

In this Update

A Note from the Executive Director

- Is Mississippi Racing to the Top?

Policy Advocacy @MSF

- Mississippi First Policy Priorities for FY2010
- Mississippi First Attends PIE Network Summit
- Racial Equity and Education: Mississippi & the South

Democracy Revitalization @MSF

- MSF Receives Grant from the Ben & Jerry's Foundation

Mississippi in the News

- Mississippi's NAEP Math Scores and State Ranking Stagnate

November Preview

- State Board to Select New State Superintendent
- Organizational Development
- Support Mississippi First

A Note from the Executive Director

IS MISSISSIPPI RACING TO THE TOP?

When Sanford and I went to Denver earlier this month to attend the Policy Innovators in Education Fall Summit, the issue on everyone else's mind was the status of their state's application to the U.S. Dept. of Education's [Race-to-the-Top](#) (R2TT) Fund. And is it any wonder? At a time when most states – Mississippi included – are struggling to fund their K-12 education systems, the R2TT Fund is dangling \$4,350,000,000.00 (yes, that number is in the billions) in federal grant dollars to states that submit the applications with the most innovative ideas in four reform areas:

- 1) standards and assessments,
- 2) effective teachers and principals,
- 3) data systems, and
- 4) turning around low-performing schools.

A few months ago, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) came out with a [report](#) handicapping each state's chances of receiving funds. The report ranked Mississippi as "somewhat competitive." Unfortunately, TNTP must have made this assessment before Mississippi's charter law lapsed in July. Since one of the selection criteria for receiving R2TT funds is having legislation enabling charter school creation and growth, a more accurate classification would be "does not meet one or more selection criteria" – just like Alabama. No matter what your opinion on charters, I hope you find this

classification as disheartening as I do. Who needs innovative education reform – and the money to accomplish the task – more than Mississippi?

Certainly, if the legislature passes a high-quality charter law this session, Mississippi might be more competitive in Round 2 of the R2TT application process. But *not* running afoul of the selection criteria is only a minimal goal to shoot for. No one in Mississippi even seems to be talking about our application, which is supposed to be filed by the Governor's Office. The most I could find out about it on the Mississippi Department of Education's website was one line in a chart that stated that "MDE will work in conjunction with the Governor's Office on the application." My email to the Governor's Office about R2TT went unanswered, although I will try again this week. Right now, the innovative ideas our state leaders plan to include in our application are a complete mystery.

Here at Mississippi First, we have a few ideas about what Mississippi should propose in each of the four reform areas. We will certainly be sharing these ideas with you – and the Governor's Office – over the next few months. But to ensure that Mississippi submits a competitive application, we need your help.

[Call](#) Governor Barbour's Office and ask about the status of Mississippi's Race-to-the-Top application. If you're feeling spunky, suggest that they call us about it, too. And of course, we want to hear from you. Do you have great ideas about how we can reform education? If so, email us at contact@mississippifirst.org. We'll take the best ideas (those supported by research and practice) in the four reform areas and incorporate them into our lobbying campaign. Let's get this race started!

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

Policy Advocacy @MSF

MISSISSIPPI FIRST POLICY PRIORITIES FOR FY2010

This month, MSF's Board of Directors met to approve Mississippi First's policy priorities for the 2010 fiscal year (July 2009-June 2010). These priorities are

Comprehensive Sex Education – MSF supports a comprehensive sex education pilot program in Mississippi's public schools. Following research on what works to lower risky teen behaviors that lead to high teen birth and STD rates, this pilot program must be age-appropriate, scientifically reviewed, and based on medically accurate information regarding abstinence and contraception. It must also teach teens decision-making skills about responsible sexual behavior.

Charter Schools – MSF supports policy that will allow the creation of open-enrollment charter schools. However, this policy must ensure a high-quality charter authorizing process, create effective accountability, and promote the closing of racial and socio-economic achievement gaps.

Early Voting – MSF supports an in-person early voting policy.

Pre-Kindergarten – MSF will develop a multi-year strategy for building statewide support for state-funded pre-K. MSF will also examine “collaborative” pre-K models, which can serve as models for affordable, high-quality programs.

As always, we welcome any comments, questions, or ideas you may have about our policy priorities. Please contact us by sending an e-mail to contact@mississippifirst.org. We also encourage you to help us build our capacity by [donating](#) to Mississippi First.

MISSISSIPPI FIRST ATTENDS PIE NETWORK SUMMIT

MSF attended the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Policy Summit, held October 14-16 in Denver, CO. The PIE Network, created by four leading education policy organizations, is a national coalition of state-level education advocacy organizations.

The summit explored several education policy topics, including

- the [Common Core](#) academic standards;
- the federal Race-to-the-Top grant;
- possible teacher quality provisions in the next NCLB re-authorization; and
- turnaround schools.

After attending this policy summit, MSF plans to submit an application for membership to the PIE Network. If accepted, MSF would become Mississippi’s only member and one of the few members representing Southern states. Membership would give MSF the opportunity to learn about recent policy research and innovative ideas and share best practices from across the country. We would also have the opportunity to collaborate with other state-level policy organizations.

RACIAL EQUITY AND EDUCATION: MISSISSIPPI & THE SOUTH

Last week, MSF staff attended a three-day policy conference entitled “Racial Equity and Education: Mississippi & The South.” The conference was convened by the Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP, the Center for Social Inclusion, and the Southern Education Fund. Attendees included education advocates from Mississippi and other Southern states. The conference explored the history of racial and class disparities in educational attainment in Mississippi and the South. Conference attendees also discussed ideas to improve educational quality, access, and achievement for all children.

Democracy Revitalization @MSF

MSF RECEIVES GRANT FROM THE BEN & JERRY’S FOUNDATION

Mississippi First received its first foundation grant this month from the Ben & Jerry’s Foundation. The \$15,000 grant, matched by another \$15,000 from our challenge grant from Josh and Anita Bekenstein, will be used to hire a Technology Director. This hire will allow us to further develop our website to use new media, including a blog for MSF staff and members and more social networking tools. An online donation tool is also a priority.

Our search for a new Technology Director has just begun. We are seeking qualified applicants that are interested in the position. If you or someone you know is interested in joining the MSF staff, please contact Executive Director Rachel Hicks at rachel@mississippifirst.org.

Mississippi in the News

MISSISSIPPI'S NAEP MATH SCORES AND STATE RANKING STAGNATE

This month, the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education released the 4th and 8th grade [mathematics](#) results of the 2009 National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. The report holds bad news for Mississippi: not only did Mississippi not move from our bottom place finish in the state rankings for 4th and 8th grade math scores, Mississippi's scores in both grades also have not risen to any statistically significant degree since 2005. This stagnation holds true for both black and white students as well as poor and non-poor students. Click [here](#) for the full report.

November Preview

STATE BOARD TO SELECT NEW STATE SUPERINTENDENT

According to the [Clarion-Ledger](#), the Mississippi State Board of Education has narrowed its field of candidates to four for the job of State Superintendent of Education. Read our white paper on the selection [here](#), and contact [the State Board](#) to voice your support for our position!

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Website Development: Please continue to follow our progress at www.mississippifirst.org. When our new Technology Director is hired, the site will begin changing rapidly!

Fundraising: MSF relies on the generosity of individuals and foundations to continue our work. To make a donation, please visit www.mississippifirst.org/contribute for details or email staff at contact@mississippifirst.org to set up an appointment.

SUPPORT MISSISSIPPI FIRST

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. Mississippi First is led by Executive Director Rachel Hicks and Deputy Director Sanford Johnson. To learn more, visit MississippiFirst.org.