

*Editor's Note: We are implementing is a more consistent schedule for the release of our monthly updates. From now on, we plan officially release our update on the last Monday of each month. Between updates, keep checking the website for periodic updates or, to keep track of us up-to-the-minute, become a fan on [Facebook](#) or follow us on [Twitter](#).*

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## **A Note from the Executive Director**

### SEEING MORE THAN THE MOUNTAIN

For the past two months, I've been working with a group of first year Teach For America teachers in Holmes County. Each week, I help them work through some of their daily challenges in teaching high-poverty, low-achieving students. When I met these teachers on the eve of their first week of school, they were just as excited about digging in to the work of their classrooms as they were anxious.

Now the new has worn off, and the tough reality of teaching under difficult circumstances has set in. At our last meeting, one elementary school teacher expressed what many of my colleagues in education reform have felt before – the feeling of failure. Whether in the classroom or at the policy level, we all know what the mountain looks like. We can describe it in detail and can recount the many ways in which we've tried to climb it and the many times that we have failed. Some find the vastness of the mountain so daunting and have been toiling to scale it for so long that they have become convinced that it is an impossible task. Every new method that is proposed is not met with enthusiasm, or even curiosity, but with "can't's," "won't's," and "don't's."

Fortunately, we live in an era in which people have climbed the mountain of education reform. Low-income students CAN be successful. Low-performing schools CAN be turned around. But if we focus solely on the mountain, we never see the better way. Perhaps Sir Edmund Hillary, who is credited with being the first person to climb Mt. Everest, put it best when he said, “We conquer not the mountain, but ourselves.” After each teacher meeting I lead, what I remember during the rest of my week is not my teachers’ frustration but their determination to help their students succeed despite their struggles. It is this drive – the desire to acknowledge and analyze their own mistakes, learn from them, and try again – that will ultimately make these teachers successful. Last week, for example, the last teacher to leave our meeting was the same teacher who confessed to feeling like a failure. On his way out, I could hear the commitment to overcoming the mountain in his voice when he said of his classroom, “We’re going to get [the job] done.”

I agree. We are going to get the job done in Mississippi, too. Join our journey by signing up at [www.mississippifirst.org/contactus](http://www.mississippifirst.org/contactus). You should also take a peek at the four-minute video the Starkville Public Schools has produced to inspire their striving. Watch it here: <http://www.broadcastmediagroup.com/believe>.

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director

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

## Policy Advocacy @MSF

### PRE-KINDERGARTEN AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION STRATEGY

Since our July presentation at the Capitol, Mississippi First staff have been making the rounds to talk to people engaged in the early childhood field in Mississippi. Recently, Executive Director Rachel Hicks spent a half-day at the Emerson Family School in the Starkville School District and was very impressed by the work going on there. As a result of these conversations, MSF is closing in on a workable pre-K strategy that emphasizes collaboration across the early childhood sector. We hope to publish a white paper by December on successful collaborative models for implementing high-quality early education, and how existing state legislation could advance our efforts in this area.

### GOVERNOR’S SUMMIT ON TURNAROUND SCHOOLS

On September 16<sup>th</sup>, Governor Barbour hosted district superintendents, policymakers, and education advocates in Jackson for *Making the Grade: Turnaround Tools for Mississippi Schools*. The purpose of this summit was to explore strategies that can be used to dramatically improve the educational outcomes for students in our lowest performing school and school districts.

One of the summit’s key presentations was led by David Wakelyn of the National Governors Association’s [Center for Best Practices](#). During the presentation, Mr. Wakelyn presented four school/district turnaround strategies that states may use with stimulus monies added to the Title I program. These options are

- **Leaders/Staff Turnaround** – replace administrators and a significant portion of teachers (as much as 50%) in the lowest performing schools

- **Restart Model** – close low-performing schools and allow them to reopen as charter schools
- **Close and Consolidate** – better use of resources by closing or consolidating schools and districts
- **Transformation Model** – focus on better instruction, data-driven decisions, and greater flexibility on the school-level

During this presentation, it was clear that each strategy had supporters and critics in the audience. The comments of several attendees also made it clear that the strategies were not fully understood. To address the interests and concerns that were expressed, MSF will publish a white paper that will explain each of these options from a Mississippi perspective. For each strategy, the paper will outline

- What each strategy is
- Essential components for success/possible obstacles
- Examples of successful implementation from across the country

This white paper will be published by the end of October and will be available on our [website](#).

