



## *MISSISSIPPIANS MOVING FORWARD*

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**December 2009 Update**

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### **In this Update**

A Note from the Executive Director

- Make More Friends in 2010

Policy Advocacy @MSF

- Emerson Family School Tour
- Race to the Top
  - Mississippi's Race to the Top off to a Shaky Start
  - Race to the Top in Neighboring States
  - We Want to Hear from You

Democracy Revitalization @MSF

- MSF Campus Outreach

Research Round-up

- New Research on Principal Effectiveness

Mississippi in the News

- FY2011 Budget Recommendations
- Commission on Mississippi Education Structure

January Preview

- 2010 Legislative Session
- Recent Grant Success
- Support Mississippi First—Online Donations Now Accepted

### **A Note from the Executive Director**

#### MAKE MORE FRIENDS IN 2010

Mississippi has seen a lot changes in education this year: from the passage of the Children First Act to the adoption of a new accountability system to the hiring of a new State Superintendent, education is a whole new ball game from 2008. I'm excited to watch where some of these changes lead us in 2010.

It's no secret, however, that Mississippi has a long way to go to climb out of its cellar-dwelling place in education among the states. When we founded Mississippi First to help Mississippi move forward, we knew that it would take a lot of work and a lot of help to make change. I have a friend who likes to theme his New Year's Resolutions around a rhyme with the year. For example, after a hectic year in college, his 2004 resolutions all fell under the banner of "Drama No More 2004." I've decided to nick his idea and theme this year at MSF "Make More Friends

in 2010.” As we move into the New Year, we hope that you will continue following our monthly Updates as well as our Facebook and Twitter posts. We will also be aggressively seeking partners among education advocates, government officials, and fellow non-profits for our work, some of which can be found in these pages. Furthermore, if you’re a college student interested in becoming more involved, we are going to be looking for people to create campus chapters to engage college students in policy advocacy. Finally, we’ll be seeking high-quality bloggers over the next few months to contribute to the new website that we’re building. The new website will also allow people to become “members” of Mississippi First and have a say in our policy priorities. If any of this sounds interesting to you, please write us at [contact@mississippifirst.org](mailto:contact@mississippifirst.org) and let us know your thoughts.

Have a safe and happy New Year. We’ll see you in January!

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

## **Policy Advocacy @MSF**

### EMERSON FAMILY SCHOOL TOUR

On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, MSF hosted a tour of Starkville’s Emerson Family School, which MSF believes can be a successful model for a state-funded pre-Kindergarten program. As we mentioned in our November update, the Emerson Family School operates through a partnership with the Starkville School District, and is funded through tuition, childcare vouchers, and grants. The MSF Staff would like to thank [Rep. Jim Beckett](#) for driving down from Bruce to tour the school. He spoke of his support for early childhood education and spent a great deal of time meeting the EFS teachers. We would also like to thank Dr. Joan Butler, director of the Emerson Family School, for all of her help in setting up the tour. We hope to have a second tour of the school in the coming months, when members of the House and Senate Education Committees will be invited.

## **Race to the Top**

### MISSISSIPPI’S RACE TO THE TOP OFF TO A SHAKY START:

#### No Round 1 Application, No Gates Grant, No Ideas

On December 15<sup>th</sup>, the Mississippi Department of Education announced to the state’s Race to the Top Advisory Committee that it had decided *not* to submit an application by the January 19<sup>th</sup> deadline for Round 1. Although MDE officials on the call did not specify all of the reasons for this decision, we suspect Mississippi’s late start on the application probably factored into the decision. Not only has the advisory committee only met twice—once in person and once via webinar—the advisory committee’s subcommittees, the groups that are supposed to weigh in on reform proposals, will meet for the first time in January.

After months of waiting for movement on Mississippi's application, MSF was bewildered by MDE's announcement. The U.S. Department of Education has been very clear that all unsuccessful Round 1 applicants will be receiving feedback on their applications, which MSF believes will give those states a competitive advantage in knowing exactly where their applications are deficient. Moreover, Executive Director Rachel Hicks spoke to a high-level US DOE official in D.C. who assured her that any Round 1 application, no matter how rough the submission, would receive this feedback.

