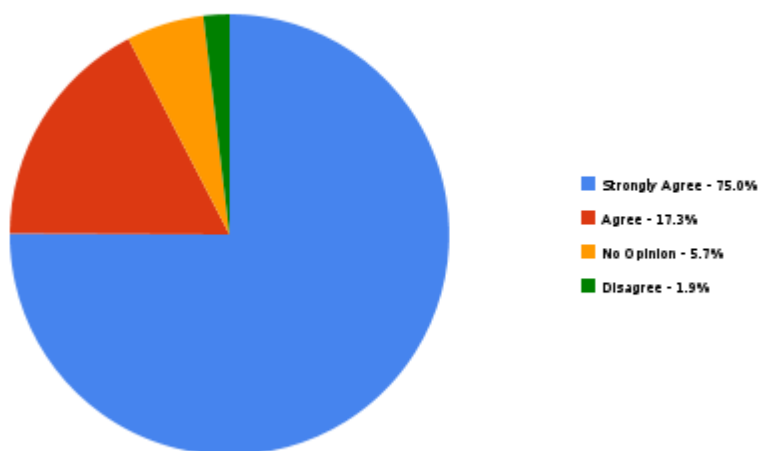
The members of Mississippi First have spoken! The MSF staff would like to thank everyone that completed the Member Interest Survey this past month. The responses we've received from our members will be used to guide our policy work over the coming year. We will also use the responses to provide you with additional information and advocacy opportunities based on your policy interests. Over the next week, members that have requested additional information for advocacy opportunities for one or more policy goals will receive an e-mail notification from the MSF staff. We would like to remind our members that the survey was confidential but not anonymous, meaning that your name was linked to your responses but only MSF staff has access to them.

The following are the results of member support for our 2011 policy goals.

### Pre-Kindergarten

**MSF Position** - A state-funded pre-kindergarten program is *essential* to closing achievement gaps and to improving the likelihood of K-12 success for Mississippi children. Although securing funding for a statewide program may not be an immediate possibility, steps must be taken right now to expand access to pre-K, especially for children that need it the most. Some Mississippi communities have been able to expand access to pre-K through local, state, and/or federal partnerships. Over the next year, we will continue to study these collaborative programs to determine how they can be replicated statewide.

### Response to MSF's Position on Pre-K

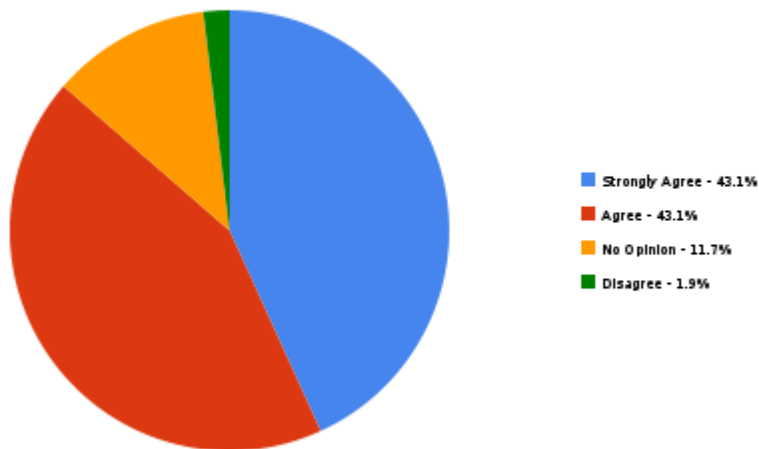


### Charter Schools

**MSF Position** - Public charter schools should be a part of our state's public education reform strategy.

High-quality charter schools would serve as an option for students in low-performing schools, as well as a source of innovation for the entire public system. Successful charter schools are often the product of strong state policies that effectively address the authorization, evaluation, and accountability of schools. Unfortunately, our new charter school law falls well short of being an effective reform tool. Therefore, we will spend the next year boosting public knowledge of charter schools, while also advocating for amendments that will improve the quality of our new law.

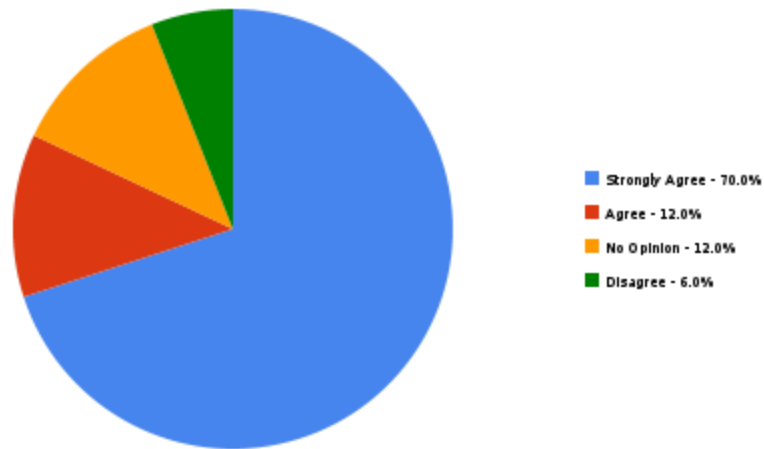
### Response to MSF's Position on Charter Schools



