



## MISSISSIPPIANS MOVING FORWARD

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### A Note from the Executive Director

#### SO MUCH TO DO, SO LITTLE TIME

Since becoming an Executive Director in October 2008, I have often described my life as “drinking water from a fire hose.” Nothing could more aptly describe what it is like to track bills during Mississippi’s legislative session. While I am enjoying knowing my way around in the Capitol this year, it is amazing to me how little time there is once the session starts to get good things done for Mississippi. In just three short weeks, we already know what bills we should follow in earnest and which are likely to “die on the calendar”—not garner enough support to ensure that legislators take action before a deadline. The next few weeks will narrow our focus even more as the deadlines for a bill’s original committee and original house to take action pass.

In the sections below, you can read more about the specific bills we are tracking in addition to the non-legislative work we’re doing, such as Race to the Top. The best way to keep up-to-date with our work is by signing up for our Facebook [Fan Page](#) or following us on [Twitter](#) because the session will be nearly over by the time we publish our February Update. I plan to start blogging soon about our daily work, and our Facebook fans and Twitter followers will be the first to know when the blog posts start.

As always, thanks for supporting us. Please keep reading our publications and sending us your donations: we can't live to fight another day without you.

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

## Policy Advocacy @MSF

### Legislative Update

#### BILL STATUS

January 5<sup>th</sup> marked the start of the 2010 legislative session. Since then, a number of bills have been introduced related to our policy goals. Below is brief description of the bills introduced as of January 25<sup>th</sup> (author in parenthesis) that may survive the February 2 deadline for committee action on bills originating in their own house. Please click on the links to read these bills as we could not include every relevant detail in these summaries.

#### **Comprehensive Sex Education**

- House Bill [140](#) ([Rep. Alyce Clarke](#)) – This bill, which might serve as a companion to HB837 (below), establishes a 3-year, sex education pilot program in Mississippi public school districts. The pilot program is to be created by the Mississippi Department of Education.
- HB [837](#) ([Rep. Alyce Clarke](#)) – This bill, which passed the House Education Committee on January 20, will likely be debated on the House floor this week (January 25-29). HB837 requires school districts to adopt an “abstinence-only” or “abstinence-plus” sex education policy. It also re-names last year’s teen pregnancy task force the “Teen Pregnancy Monitoring Task Force” and expands its responsibilities to include monitoring the implementation of the law. HB837 also provides for evaluation of sex education policies adopted by districts.
  - *Hear ED Rachel Hicks’s take on this bill in an [MPB story](#).*
  - *Read ED Rachel Hicks’s quote about this bill in the [JFP](#).*

#### **Early Voting**

- HB [114](#) ([Rep. Harvey Moss](#)) – This bill creates an early voting pilot program in Alcorn County.
  - *Also introduced in the Senate as SB [2263](#) & SB [2264](#) ([Sen. Eric Powell](#))*
- HB [853](#) ([Rep. Tommie Reynolds](#)) – This bill allows qualified voters to vote early starting 20 days before the election and ending 5 days before the election. The bill also allows voters to cast ballots on any Saturday within the early voting period.
- SB [2114](#) ([Sen. Eric Powell](#)) – This bill establishes early voting starting 21 days before the election and ending 5 days prior to the election.

#### **Pre-Kindergarten**

- HB [80](#) ([Rep. Cecil Brown](#)) – This bill creates the Task Force to Study and Report on the Funding and Implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten Programs.

#### **Public Charter Schools**

- HB [30](#), [36](#), [458](#), [464](#), [513](#), [604](#), [736](#), [1275](#)—At this point, it is unclear what, if any, charter school bill might make it to the House floor. HB [1275](#) ([Rep. Tyrone Ellis](#)), which representative Ellis dropped at the request of Mississippi First, is the clearest, most comprehensive charter school bill offered in either house and worth a read for any person interested in this topic.
- SB [2293](#) ([Sen. Michael Watson](#)) – This bill is the same charter school bill that passed the Senate floor last year. It is likely to pass the Senate again this year and so is also worth a read.

## Race to the Top

### MISSISSIPPI'S RACE TO THE TOP: ROUND ONE, GHOST APPLICATION, THIRD CHANCE

January 19<sup>th</sup> was the deadline for states to submit applications for Round 1 of Race to the Top (R2TT). [40 states and the District of Columbia](#) submitted applications. Unfortunately, Mississippi was one of the ten states that did not submit an application. Mississippi is the only southern state that has expressed interest in R2TT yet failed to apply by the 19<sup>th</sup> (Texas Governor Rick Perry announced this month that his state will not participate in the competition).

As we noted in our [December Update](#), states that do not win awards in Round 1 will receive feedback from the U.S. Department of Education so that they can improve their applications by the June 1<sup>st</sup> deadline for Round 2. Since Mississippi will not receive any feedback before the final deadline, the state will have to work even harder to write an extremely competitive application. To contribute to this process, Mississippi First released a framework of ideas on January 8 that we believe should be considered for inclusion in the official application. Click [here](#) to find the framework on our website.