The same day as the MDE call, the U.S. Department of Education announced that 36 states submitted letters of intent to apply for Round 1. That number has since increased to [39 plus the District of Columbia](#). Each of the four states surrounding Mississippi sent in letters of intent. In fact, Mississippi and Texas are the only Southern states that did not send in a letter of intent. While submitting or not submitting a letter doesn't guarantee whether a state will apply for Round 1, it does give an upward bound to how many other states may be receiving the Round 1 feedback that Mississippi has chosen to forgo.

On December 17th, *EdWeek* broke an even more disheartening [story](#): Mississippi was one of 14 states turned down for a Gates technical assistance grant. For those of you who haven't been following the Gates grants as closely as MSF, here's the background: Last summer, the Gates Foundation announced Race to the Top technical assistance grants of \$250,000 to 15 states it hand-selected for their commitment to education reform. Three of Mississippi's neighbors—Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana—were in this group of 15. After protests from education advocates following their initial announcement, Gates offered competitive technical assistance grants to all of the remaining states. Twenty-four states, including Mississippi and Alabama, applied. Ten additional states—including Alabama—won Gates money. To sum, *all* of Mississippi's neighbors have received \$250,000 in Gates grants for Race to the Top. Many believe that these grants will give the 24 (plus D.C.) Gates states an advantage in the process, or conversely, as *EdWeek's* Michele McNeil wrote, that “Vegas odd probably aren't favoring these 14 [unfunded] states.” It pains us to agree.

What concerns MSF most of all is that MDE officials on the December 15<sup>th</sup> conference call could not list ideas for inclusion in the application. The one suggestion call participants were offered was an idea to frame the application around the “Response to Intervention” protocol, which MDE already supports in school districts and which many school districts reportedly already use. We understand that MDE, the State Board, or new State Superintendent Tom Burnham may have ideas that were not enumerated to the advisory committee. Nonetheless, MSF has grown increasingly perplexed with every new revelation, including an MDE press release on December 18 claiming that Mississippi will experience no competitive disadvantage for waiting until Round 2 to apply because “PEER reviewers from across the country will judge each state's application based on its own merit.”

Despite what we believe has been a very shaky start to Mississippi's “Race to the Top,” we believe that Mississippi can put forward a strong application in June. But it won't be easy. For our part, MSF has decided to disseminate a “ghost framework” of ideas to provoke discussion

among advisory committee members and the general public. We plan to expand this framework into a full-blown “ghost application” before June. We hope to have what will admittedly be a first rough paper out by the end of the first full week of January.

#### RACE TO THE TOP IN NEIGHBORING STATES

A recent *EdWeek* article described education policies states across the nation have proposed or adopted to compete for R2TT funds. Policies proposed in three of Mississippi’s neighboring states are described below:

- **Alabama** – Gov. Bob Riley (R) will propose charter school legislation during the upcoming legislative session.
- **Louisiana** – The Louisiana Legislature voted to eliminate the cap on charter schools in the state.
- **Tennessee** – Gov. Phil Bredensen (D) has proposed new policies that would link student data to teacher evaluations, raised caps on charter schools, and strengthen the state’s ability to intervene in chronically low-performing schools.

#### WE STILL WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

As the process of crafting Mississippi’s Race to the Top application continues, we still call on each of you to share your thoughts and ideas. To share your ideas, please email us at [contact@mississippifirst.org](mailto:contact@mississippifirst.org).

## **Democracy Revitalization @MSF**

#### MSF CAMPUS OUTREACH

Part of our mission at MSF is to boost civic engagement among fellow Mississippians. We are particularly interested in targeting Mississippians ages 18-35, a group that is woefully underrepresented in our state’s important policy discussions. To address this critical need, MSF is launching a campus outreach initiative that will kick off in 2010. We will be on several college campuses throughout the state to reach out to individuals and organizations to share our mission, policy goals, and advocacy plans. We will also launch two MSF college chapters, in which members can join us in our efforts to move Mississippi forward.

