

Text for July 2010 Update [NO FORMATTING NEEDED]

ED Note

The Circumstance of Graduation

When I graduated from Starkville High School ten years ago, Mississippi's dropout rate wasn't something that I thought much about. Not graduating from high school was such a foreign concept to me: by May of my senior year, I already had my sights set on college.

I distinctly remember the day that I went to see the senior counselor with a classmate of mine to discuss whether he and I would be Valedictorian and Salutatorian or whether a third classmate of mine, who was threatening to drop a class to raise his GPA, could squeeze one of us out. She was more than a little frustrated with us. She told me later it was because she had spent all morning with a student who wasn't even sure he was going to graduate, and she was trying to help him with his post-high school plans. And then we come in, with our college plans in the bag, worried about who was going to be ranked 1, 2, and 3 on graduation day. I can see why she was frustrated.

Ten years later, I think a lot more about the kids in Mississippi who don't graduate high school and the ones who graduate unprepared for college or career. Before my high school reunion in June, I flipped through our yearbook to refresh my memory of names and faces. I was surprised by who wasn't in the book, but knowing our graduation statistics like I do, perhaps I shouldn't be.

This month, MDE released graduation, completion, and dropout statistics for the Class of 2009. Nearly 30% of students who began high school in 2005-2006 did not graduate with a regular diploma. Of that 30%, over half of them dropped out. In this month's Update, you'll read some of our analysis about the recent statistics. You'll also read about three of our policy initiatives designed to improve student achievement and increase our college-and-career-ready student population. If you're already a college student, don't forget to read about the work Sanford Johnson is doing to engage you and your peers in bettering public education. And, of course, we would love your support and feedback. So, keep an eye out for a member interest survey coming to your inbox in August.

Have a great end to the summer.

Rachel Hicks

Executive Director

Rachel can be reached via email at rachel@mississippifirst.org.

POLICY ADVOCACY

School Turnaround Initiative

School Improvement Grant Winners Announced

MSF has been deeply involved in the School Improvement Grant (SIG) process, from writing the state's application to being involved in grant review, so we are pleased to report that the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) recently announced which schools have been awarded grants. The SIG program is a federal grant program for low-performing schools. Using achievement and graduation rate data per federal guidelines, Mississippi created a list of three tiers of low-performing schools that would be eligible to apply for funds. These funds require districts to use one of four U.S. Department of Education-approved intervention models: close and consolidate, convert to a charter school, turnaround, or transformation. Tier III (lowest priority) schools were also given the freedom to choose a different reform model.

Of the over 300 schools eligible to apply for SIG funds, the Mississippi Department of Education received 86 applications from 53 school districts. These applications proposed to "transform" 79 schools, "close and consolidate" 1 school, and use a "Tier III intervention" in 6 schools. Although Mississippi's 7 Tier I schools received highest priority for funding, only 5 of them applied. Furthermore, a little less than half of Mississippi's failing schools (24 of 53) applied for funding, although all were eligible. However, nearly all of Mississippi's failing districts (7 of 8) submitted at least one school proposal.

Each application was scored by a team of reviewers using a common rubric. Of the 86 applications, 36 applications scored high enough to qualify for funds. However, because not all Tier I schools applied or qualified for funds, MDE had to reserve 25% of its grant allocation. As a result, MDE only had enough funds to award three-year grants to 8 schools. These are

- Hazlehurst High School (Hazlehurst School District) - \$3,750,000
- Hazlehurst Middle School (Hazlehurst School District) - \$4,127,067
- Wingfield High School (Jackson Public Schools) - \$5,221,793
- North Panola High School (N. Panola School District) - \$2,605,080
- Gentry High School (Indianola School District) - \$3,518,056
- W.A. Higgins Middle School (Clarksdale School District) - \$3,750,000
- Leflore County High School (Leflore Co. School District) - \$5,250,000
- Amanda Elzy High School (Leflore Co. School District) - \$4,790,995

3 of the 8 schools in this group are designated as "failing" under Mississippi's accountability system. 3 of Mississippi's 8 failing districts are also represented.

Because 25% of Mississippi's allocation is still available, there will be another round of SIG applications in the spring of 2011. Unfortunately for this year's grantees, the 2010-2011 funds' disbursement has been delayed as the state's application wends its way through the federal bureaucracy at the U.S. Department of Education. We'll keep you posted on the status of the funds.

Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens Initiative

Model School Board Policy Development

Since the beginning of July, Mississippi First has hosted Cortez Moss, our 2010 Summer Policy Intern whose internship has been sponsored by the Public Policy Department at the University of Mississippi. Cortez has been working with Mississippi First to create a model school board policy for comprehensive sex education and to write an issue brief for the public explaining comprehensive sex education. We hope to finalize and publish these documents by the end of August. Below, Cortez reports about his work in his own words.

“In my time at Mississippi First, I have had the opportunity to review a robust amount of research in the area of Comprehensive Sex Education. I began my project by gaining a thorough understanding of the challenges Mississippi is currently facing in terms of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. After having completed my research, I identified advocates in and out of state who were working to combat these challenges. I have also been charged with the task of developing a school district policy. I am pleased to report that the policy has been drafted and is currently being edited by Executive Director Rachel Hicks. I have enjoyed my comprehensive study of sex education during my time at Mississippi First. I look forward to creating a policy brief in the coming days to be distributed statewide.”

Charter Schools Initiative

Another Missed Opportunity

Over the past year, the U.S. Department of Education’s Charter School Program (CSP) has awarded Charter School Start-up and Dissemination Grants to 29 states, including 6 southern states (AR, FL, GA, LA, SC, TN). These grants have been given to states to “increase national understanding of the charter school model and to expand the number of high-quality charter schools available to students across the nation.” Grants are being used for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools; or for the evaluation of charter schools, including their effects on students, teachers, and parents.

After these 29 state grants were awarded, \$3 million was still available in the fund. As a result, this money will now be available to the 13 charter school states, including Mississippi, that did not receive a state grant. In this second round of funding, non-state educational agencies (non-SEAs) can apply directly to the CSP for a grant. Examples of non-SEAs in Mississippi would be local school districts or prospective charter school operators such as education-related community organizations.

Unfortunately, although Mississippi was included in the list of 13 states, our new charter school law prevents any organization from applying for these grants. First of all, a local school district has to be identified as “failing,” “at risk of failing,” or “low-performing” for three consecutive years before parents can form a Local Management Board (LMB) to initiate the conversion charter school process. Therefore, no school will become eligible for conversion charter status until the fall of 2012. Needless to say, non-SEAs in Mississippi won’t be able to make the August 25, 2010, deadline for applications. Furthermore, because of the law’s restrictive and convoluted provisions, respected charter school operators would be unlikely to work with

Due to bi-partisan federal support, millions of dollars will be available in the coming years for the start-up and expansion of high-quality charter schools. However, unless our restrictive new law is improved in the coming years, we will miss out on each and every grant opportunity. MSF will continue to advocate for policy changes that will make our charter law an effective reform tool.

DEMOCRACY REVITALIZATION

MSF Campus Outreach

MSF’s campus outreach initiative is well underway, and the level of interest among students and faculty has been incredibly encouraging. As of today, we have scheduled meetings or class presentations this fall at Ole Miss, Delta State, and Jackson State. We have also been successful in our outreach efforts at Mississippi State, Alcorn, Southern Miss, and Millsaps. Through these outreach efforts, we have been in contact with several students that are interested in taking part in our policy/advocacy initiatives, applying for internships, or partnering with us for class assignments.

Our campus outreach effort was created to get young policymakers and advocates involved in the important policy discussions currently taking place throughout the state. We also aim to expose students to policy needs, as well as the opportunities, that can be found right here in the Magnolia State.

If you have any questions, comments, or ideas regarding our campus outreach efforts, please contact Deputy Director Sanford Johnson at sanford@mississippifirst.org.

IN THE NEWS

Race to the Top

Mississippi Not a Finalist for Race to the Top

On July 27, the U.S. Department of Education announced the 19 finalists for Round II of Race to the Top. Mississippi did not make the cut (see [Mississippi’s Round II application](#)); however, we will not find out where the state’s application fell short until the reviewers’ comments are available in the fall.

Among the finalists were the southern states of Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Alabama and Arkansas also missed the cut, while Texas and Virginia did not apply for Round II. With Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's prediction that 10 to 15 states may be announced as winners this August, it's possible that several southern states can join Tennessee in the winners' circle.