## Democracy Revitalization @MSF

### YOUTH ENGAGED in SERVICE (YES!)

Mississippi First held a YES! Curriculum training on August 21 and 22 at the Knight Non-Profit Center in Gulfport, MS. During the training, MSF staff led participants through the entire curriculum, identified available resources, and answered questions. Participants also had the opportunity to prepare and teach one of the lessons from the curriculum.

Many thanks goes to America's Promise and the Jackson County Civic Action Committee for sponsoring the curriculum development and training through its grants to MCVS. In turn, MCVS has generously made the YES! Curriculum available for free to any interested organization. As part of our contract services program, MSF can be contracted to train organizations to use the curriculum. For more information about MSF's contract services, contact Executive Director Rachel Hicks at [rachel@mississippifirst.org](mailto:rachel@mississippifirst.org). For more information about YES! or the curriculum, contact Caitlin Brooking at [cbrooking@ihl.state.ms.us](mailto:cbrooking@ihl.state.ms.us).

### EARLY VOTING

If you missed Mississippi First's Executive Director Rachel Hicks' op-ed in the *Clarion-Ledger* on Saturday, September 26, you can find it [here](#). It has also been published in the *Hattiesburg American* and the *Mississippi Link*. We'll keep you posted about where else it pops up. Over the next few months, we will also be releasing a white paper on sensible early voting policy that discusses the advantages of early voting, how early voting impacts the integrity of the voting process, and the costs of an early voting policy.

## Research Round-up

### PAPER FINDS THAT GOOD TEACHERS POSITIVELY AFFECT THEIR PEERS

A new [National Bureau of Economics Research](#) paper expected to be published in October by researchers Kirabo Jackson and Elias Bruegmann finds that high-quality teachers positively influence the outcomes of students taught by their peers, which economists refer to as a “spillover” effect. According to Education Week, the noted effect is large enough to be both statistically significant and meaningful. The study’s authors speculate that the “spillover” may be caused by less effective teachers learning from the example of the more effective teacher, but more research is needed to verify or disprove that theory. When the paper is released in October, Mississippi First will analyze it more extensively.

## Mississippi in the News

### REP. THOMPSON’S HEALTH CARE TOWN HALL

According to the [U.S. Census](#), over 500,000 Mississippians have no health insurance. Thousands more have inadequate insurance, and would risk a financial crisis in the face of a medical emergency. The Magnolia State also faces severe shortages of health care professionals, particularly in our most impoverished areas. And because we hold the distinction of being “America’s Fattest State” for the 6<sup>th</sup> straight year, many Mississippians are vulnerable to a host of chronic health problems. These conditions not only affect our state’s health, but they also have a negative impact on education, economic development, and our overall quality of life.

As the health insurance reform debate is very important to the state of Mississippi, Deputy Director Sanford Johnson attended U.S. Representative Bennie Thompson’s (D-2<sup>nd</sup>) August 26<sup>th</sup> town hall discussion of House Bill 3200, the “America’s Affordable Health Choices Act.” Below is a summary of the notes Johnson took during the meeting.

According to information provided by the Congressman, HB 3200 would provide the following benefits:

- Tax credits for middle class Mississippians to help cover insurance premiums;
- Protections from losing coverage for pre-existing conditions;
- Increased focus on preventive healthcare; and
- Access for individuals and small businesses to a health insurance exchange, which would include a new public insurance option.

After a 15-minute introduction, Thompson took **questions**. These are summarized.

