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## A Note from the Executive Director

### FINDING OUR WILLINGNESS FOR REFORM

Last Wednesday, I went to D.C. for the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Executives' Meeting. We were joined by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his Assistant Secretary Carmel Martin for a little over half an hour. Martin briefed us on the [ESEA \(No Child Left Behind\) Re-authorization Blueprint](#) that the Department published recently. Then Secretary Duncan very generously took our questions. Although the Department is not proposing to decrease money for formula programs like Title I and IDEA, part of the Department's new ESEA strategy is to devote their entire request for additional resources to competitive grant processes like Race to the Top that will reward success and innovation.

In general, I agree with the Department's thinking that formula money provides no incentive for recipients to innovate because the money arrives regularly regardless of how well schools or districts use it. In fact, the worse schools do, the more money they receive under current federal programs. This policy is based on a belief that more monetary investment in ineffective schools will translate into improve outcomes. The fly in the ointment, as the Department has recognized, is that money is necessary but not sufficient. We have to do a better job with whatever resources we have, regardless of whether they are enough (and certainly in Mississippi, they aren't).

Despite my support of Secretary Duncan’s vision, I am concerned that Mississippi’s sluggish response to Race to the Top is bad omen for our chances to win future grant dollars. Will a competitive strategy put Mississippi farther and farther behind?

The Secretary unequivocally answered, “We want to go not just with the fancy PowerPoint presentation, but where there’s heart. We want to go where there’s willingness to do things differently and where there’s tremendous need.” Mississippi, the Secretary added, obviously has tremendous need. **But we have to show the Department we have the appetite for reform.** To stay on the sidelines and bemoan our own weaknesses will result in a self-fulfilling prophecy: we have to try. The Secretary finished by remarking, “Money is the icing on the cake, but it’s the process that will help states move forward.”

I have been thinking about Secretary Duncan’s comments in the last few days as it has become apparent that high-quality charter legislation is not going to happen this session. Add this disappointing result to the failure to move forward on pre-Kindergarten or teacher policy and I think the Department, and the nation for that matter, can rightly question our commitment to reform. Winning Race to the Top would be fantastic, but it shouldn’t take grant dollars to get us to do the right things for our children. The fact is that we have to prove that we want to move forward by helping ourselves out of last place, with or without federal grant incentives.

At Mississippi First, we walk the walk every day by pouring our blood, sweat, tears, hearts, and souls into this non-profit and its ideals. But we need your help. If you’re reading this newsletter, it is probably because you signed up on the website. We need you to do more. Donate, volunteer, or get involved in one of our advocacy campaigns. Don’t wait for us to reach out to you. Email us with your thoughts and your ideas. We’re ready and we’re willing and we can all make Mississippi ready and willing, too.

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

## **Policy Advocacy @MSF**

### POLICY INNOVATORS IN EDUCATION (PIE) NETWORK

Mississippi First is proud to announce its acceptance into the [Policy Innovators in Education \(PIE\) Network](#). PIE is a network of state-level education advocacy organizations convened by the Center for American Progress, Education Sector, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and the Center for Reinventing Public Education. PIE members “bring a credible, evidence-based, non-partisan voice for school improvement to their state capitals,” which is exactly what Mississippi First is designed to do. We are PIE’s 20<sup>th</sup> member organization and Mississippi is the 16<sup>th</sup> state represented. We are very proud of our membership and look forward to the tremendous learning opportunities ahead of us.

### MISSISSIPPI’S SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT

Executive Director Rachel Hicks put in over 110 hours in three weeks in shaping the Mississippi Department of Education’s School Improvement Grant application. Now that the application has been submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, ED Hicks will continue to play a role in helping the Department work through implementation of the grant process.

## Legislative Review

### 2010 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

With only a few days remaining on the legislative calendar, most of the major action on our legislative priorities is complete. In some areas, bills never made it out of the committee. In other cases, bills passed one or both chambers and were heavily debated. The following is a legislative review of each of the policy issues we were tracking along with our next steps for moving forward on each issue.