Race to the Top by The Numbers

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

14 Number of Round I Finalists that were selected as Round II Finalists [100%]

4 Number of states that missed the Round I cut but were selected as finalists for Round II

1 Number of first-time applicants that were selected as Round II finalists [Maryland]

11 Number of states that missed the cut in both rounds of RTTT

6 Number of states, including Mississippi, that applied for the first time in Round II

4 Number of states that chose not to participate in Round I or II of Race to the Top [Alaska, North Dakota, Texas, and Vermont]

Race to the Top Round III

Although Mississippi came up short with Race to the Top this year, we may get a [third](#) chance. A U.S. Senate Appropriations subcommittee has approved \$675 million in Race to the Top funds for the 2011 fiscal year. While this amount is less than the \$800 million approved by a House subcommittee, and much less than the \$1.35 billion request from the White House, it does mean that is very likely that R2TT will live on for another year. Word from the Mississippi Department of Education is that Mississippi will apply for any future rounds of Race to the Top that Congress funds.

Graduation Data

Class of 2009 Graduation Data Released

On July 8, the Mississippi Department of Education released [official graduation, completion, and dropout data](#) for the Class of 2009. MDE reports that 71.9% of the Class of 2009 graduated high school with a standard diploma. This number is slightly down from the 72% graduating in the Class of 2008 and follows a three-year trend of small decreases since the Class of 2007 (73.8%). Conversely, the number of dropouts in the Class of 2009 is slightly up to 16.7% from the 16% dropout rate in the Class of 2008. This year's dropout rate also follows a three-year trend of slightly rising dropout rates since the Class of 2007 (15.9%).

Since the Class of 2006, MDE has been reporting cohort graduation statistics; in other words, Mississippi now measures its graduate rate by how many ninth graders from a given year complete high school in four years. (For the Class of 2009, 71.9% of students who were first-time ninth graders in 2005-2006 graduated with a regular diploma in the 2008-2009 school year.) Cohort rates are much more accurate than our

previous method of measuring graduates which only looked at the number of seniors who graduated at the end of the year.

In addition to new cohort graduation statistics, we are also more accurately measuring completers and dropouts. “Completers” are students who receive a GED from a district program or attain a certification of completion or an occupational diploma (for special education students) rather than a regular high school diploma. “Dropouts” are students who were enrolled in ninth grade for the first time with the cohort but since have left their ninth-grade school without transferring to another school, becoming deceased, or enrolling in a district’s GED program.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly--Graduation Edition

In this section, you will find some basic analysis of the data that MDE released on July 8. If you are interested in further analysis of these statistics, please contact Rachel Hicks via email at rachel@mississippifirst.org.

THE GOOD: The ten districts with the highest graduation rates

District	Graduation Rate	Label
Enterprise	96	High Performing
Clinton	88.5	High Performing
Booneville	87	Star
Benoit	86.8	Academic Watch
Claiborne County	86.3	At Risk of Failing
Columbia	85.8	Academic Watch
Madison	85.8	High Performing
Tishomingo County	85.4	High Performing
Ocean Springs	84.6	High Performing
DeSoto County	84.5	High Performing

The BAD: The ten districts with the lowest graduation rates

District	Graduation Rate	Label
Amite County	42.1	At Risk of Failing
North Panola	47.5	Failing
Greenwood	48.8	At Risk of Failing
Tunica County	52.3	At Risk of Failing

West Tallahatchie	52.3	Failing
Coahoma County	53.1	Failing
East Jasper	53.4	Academic Watch
Louisville	53.5	Academic Watch
Oktibbeha County	54.1	At Risk of Failing
Coffeerville	55.3	At Risk of Failing

The UGLY: The ten districts with highest dropout rates

District	Dropout Rate	Label
Amite County*	44.1	At Risk of Failing
Greenwood*	39.4	At Risk of Failing
West Tallahatchie*	32.1	Failing
Sunflower County	31.8	At Risk of Failing
Canton	31.1	At Risk of Failing
Tunica County*	31.1	At Risk of Failing
Forrest County	30.7	Academic Watch
East Jasper*	30.2	Academic Watch
Houston Separate	29.9	Successful
North Panola*	29.8	Failing