### *Funding Health Care Reform*

Thompson stated that the House was likely to vote to fund health care reform through a tax increase on wealthy Americans. But he added that the Senate may very well approve a different plan, and that the funding plan for the final bill will likely be a hybrid of the two chambers’ plans.

### *Questions about Abortion Services*

This was a major concern for a many of the town hall participants. Thompson responded by saying that there was nothing in the health care bill that would cover abortion services.

### *Co-Op Instead of a Public Option*

Thompson said that a co-op plan would have to include a large number of members (at least 500,000) in order to lower insurance costs. He added that he'd be open to supporting a co-op in the final bill, as long as it covered the 47million uninsured Americans.

### *Federal Resources to Help Mississippi Fight Obesity*

Thompson stated that the House bill will provide greater focus on preventive health care, including wellness programs and health education.

Several questioners also wanted to know **how reform would impact people in a variety of circumstances**. Thompson's answers are summarized.

### *Mississippians with private insurance:*

A questioner suggested that private insurance holders should receive compensation since people on the public option would get it for free. Thompson stated that people on the public option would also pay an insurance premium, determined by an income-based scale. He also stated that the privately-insured would benefit by no longer losing their coverage because of a pre-existing condition.

### *Mississippians on Medicare or Medicaid:*

Thompson stated that people on these two insurance programs would not be affected by the new legislation. However, he also stated that no provision in the bill would prevent doctors from turning away patients on Medicare, Medicaid, or a public option. He concluded by saying that if people have some form of insurance, they'll be able to find a doctor to see them.

### *Mississippians receiving end-of-life care:*

Thompson stated that the public option would cover end-of-life care, including hospice care.

### *Mississippi small business owners:*

Thompson stated that small businesses with gross income under \$250,000 will have their insurance premiums capped at 2%. He added that the increased competition provided by the insurance marketplace and the public option would help to lower the cost of insurance.

Rep. Thompson and the rest of our Congressional delegation returned to Washington last week. While Mississippi First is not taking an official position on any of the health care bills working their way through Congress, we believe that reform measures that will expand access to quality care for all Mississippians will be good for the state.

## EFFORTS TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF MS COLLEGE GRADS

A *Clarion Ledger* article published [Wednesday](#), September 19, discussed the current work of the Graduation Rate Task Force. The task force is comprised of legislators, as well as representatives from Mississippi's community colleges and 4-year colleges and

universities. Its purpose is to create recommendations that will boost the number of Mississippians that earn college degrees. These recommendations will be presented before the start of the 2010 Legislative Session.

The article points out that only 19% of Mississippians have earned a bachelor's degree, which earns a national ranking of 47<sup>th</sup> according to the [census](#). Of our state's eight public universities, Mississippi State University's graduation rate of 58.2% is the only one to surpass the national average of 55%. In an economy where a college degree continues to become more and more essential, our low college graduation rates leave Mississippi at a disadvantage.

## October Preview

### POLICY GOALS FOR 2010 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

This month, the MSF Staff and Board members will outline our policy goals for the 2010 Legislative Session, which begins in January. Education reform will continue to be a major focus. We will work on a multi-year strategy to promote the adoption of a state-funded pre-Kindergarten program. We will also work to promote charter school legislation that will provide quality access, resources, and accountability. To read the policy work we've already done on these issues, please visit our [website](#). We also welcome any comments, questions, or ideas you may have about our policy goals. Please contact us by sending an e-mail to [contact@mississippifirst.org](mailto:contact@mississippifirst.org).

As a nonprofit organization, fundraising is essential to our policy work. Your [donations](#) to MSF give us the capacity to take on more policy issues, and we greatly appreciate your generosity.

### ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**Website Development:** Please continue to follow our progress at [www.mississippifirst.org](http://www.mississippifirst.org). We are continually adding content!

**Fundraising:** MSF relies on the generosity of individuals and foundations to continue our work. To make a donation, please visit [www.mississippifirst.org/contribute](http://www.mississippifirst.org/contribute) for details or email staff at [contact@mississippifirst.org](mailto: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 the websites.

### **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](https://MississippiFirst.org).