



MISSISSIPPIANS MOVING FORWARD

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November 2009 Update

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A Note from the Executive Director

OUR HOLIDAY WISH LIST

Mississippi First had many things to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. This month alone, we got a big present in the mail – our 501(c)3 status. We have also been blessed with our first two foundation grants from Ben & Jerry's Foundation and the Entergy Foundation, which have allowed us to hire a new staff member and continue the important work we do for a little while longer. But most of all, we are grateful for the support of all of you and the privilege of working everyday for the people of Mississippi.

The past year has literally been *a dream come true* for us. Seven years ago, when the idea of this organization first began rolling around in my head, it was hard to imagine what

it would be like to be at the point we are today, a little over one year into operation. We have a lot to celebrate, but we also have a lot to strive for as we prepare for the upcoming legislative session. We hope you're already in the holiday spirit because we've got a big favor to ask: Can you help us with our wish list?

- \$27,225.00 in donations from individuals (donations are tax-deductible!)
- \$65,000.00 in foundation grants
- In-kind donations of office furniture and supplies
- High-capacity, spring and summer unpaid interns for our Jackson office
- Partnerships with area non-profits
- A high-quality charter school law
- A bold Race to the Top application
- A comprehensive sex education pilot program
- Access to Mississippi's K-12 longitudinal data
- Moving the conversation forward on pre-Kindergarten
- More Facebook fans and Twitter followers
- Your ideas and feedback about our work

On behalf of Mississippi First, thank you for all that you do.

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

Policy Advocacy @MSF

MSF PREPARES FOR 2010 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

With the legislative session right around the corner, MSF has been busily working on our first strategic plan which includes our goals for the legislative session. Once approved, our legislative agenda will be made available to the public via our website, mississippifirst.org. We encourage advocates interested in supporting our legislative efforts to contact us at contact@mississippifirst.org.

SEX EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE REFORM

A recent article in [Education Week](#) highlighted funding for sex education in healthcare bills in Congress. The healthcare bill passed by the House earlier this month provided \$50 million for comprehensive sex education programs and no funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. But while the bill currently being debated in the Senate provides \$75 million for comprehensive programs, it also provides \$50 million for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. If the Senate bill is passed, the two bills will be sent to a conference committee in which members of both chambers will craft a single, final bill. The decisions made in this committee regarding funding for sex education could have a large impact on Mississippi and its leading rates of teen birth and sexually transmitted diseases.

Numerous studies show that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs simply do not work. Students in these programs are *as likely* to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage, *less likely* to use contraceptives when they do, and are *more likely* to engage in other forms of sexual activity than their peers who do not participate in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Conversely, comprehensive sex education programs are proven effective at leading youth towards healthier decisions regarding their sexual health. MSF believes that if Congress provides any funding for sex education, it should go to programs that are proven to be effective. MSF will continue to track this issue as the healthcare debate continues.

Race to the Top

REGULATIONS AND DEADLINES ANNOUNCED

Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Education released the rules and guidelines for the [Race to the Top Fund](#), the \$4.35 billion competitive grant program for states to improve the quality of public education. Based on Mississippi's population of children between the ages of 5 and 17, Mississippi could be awarded as much as \$175 million. State applications will be evaluated based on a rubric that awards a maximum of 500 points:

- State Success Factors--125 points (25%)
- Standards and Assessments--70 points (14%)
- Data Systems to Support Instruction--47 points (9%)
- Great Teachers and Leaders--138 points (28%)
- Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools--50 points (10%)
- General Selection Criteria--55 points (13%)
- Emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)--15 points (3%)

A more detailed description of these categories can be found [here](#).

The Department has also indicated that it will give priority to applications with the following characteristics:

- Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform [absolute priority for successful applications]
- Emphasis on STEM
- Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes
- Expansion and Adaptation of Statewide Longitudinal Data
- P-20 Coordination, Vertical and Horizontal Alignment
- School-Level Conditions for Reform, Innovation, and Learning

Race to the Top (R2TT) grants will be awarded in two rounds. The deadline for Round I is January 19, 2010. States whose applications are unsuccessful in Round I or who do not apply can apply by the Round II deadline of June 1, 2009. As an incentive to apply

in Round I, unsuccessful applicants will receive feedback on their applications before the Round II deadline. Therefore, MSF strongly encourages our state to submit an application by the Round I deadline.

YOU CAN HELP!

Executive Director Rachel Hicks has been appointed to Mississippi's Race to the Top Advisory Committee. This committee will play a large role in Mississippi's application process. Because we have a seat at the table, you also have a seat at the table. MSF strongly encourages you to share your best ideas (those supported by research and practice) in order to make Mississippi's application as competitive as possible. To share your ideas, please email us at contact@mississippifirst.org.