We are in the process of finalizing our launch plan, with the goal of starting campus visits in mid-January. If you have any ideas or comments regarding our campus outreach initiative, please email Deputy Director Sanford Johnson at [sanford@mississippifirst.org](mailto:sanford@mississippifirst.org).

## **Research Roundup**

#### NEW RESEARCH ON PRINCIPAL EFFECTIVENESS

This month, Executive Director Rachel Hicks attended a [conference](#) on Principal Effectiveness at the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) in D.C. The conference explored the latest research on many aspects of school leadership, including “the ways in which school performance relates to the characteristics of school principals; how school

leadership relates to teacher attrition; school policies and practices common among successful school leaders; and how to prepare principals for this increasingly demanding job.”

Of particular interest to MSF was the paper presented by Tim Sass entitled “What Makes for a Good Teacher & Who Can Tell.” Sass and his colleagues presented evidence that principals’ ratings of teachers are less predictive of future teaching success when compared to two successive years of value-added data but that one year of value-added data is less predictive than a principal’s rating of a teacher. Other interesting findings included research by Damon Clark and colleagues who showed that leadership transitions from highly experienced principals to novice principals adversely impacted school performance in New York City and that principals in the study needed several years at the helm of a school to affect the biggest gains. These papers and more can be found at the [CALDER conference site](#).

## **Mississippi in the News**

### FY2011 BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

Earlier this month, Governor Barbour’s submitted [his recommendations](#) for covering the state’s current revenue shortfall. His recommendations include a 10.9% cut in the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) formula, reducing the state’s public school districts from 152 to 100, and a one-year suspension of the automatic annual teacher pay raise. On December 15<sup>th</sup>, the Joint Legislative Budget Committee produced [its own recommendations](#) for the 2011 budget. The recommendations include a 5.9% cut in MAEP, along with a 10% cut in higher education funding. The Mississippi Department of Education’s 2010 Legislative Priorities Finding an agreement on the FY2011 budget will most certainly be the top priority during the upcoming legislative session. MSF will keep you informed throughout the entire process.

### COMMISSION ON MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION STRUCTURE

Governor Board has recently announced the creation of the Commission on Mississippi Education Structure, an advisory panel that will make recommendations on the Governor’s K-12 school consolidation proposal. The Commission will be chaired by BancorpSouth Chairman and CEO Aubrey Patterson and will present its final report on April 1<sup>st</sup>.

The chairs of both the House and Senate education committees—Cecil Brown and Videt Carmichael, respectively—the State Superintendent of Education Tom Burnham, and IHL Commissioner Hank Bounds will serve on the commission. Other members include district superintendents, education advocates, and members of Mississippi’s business community.

## **January Preview**

### 2010 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The 2010 Legislative Session begins on January 5<sup>th</sup>. As we mentioned earlier, approving a budget for the next fiscal year will be the most contentious issue during the upcoming session.

We also hope that the Legislature will work hard to pass education policies that will make us competitive for Race to the Top.

MSF's 2010 Legislative Agenda includes

- Adoption of a comprehensive sex education pilot program for counties with the highest teen pregnancy rates;
- Passage of high-quality charter school legislation;
- Support for in-person early voting; and
- Support for state-funded pre-Kindergarten.

Legislators will likely introduce several bills related to these policy priorities, and we will keep you informed about progress made in each area. In addition to our monthly updates, you can receive instant updates of major legislative news by following us on Facebook or Twitter.

#### RECENT GRANT SUCCESS

Mississippi First is proud to announce recent grant support from the Entergy Foundation, the Phil Hardin Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. We are now almost 80% to our FY2010 budget goals! Please see below to find out how you can help us reach our goals.

#### SUPPORT MISSISSIPPI FIRST—ONLINE DONATIONS NOW ACCEPTED

Your support is very important to this organization, and we greatly appreciate all you have done. You can continue to support Mississippi First by encouraging your friends and neighbors to **sign up** and **donate** to our non-profit. Facebook and Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE) members should also join the Mississippi First groups on those websites. You may also follow us on Twitter @Mississippi1st.

#### **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).