* - Counties among those with the ten lowest graduation rates

A few last words--

- Houston Separate holds the dubious distinction of being rated a “successful” district and having one of the state’s highest dropout rates for the Class of 2009. However, Houston Separate is not alone in being rated as “successful” and having a high dropout rate (one that exceeds the state average). In fact, 8 other districts (Union City, Forrest AHS, South Tippah, Pearl River, Grenada, George County, South Delta, and Nettleton) are rated as “successful” but have dropout rates between 19.7-27.1%. 1 district--Winona--is rated as “high performing” but has a dropout rate of 19.1%.
- 60% of districts with the highest dropout rates were also in the ten districts with the lowest graduation rates (Amite County, East Jasper, Greenwood, Louisville, North Panola, Tunica County, and West Tallahatchie). In each of these districts, a majority of Class of 2009 students who did not graduate dropped out of high school. In both Amite County and Greenwood, over 75% of non-graduates dropped out. Interestingly, both Oktibbeha County and East Jasper, which are

in the ten lowest graduation rate districts, are in the list of districts that have the highest non-graduating “completers” (31% and 16.4% respectively). Coffeerville also has a non-graduating “completers” rate of twice the state average (14.5% v. 7.7% for the state).

Common Core

Mississippi Moves to Adopt Common Core Standards

At the June meeting of the State Board of Education, Mississippi began the Administrative Procedures Act process of adopting the math and literacy [Common Core Standards](#). The Common Core Standards Initiative is a state-led collaboration facilitated by the National Governors’ Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop rigorous, common standards for states in math and literacy. A recent [Fordham Institute report](#) found that the Common Core Standards are [clearly better than Mississippi’s current standards](#) in both math and literacy. As a result, adopting Common Core will allow Mississippi to help our students be more prepared for college and career upon graduation.

Student Health

Mississippi: Still the Nation’s Fattest State

Mississippi will keep the unfortunate distinction of being the nation’s most obese state for another year. In “[F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America’s Future](#)”, Mississippi’s 33.8% adult obesity rate is the highest in the nation. Neighboring states Alabama and Tennessee tied for second with a rate of 31.6%. Mississippi also leads the nation in childhood obesity, with 44.4% of our children identified as overweight or obese. The study, produced by the [Trust for America’s Health](#) (TFAH) and the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), highlighted the severity of this national public health issue. In 1991, no state had an adult obesity rate above 20%. Now, two-thirds of states have rates above 25%. The study also identifies disparities in obesity statistics that exist along regional and racial lines. Ten of the eleven states with the highest obesity rates are located in the South. Additionally, adult obesity rates for African Americans topped 35% in 34 states, while rates for Latinos topped 30% in 19 states.

Recognizing that eliminating childhood obesity is the key to significantly reducing adult obesity, TFAH has recommended steps that will enable states to address this health crisis. 20 states, including Mississippi, and the District of Columbia have adopted nutritional standards for school lunches the first of TFAH’s recommendations. Mississippi is also one of 28 states (D.C. included) to adopt nutritional standards on vending machines. The Trust also recommends that Mississippi and several other states can do more to reduce childhood obesity. Additional recommendations include completing body mass index (BMI) screenings for students and passing legislation to make community streets safer for pedestrians.

[MSF in the News](#)

Recently, Executive Director Rachel Hicks was quoted in two recent articles about graduation statistics:

[Clarion-Ledger--July 9, 2010](#)

[Jackson Free Press--July 28, 2010](#)

TAKE ACTION!

MSF's 2011 Member Interest Survey

As a public policy advocacy organization, we at MSF are fully committed to providing our members and supporters with a wealth of information regarding our full body of work. However, we recognize that each of our supporters has different interests and may enjoy receiving more information about a specific issue or set of issues. Therefore, we have designed a member interest survey in order to more effectively target our communications.

On August 5th you will receive an e-mail with a link to our 2011 Member Interest Survey. This confidential survey will give you the opportunity to...

- Share your position on our 2011 policy initiatives;
- Request additional information on policy initiatives;
- Let us know if you'd like to take part in advocacy activities for a policy initiative; and
- Share your ideas for policy initiatives we should consider in the future.

Again, this short survey will be sent to you on August 5th, and you will have one week to fill it out and send it back to us (August 12th). Remember: the survey is voluntary, but it will help us serve each of you better. Thank you in advance for your support!

FOLLOW MSF

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

On Twitter: [@Mississippi1st](#)

On Facebook: 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 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.