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A Note from the Executive Director**SHORT AND SWEET**

June 30 marks the last day of the Mississippi First fiscal year. It's been quite a ride. In this Update, you'll read a little about the work we've done this year and the work we're planning for the upcoming year. In the interest of letting you get to reading, I'm even going to keep this note short!

Have a good July.

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

Policy Advocacy @MSF

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT REVIEW COMMITTEE

As you may remember, Executive Director Rachel Hicks spent the much of March and April writing the Mississippi Department of Education's application for the School Improvement Grant program. The deadline for local districts to submit applications for funding was April 30, 2010. In May, Deputy Director Sanford Johnson served on the School Improvement Grant ([SIG](#)) Review Committee. The members of this committee were tasked with reviewing the SIG proposal from school districts, and scoring them based on several factors, including the use of data in improving instruction and assessments; improved professional development; and providing more instructional time for students. High quality proposals will receive a portion of the \$40 million in federal funds allocated to Mississippi, thanks to the SIG application written by Mississippi First on behalf of MDE.

The School Improvement Grant process, along with Race to the Top, has marked a change in federal policies related to education funding. Over the past two years, we have seen an unprecedented increase in federal dollars for public education. Yet in order to obtain these funds, education administrators and policymakers on the local and state levels are *required* to demonstrate a commitment to implement proven school reform efforts. Asking for more money to do the same things will no longer cut it, which is a lesson Mississippians are learning the hard way. Only by embracing evidence-based innovation will we be able to gain access to the funding that we desperately need.

PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS GRANT

Executive Director Rachel Hicks spent July helping the Nollie Jenkins Family Center, Inc., in Lexington, Mississippi, writing an application for a [Promise Neighborhoods Planning Grant](#). The one-year planning grant is intended to help communities think through issues related to designing a Promise Neighborhood before implementation grants become available next year. Best of luck to the West Holmes County Promise Neighborhood Advisory Board and Nollie Jenkins!

Race to the Top

TIME'S UP!

The June 1st Deadline for Round 2 RTTT applications has come and gone. D.C. and thirty-five states – including Mississippi – submitted applications by the June 1 deadline. Nine Round 1 states, however, chose [not to re-apply](#). These states opted out due to lack of support from important stakeholders (teachers unions & LEAs), failure to pass important reform legislation, and/or an unwillingness to adopt important criteria of the competitive grant. Virginia, the only southern state that opted out, did not want to sign on to Common Core academic standards. None of the nine states that opted out of Round 2 were named finalists during Round 1.

Over \$3.5 billion dollars are available for Round 2 applicants, and anywhere from [10 to 15 states](#) may win funding. Round 2 finalists will be announced on July 26th, which will be followed by in-person presentations in August. Round 2 winners will be announced in early September.

MISSISSIPPI SUBMITS ROUND TWO APPLICATION

Mississippi submitted its Round 2 application on June 1. The Mississippi Department of Education, which crafted the application, has made submission [available online](#).

FY2010 Review

With the official start of summer fast approaching, our 2010 fiscal year is coming to a close. The past few weeks have been devoted to reflecting on our work over the past year and setting our policy goals for the 2011 fiscal year. Below is a brief description of the work that we have done to move forward on FY2010 policy issues, which were approved by our Board of Directors:

ISSUE 1: State Funded Pre-Kindergarten

Despite the undeniable need for pre-K in Mississippi, the Legislature failed to pass a bill that would have created a task force to *study* pre-K's potential impact. Nevertheless, MSF took steps to move the issue forward. In December, we hosted a legislative tour of the Emerson Family School (EFS) in Starkville, which is a successful public pre-K program funded through a grants. Additionally, MSF worked with the Public Policy Center of MS and EFS to submit a federal i3 Grant in May. If successful, this grant will provide funding that would enable the Emerson Family School to place teachers in local childcare centers.

ISSUE 2: Charter School Legislation

Our work on charter school policy was extensive over the past year. Our contributions consisted of drafting a charter school bill based on the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' Model Law, which was introduced as [House Bill 1275](#) by Rep. Tyrone Ellis (D – Starkville). We also published our second white paper on the essential qualities of a high-quality charter school policy and an op-ed in support of charters. Furthermore, we worked with advocacy partners to build public awareness and grassroots support for public charter schools. Although the version of the charter school bill that was signed by the governor falls well short of being an effective reform tool, we believe the fact that both houses were had a debate about charter schools is a huge step forward for the Magnolia State. In June, Executive Director Rachel Hicks was [quoted in the Wall Street Journal](#) about Mississippi's new charter school law.

ISSUE 3: Comprehensive Sex Education

Legislation that would have given public school districts more flexibility to move beyond abstinence-only-until-marriage programs met a disappointing end in the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee. As a result, we are devoting our resources this upcoming year to guiding districts to provide the most comprehensive sex education programs current legislation will allow.