Despite the inauspicious start to Mississippi's Race to the Top, there is good news for local school districts. President Obama has requested \$1.35 billion from Congress to expand Race to the Top into the next fiscal year. Through this expansion, a second grant competition would be established exclusively for local school districts. This competition will be particularly beneficial for districts located in states that did not participate, or were unsuccessful in their Race to the Top bids. Mississippi First pledges to do everything in our power to ensure that Mississippi submits a competitive application; however, we are hopeful that Congress expands Race to the Top to give Mississippi a third chance, if necessary. If you have any questions, comments, or ideas regarding our frame, or Mississippi's Round 2 application, please contact Rachel Hicks at [rachel@mississippifirst.org](mailto:rachel@mississippifirst.org).

### RACE TO THE TOP IN NEIGHBORING STATES

- **Alabama** – Motivated by Race to the Top, the Alabama Board of Education unanimously approved a resolution supporting the passage of charter school legislation. The legislation supported by Gov. Riley (R) would allow local school boards to serve as authorizers and requires them to share monitoring powers with the state school board. Passing the legislation may be difficult, due to strong opposition from the state's powerful teachers association. Alabama submitted its application by the Round I deadline.
- **Arkansas** – Local school boards and charter school boards from across the state held special meetings to sign on to the education reform plan outlined in the state's Race to the Top application. By signing the memorandum of understanding, local education agencies (LEAs) agree to implement all applicable elements of the state's plan. Arkansas submitted its application by the Round I deadline.
- **Louisiana** – The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted 6-3 to endorse the state's application, the final step before the application was submitted on

January 19. However, only [28 of the state's 70 districts](#) agreed to participate. Louisiana, already viewed as a frontrunner for RTTT, is eligible for up to \$300 million in funds. If successful, half of the award would go directly to participating districts, while the rest would go to statewide education initiatives.

- **Tennessee** – The Tennessee General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to approve the “Tennessee First to the Top Act.” The [legislation](#) was championed by Gov. Bredesen (D) to make Tennessee’s application more competitive before it was submitted on January 19<sup>th</sup>. The law requires student performance data to be used in teacher evaluation and tenure decisions. The Act also includes changes in state processes for dismissing teachers and taking over failed 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

This month, we officially launched our campus outreach campaign. Our first stop was the Ole Miss campus, where we met with students and professors that share our commitment to improving the quality of life for all Mississippians. In the coming weeks, we will be back at Ole Miss to meet other students and to speak with classes and organizations. As we mentioned in our last Update, our campus outreach campaign will be a statewide effort. 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).

## **Mississippi in the News**

#### MISSISSIPPI RECEIVES C- OVERALL FROM *QUALITY COUNTS*

On January 14, *Education Week* released the newest edition of [Quality Counts](#), a report which grades the states “across six categories of educational performance and policy.” Mississippi’s overall C- (70.0) is the result of the following scores in each of the six categories:

- Chance for Success: D+ (68.6)
- K-12 Achievement: F (55.9)
- School Finance: D (66.4)
- Standards, Assessments, and Accountability: B+ (88.3)
- Transitions & Alignment: C (75.0)
- The Teaching Profession: D (66.2)

On January 25, the Mississippi Department of Education released a statement by State Superintendent Tom Burnham heralding Mississippi’s B+ on the Standards, Assessments, and

Accountability metric. He wrote, “This achievement should be celebrated by all Mississippians.” MSF agrees that our state deserves a pat on the back for raising its standards and expectations for all children. It is worth noting that the B+ would have been even higher had it not been for the C+ (78.3) Mississippi earned in the sub-category of Assessments.

Taken as a whole, however, Mississippi’s *Quality Counts* rating is not something to celebrate. According to the report, Mississippi’s system ranks 47 out of 51 (50 states and the District of Columbia). We have a lot of work to do, which is why Mississippi First is aggressively following Race to the Top and promoting the education reforms we outlined in our [ghost application framework](#). As the R2TT application process unfolds, we hope we can share Dr. Burnham’s opinion that “these are exciting times.”

## February Preview

### MSF LEGISLATIVE ACTION

February will be a crucial time for Mississippi First’s 2010 legislative agenda. The deadline for bills to exit committees in the originating house is February 2. Many bills will “die on the calendar”—not remain active—on February 2. More bills will die on February 11, which is the deadline for floor action on bills originating in either house. We will be carefully tracking the progress of bills related to the sex education, charter schools, pre-Kindergarten, and early voting. Please see our Legislative Update above for more information on specific bills. For up-to-date information, join our Facebook [Fan Page](#) or follow us on [Twitter](#).

### RACE TO THE TOP

Dr. Lynn House, a former deputy commissioner at IHL, will join the Mississippi Department of Education as a new Deputy Superintendent in February. According to Rachel Hicks’s discussions with Dr. Burnham, Dr. House will be MDE’s new coordinator of Mississippi’s Race to the Top application. We look forward to working with Dr. House and will keep you updated on the application’s progress.

### ROOTSCAMP D.C.

On February 20-21, Rachel and Sanford will represent MSF in Washington, D.C. for RootsCamp D.C. This “*un*-conference” will be presented by the New Organizing Institute, a national organizing and campaign training program. Organizations from across the country will attend RootsCamp to share their organizing experiences and best practices. The knowledge that we will bring back to Mississippi will greatly strengthen our outreach efforts on college campuses and in communities throughout the state.

### 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).