#### **Early Voting**

Though a number of bills were introduced in both the House and the Senate, it became clear early on that there wasn't enough legislative support for early voting this year. HB [853](#) was passed by the House by a vote of 69 to 50 but died in the Senate Elections Committee. A similar [early voting bill](#) introduced in the Senate also died in committee.

**Next Step** – With statewide elections coming up next year, it is very likely that early voting legislation will be introduced again next year. In the meantime, our focus over the coming months will be to help build public support for the measure by highlighting the benefits of early voting and the impact it can have on improving our absentee balloting process.

#### **Pre-Kindergarten**

HB [80](#), which called for the creation of the Task Force to Study and Report on the Funding and Implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten Programs, was passed by the House by a vote of 73 to 48. From there, the bill was referred to the Senate Education and Appropriation Committees. The bill died before ever making it to the Senate floor.

**Next Step** – In the coming months, we plan to work with others in the early education field to develop a working delivery model for Mississippi. We hope to have more to discuss in next month's Update.

#### **Comprehensive Sex Education**

By a vote of 83 to 32, the House passed HB [837](#), which would require school districts to adopt an "abstinence-only" or "abstinence-plus" sex education policy. The bill also created a Prevention of Teen Pregnancy Pilot Program for each of the 9 health districts. After the House passed the bill, a motion to reconsider the bill was approved, and an amendment was added that prohibited social studies courses from "being revised for partisan or philosophical purposes." But although the bill passed the House for a second time and even passed the Senate Education Committee, it died in the Senate Public Health Committee.

**Next Step** – Although the failure of this bill was disappointing, its impact on current law would have been minimal. Currently, local districts can implement an "abstinence-only" program or a program expands beyond abstinence as long as the program does not conflict with current law. The biggest benefit of the bill would have been to require districts to make that choice. In the coming months, we will work with the Departments of Education and Health to reach out to districts in counties with high teen pregnancy rates. As part of this work, we will explain the parameters of current law, evaluate available curricula, and recommend a model policy for providing more comprehensive programs.

#### **Public Charter Schools**

As expected, this has been the most contentious issue we have dealt with during this legislative session. When the Senate passed SB [2293](#), it allowed for conversion and open-enrollment charter schools to be

authorized in districts that were identified as failing, at-risk, or academic watch. The House version of the bill, however, replaced the original Senate bill language in favor of an “[innovative schools](#)” concept. Under this policy, parents would be able to vote to convert a school that was identified as failing for three consecutive years. Parents would petition the State Board to establish a local management board composed of parents of children currently enrolled at the school. This local management board would assume governance authority, with oversight powers of each decision divided between the local district and the State Board of Education. The conference report adopted by House and Senate members took references to “innovative schools” in the House version and changed them to “conversion charter schools.” The report also adds the “new start” school language from HB1043. The report was approved by both houses of the legislature and is now headed to the Governor.

**Next Steps:** In our [white paper](#), we stated that we could only support high-quality charter school legislation. Such legislation would produce charter schools that would be a targeted reform tool, helping to boost academic performance and close achievement gaps. Unfortunately, the final bill passed by the legislature falls well short of any acceptable definition of quality. Therefore, we feel that the Governor should not sign this bill. However, if this bill is signed into law, we will work with the Mississippi Department of Education to structure the rules and regulations as best as possible. Then, we will work for high-quality charter school legislation during the next session.

## **Race to the Top**

### ROUND ONE WINNERS ARE DELAWARE AND TENNESSEE

Today, the U.S. Department of Education announced that Delaware and Tennessee won the first Race to the Top grants. According to the [EdWeek](#), Delaware will be awarded \$100 million, while Tennessee will be awarded about \$500 million. The Department generously provided all of the applications, scoring sheets, and reviewers comments [online](#).

Because Tennessee is one of our neighbors, we have featured their application process several times in our Race to the Top updates. As we mentioned in our January update, Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen and the General Assembly passed the “Tennessee First to the Top Act” which consisted of policies designed to make the state more competitive for RTTT. The law requires student performance data to be used in teacher evaluation and tenure decisions. It also includes changes in the state’s charter school policies and processes for dismissing teachers and taking over failed schools. Simply put, Tennessee won in part because their state leaders were fully invested in winning.