ISSUE 4: Early Voting

Due to three critical factors—the heated nature of the charter school issue, the lack of support for early voting in the Senate, and the lingering fallout from last year's failed early voting/voter ID compromise—it was clear early on that progress on early voting would be limited at best. Although legislation was introduced in both chambers, and a bill was approved by the House, the issue went nowhere in the Senate.

In addition to the work that we've done to advance our policy goals, we have also taken part in several other projects related to improving the quality of life for Mississippians.

- **School Improvement Grants** –MSF has been heavily involved with the SIG process, from writing the successful grant proposal on behalf of MDE to serving on the SIG Review Committee.
- **Race to the Top** – Along with Executive Director Rachel Hicks' service on the RTTT Advisory Committee, MSF also published an outline that included essential elements for a competitive application.
- **College Outreach** – Efforts to establish two college chapters by the fall of 2010 got underway in February, with presentations taking place at Ole Miss and Jackson State. More presentations will take place this fall.
- **YES! Curriculum** – Having created the service learning curriculum in 2009, MSF was in Gulfport this August conducting a workshop for Gulf Coast community and nonprofit organizations interested in implementing the program. The training was sponsored by America's Promise in conjunction with the Jackson County Civic Action Committee.

FY2011 Work

The MSF Staff and Board of Directors met recently for our annual strategic planning retreat. During this meeting, our goals were set for the upcoming fiscal year, which begins July 1st. These goals will make up the bulk of the work we will do before, during, and after the 2011 Legislative Session. Below is a brief summary of the work that MSF will do this year.

MSF will work on the following policy issues in FY2011:

- **Pre-Kindergarten** – Continue research and analysis on collaborative models for providing pre-Kindergarten in public school districts.
- **School Turnaround Initiative** – Publish a report profiling high-poverty, high-performing schools in Mississippi; recommend policies to turnaround low-performing schools.
- **Charter School Policy** – Boost public knowledge of charter schools research, while advocating for amendments designed to improve the quality of our new charter law.
- **Comprehensive Sex Education Initiative** – Produce a comprehensive sex education model policy & tools; and build an advocacy strategy to encourage public districts to adopt it.

MSF will also complete the following democracy revitalization work:

- **MSF College Chapters Initiative** – Build civic engagement among college students throughout the state; establish at least two college chapters by the end of year.
- **Membership Initiative** – Build networks of online membership and active membership among MSF supporters.

Take Action!

FEEDBACK

We often call on you to take part in our policy work, and we always welcome your questions and comments. So naturally, we would greatly appreciate your input on our work for FY2011. Your contribution to this process is very important to our success over the next year. We ask that you help us in the following ways:

STEP ONE – Feedback on Our 2010 Policy Work

Please share your thoughts and ideas on how we can move forward on these policy issues and how we can expand our work.

STEP TWO – Share Ideas for New (FY2011) Policy Work

Please share your ideas on new policy goals we can start working on during the upcoming year. Keep in mind that our ability to take on new goals depends on our ability to grow our nonprofit.

STEP THREE – Donate to Mississippi First

Funding from our supporters and foundations helps us increase our capacity, enabling us to do more work on our current goals or to take on new goals.

July Preview

CONGRATULATIONS, RACHEL!

This is a special shout-out to our Executive Director Rachel Hicks, who got engaged this past weekend! The lucky man is Andrew Canter, a Maryland native who works as a lawyer with the Mississippi Center for Justice. The couple met at the Harvard Kennedy School in 2008 and began dating in 2009. Along with looking forward to planning a wedding, Rachel and Andrew are excited to see Sanford's impatient "advocacy" of this engagement come to an end.

WELCOME, CORTEZ MOSS!

MSF is happy to announce that Cortez Moss will be joining us as our Summer Intern. Cortez is a native of Bruce, and is a junior at Ole Miss, where he is majoring in political science. He is actively involved in several organizations, including the Ole Miss Associated Student Body, and the Mississippi Democratic Committee. He has also been involved in advocacy for public charter schools, through which he and two classmates made a presentation to the House Education Committee. During his internship, Cortez will work on comprehensive sex education policy, helping us to create the tools we will present to public school districts throughout the state. His internship is funded through the Trent Lott Leadership Institute at Ole Miss.

WELCOME BACK, SANFORD!

The prodigal son has returned! Deputy Director Sanford Johnson, who has been living in Helena, Arkansas, for the last few years, recently purchased a house with his wife in Clarksdale, Mississippi. The couple is excited to be back on the Mississippi side of the river. Amanda, Sanford's wife, opened the KIPP Delta Elementary Literacy Academy last fall and will commute across the river to run the school. Sanford is back at Mississippi First full time and is especially excited not to have to explain anymore why he works for Mississippi First but lives in Arkansas.

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.

FOLLOW MSF

On mississippifirst.org: Sign up, donate, read the 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.