### Comprehensive Sex Education

**MSF Position** - Through our new Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens (CHART) Initiative, MSF will work with public school districts to reduce teen pregnancy and STD rates. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs have been proven to be ineffective in reversing these troubling statistics. Thus, we have created a model sex education policy for districts that includes options for comprehensive programs. Each program we recommend has been scientifically proven to reduce teen pregnancy and STD rates. This fall, we will begin our advocacy efforts to encourage school districts to adopt and implement the

## Response to MSF's Position on Sex Ed

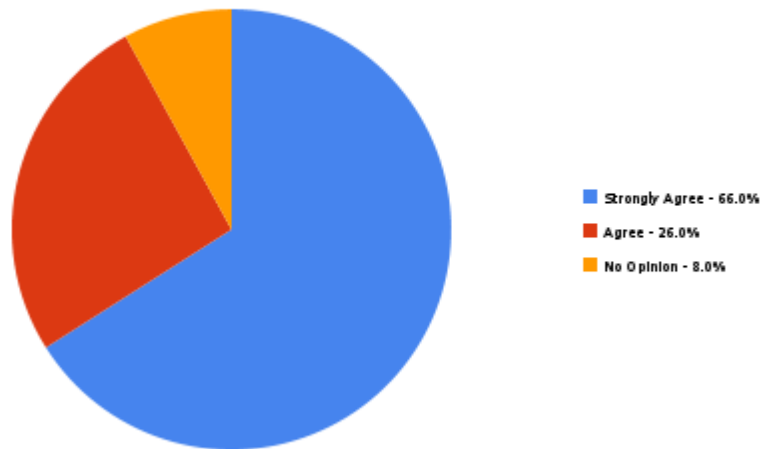


model policy.

### School Turnaround Initiative - High-Poverty/High-Performing Schools

**MSF Position** - Recognizing that there are pockets of success in public schools throughout the state, we will publish a report that will profile high-performing public schools in high-poverty communities. By identifying the effective practices that make these schools successful, we will make policy recommendations that will enable these practices to be replicated in other

## Response to MSF's Position on School Turnaround Initiative



public schools.

### IDEAS FOR NEW POLICY GOALS

Along with responding to our current policy positions, members also shared many great ideas for new policy goals. These ideas included several issues related to education, along with issues related to health care, economic development, and civic engagement. Although our 2011 policy goals have already been set, these ideas will be considered

for the 2012 fiscal year. In the meantime, the MSF staff will include information in future monthly updates about the most popular policy ideas.

The following are the five most popular policy issues that MSF members would like us to include as future policy goals (ranked in order of popularity):

1. Obesity
2. School Leadership Reform
3. Strategies to Improve Teacher Quality
4. Counseling and Support Services for Students (*tie*)
5. School and District Consolidation (*tie*)

#### FOLLOW MSF

On [mississippifirst.org](http://mississippifirst.org): Sign up, donate, read Rachel's [blog](#)

On Twitter: [@Mississippi1st](#)

On Facebook: [www.facebook.com/mississippifirst](http://www.facebook.com/mississippifirst)

On LEE: Join the Mississippi First group

On the PIE Network: Mississippi First now a member of the [Policy Innovators in Education \(PIE\) Network](#). The PIE Network is a group of state-level education advocacy organizations that are committed to bringing “a credible, evidence-based, non-partisan voice for school improvement to their state capitals.” The MSF page has now been added to the [member profile page](#), which can be found [here](#).

#### TWO DONATION OPTIONS: ISSUE OR GENERAL OPERATING SUPPORT

Are you interested in a specific issue MSF is working on? If so, we'd love you to show your support by donating to that issue. If you're sending us a check in the mail, write us a note about the work that you'd like to support. If you're donating online, an email to [contact@mississippifirst.org](mailto:contact@mississippifirst.org) will let us know how to apply your donation.

Donations to general operating budget are always welcome and allow us to continue the work we are already doing as well as investigate new work. Remember, you can donate online or by mailing us a check. Please read about how to donate [here](#).

#### **About Mississippi First**

Mississippi First is a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose mission is *to advocate the best public policy solutions and to revitalize Mississippi's democracy*. MSF's policy areas of interest are economic development, education, health/well-being, civil rights, and poverty alleviation. To learn more, visit [MississippiFirst.org](http://MississippiFirst.org).