### ROUND TWO: CAN MISSISSIPPI DELIVER A COME-FROM-BEHIND VICTORY?

Mississippi First is busily preparing for Round 2. We are going to update our Round 1 Framework and work with the Mississippi Department of Education and the Governor’s Office to make sure the state’s vision for the application is bold. When Mississippi applies for the Round 2 deadline, we will have to compete with the 38 states and the District of Columbia that applied in Round 1 but were not selected for a grant. These states each received specific feedback on the weaknesses of their original application. 14 of these applicants will be refining proposals that were already strong enough to be Round 1 finalists. Considering the competitive nature of this process, combined with our slow start, it is imperative that we get serious about crafting bold policies that will address teacher quality, data systems, academic standards, and turning around underperforming schools.

Mississippi has 63 days left before our Round 2 application has to be submitted. That means we have to move with great sense of urgency! As always, we welcome your ideas for improving the way we recruit and train teachers/leaders, use student data, implement rigorous academic standards, and turn around our lowest performing schools. To share your ideas, please email us at [contact@mississippifirst.org](mailto:contact@mississippifirst.org).

## **Democracy Revitalization @MSF**

### MSF AT OLE MISS

On February 17<sup>th</sup>, MSF did a presentation for public policy students at Ole Miss. We were also able to answer several students' questions, which ranged from describing how MSF got started to with discussing the challenges of doing public policy work in Mississippi. Since the presentation, we have stayed in contact with several Ole Miss students and have built interest in forming one of our first college chapters. We are also in the process of developing an exciting partnership with the Public Policy Leadership Department to provide Ole Miss students summer internship opportunities with MSF. We would like to thank Dr. Melissa Bass for giving us the opportunity to speak to her students.

As we have mentioned before, our goal is to reach out to students and professors on each college campus in Mississippi. We hope to have a presence on several campuses by the start of summer. If you know of any students, professors, or student organizations on any Mississippi campus that would be interested in connecting with MSF, please contact Deputy Director Sanford Johnson at [sanford@mississippifirst.org](mailto:sanford@mississippifirst.org).

### MSF AT ROOTSCAMP

The MSF team was in Washington, D.C., on February 20-21 for RootsCamp D.C. The "un-conference" featured several sessions that were conducted by people that have outstanding records in community organizing and civic engagement. The information that we brought back from D.C. will greatly enhance our campus outreach campaign. We also learned about ways that we can better connect with our current members, which will lead to changes that you will notice in the coming weeks and months.

## **Mississippi in the News**

### 2009 NAEP READING SCORES RELEASED

Last week, the 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress released the 2009 results for reading. Mississippi, once again, is last. [In 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading](#), Mississippi tied for last with 7 other states and beat only the District of Columbia. [In 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading](#), Mississippi tied for last with 4 states and beat only the District of Columbia. At both grade levels, Mississippi made no statistically significant progress overall from 2007, the last time the NAEP reading test was administered. At 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the black-white score gap was unchanged from 1992 and the poor-non-poor gap was unchanged from 1998. At 8<sup>th</sup> grade, both the black-white score gap and the poor-non-poor gap was unchanged from 1998.

## April Preview

### GRANTS, GRANTS, AND MORE GRANTS

Much of our April is going to be filled with work on Mississippi's Race to the Top application, working with the Mississippi Department of Education to implement the School Improvement Grant and the Recovery School District, and applying for education organizing and general operating grants for Mississippi First.

### MSF AT JACKSON STATE

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, MSF will be on the campus of Jackson State University, where we will introduce political science students to our public policy nonprofit. Our presentation will focus on the vision, mission, and policy goals of MSF, and we will also leave plenty of time for questions. This will be the first of what we hope will be several college visits in April. Again, if you'd like to help us reach out to students, professors, and organizations, please contact Deputy Director Sanford Johnson at [sanford@mississippifirst.org](mailto:sanford@mississippifirst.org).

### READ OUR BLOG

In February, Executive Director Rachel Hicks started [blogging](#) on the MSF website. She generally posts every few days. You can check in with the blog periodically or sign up for the RSS feed to get email updates of new blog posts.

### 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).