Democracy Revitalization @MSF

MSF HIRES LACEY LOFTIN AS TECHNOLOGY DIRECTOR

Mississippi First welcomes its third hire, Lacey Loftin, who will serve as the organization's Technology Director. Although a large part of Lacey's job will be the enhancement of mississippifirst.org, Lacey will also help MSF use technology to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. Lacey's position is generously funded by our recent grant from the Ben and Jerry's Foundation with matching support from the Josh and Anita Bekenstein Charitable Trust. If you would like to donate to the technology project, please go to www.mississippifirst.org/contribute.

Research Roundup

MISSISSIPPI RELEASES SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY DATA

On November 23, 2009, the Mississippi Department of Education released the first school and district [accountability data](#) since the new accountability system was approved. The new system was created to be more aligned with national accountability standards and assigns to schools and districts a descriptive label based on

- Student performance on state tests,
- Student achievement of expected academic growth, and
- High school graduation and completion rates.

Two districts and over thirty schools were rated "star," the highest rating in the new system. On the other end of the scale, eight districts and over fifty schools were rated "failing," the lowest rating in the new system. These schools and districts will be eligible for the Recovery School District (RSD) created by the Children First Act of 2009. The Mississippi Department of Education is expected to finalize rules and procedures for the RSD in early 2010. MSF has been carefully following the formation of the RSD and will report on its progress when new information is available.

Mississippi in the News

GOV. BARBOUR PROPOSES MAJOR CUTS IN FY2011 BUDGET

In the wake of historic state revenue shortfalls, Governor Barbour has proposed an ambitious – and very controversial – plan to balance the state’s budget for the 2011 fiscal year. His proposal recommends 12% cuts for state agencies as well as the closure of some of the state’s mental health facilities. The recommendations drawing the most ire, however, have been in education, where he has proposed that the state...

- Merge Mississippi University for Women into Mississippi State University;
- Merge Alcorn State and Mississippi Valley State Universities into Jackson State University; and
- Reduce the number of public school districts from 152 to 100.

While the governor’s current college merger plans are unlikely to be approved by the legislature, school consolidation, especially in K-12, may become a reality. But as Rep. Cecil Brown stated in a recent [op-ed](#), “The goal of any consolidation effort should be to improve student outcomes.” MSF will keep you informed about how the current budget crisis will affect efforts to improve the quality of our public education system.

TOM BURNHAM SELECTED AS THE NEXT STATE SUPERINTENDENT

The State Board of Education selected Tom Burnham to become the next State Superintendent of Education. Burnham, who previously served as Mississippi’s State Superintendent from 1992 to 1997, has been the Dean of the School of Education at Ole Miss since 2004. As State Superintendent, Burnham will be responsible for fostering dramatic improvements in our K-12 system, which has long been among the nation’s lowest-performing. Burnham is expected to begin serving by January 1st.

U.S. DHHS LAUNCHES NEW HEALTHCARE REFORM WEBSITE

This month, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services unveiled a [website](#) with information on how health insurance reform will impact the people of [Mississippi](#). The website features information from the [CDC](#), [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), and the [AMA](#).

December Preview

MSF WELCOMES SHAWNA DAVIE

Mississippi First welcomes its seventh board member, **Shawna Davie**. A native of St. Louis, Missouri, Shawna came to Mississippi to attend Jackson State University. She graduated from JSU with a B.A. in English in May 2007. Shawna works for the [United Way of the Capitol Area](#) as the Drop-out Prevention Coordinator and resides in Jackson.

LEGISLATIVE TOUR OF THE EMERSON FAMILY SCHOOL

The MSF Staff has worked with Rep. Tyrone Ellis of Starkville to schedule a legislative tour of the Emerson Family School on December 3, 2009. Legislators from the Golden Triangle area have been invited to tour the school, which represents a successful model for providing high-quality, pre-K and early learning services for Mississippi children. The school features four notable qualities:

- **Public-Private Partnership for Financing**--The Starkville School District provides the facility and serves as the school's fiscal agent while students attend through tuition or childcare vouchers. Other expenses are paid for through grants.
- **High-Quality Program**--Not only does the school follow best practices in the early learning, classes for 4- and 5-year-olds are staffed by licensed teachers.
- **A "Birth-to-Five" Focus**--Classes are available for infants to 5-year-olds.
- **Parent-Friendly**--The school operates 12 months out of the year with an extended school day and a Parent Resource Center to meet parents' needs.

Legislators from outside the Golden Triangle area who are interested in attending the tour should contact Deputy Director Sanford Johnson at sanford@mississippifirst.org.

K-12 COMMON CORE STANDARDS TO BE RELEASED

A draft of the K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is expected to be released in December 2009 or early January 2010. The [Common Core Standards Initiative](#) was created by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers as a means of developing high-quality academic standards in every state. Race to the Top guidelines call for all states to adopt internationally-benchmarked standards and assessments that will prepare students for college and the workplace. States can fulfill this requirement by fully adopting the Common Core State Standards; full adoption requires that states accept the entire CCSS and avoid the urge to pick and choose what to incorporate into their current standards. Although Mississippi is one of 46 states that have signed on to the Common Core Standards Initiative, Mississippi has not yet committed to fully adopting the CCSS.

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.