



September/October 2010 Update

ED Note

Done Waiting

After months of waiting (and more than one email to Paramount) to find out if and when the movie [Waiting for Superman](#) would come to Mississippi, the movie was here and gone in the blink of an eye. For those of you who didn't get to the theater before the movie closed in Mississippi, the film follows five children and their families who want a better education than their assigned public school can offer them and who can't afford private school options. Instead, they are hoping to get into a high-performing charter school via lottery. The movie also explores the deep challenges we have in public education in America.

Whatever your feelings are about charter schools, it is hard to see this movie and not feel how trapped these students and their families feel by their circumstances. One of the most heart-breaking facets of the film is the story of one mother who is doing everything right to try to advocate for her child in a broken school. She is the "demanding parent" that we so often hear people say is lacking in failing schools. And yet, it isn't enough. She wants to get her child into the Harlem Success Academy, the Harlem Children Zone's charter school, because she wants a better education for her child *now*, not in the five years it often takes to turnaround a traditional public school.

But, critics may counter, not every child can go to Harlem Success. What about everyone else? These critics believe that since not *every* child will be served by a high-performing charter school, charter schools should not be allowed for *any* child. We at Mississippi First do not find this argument compelling. Of course we should find a solution for *every* child. Meeting the challenges where they are--in traditional public education--must be part of the equation.

But just because high-performing charter schools may only be part of the solution doesn't mean that they aren't still *part of the solution*. This is why Mississippi First works on both charter school policy and school turnaround policy at the same time: we see them as two sides of the same coin. Both have a role to play in providing an excellent education to every child.

Mississippi First is done waiting for Superman to come along and save our schools. We're done waiting for the magic bullet that promises to instantly improve public education for all children, and we're done waiting for permission from the power players to move our reform agenda. We've got a lot of work to do on policies related to pre-Kindergarten, school turnaround, charter schools, and teacher and leader effectiveness, to name a few. We've joined the [Done Waiting](#) coalition, a national group of folks who feel the same way.

If you feel the same sense of urgency that we do, let us know that you'd like to become an

advocate for one of our issues. Forward our newsletter to your friends. Send us a donation to support our work. Talk to your colleagues about why public education reform is important. Invite us to speak at a local event. We want you to join us because it's going to take a lot more than Mississippi First to move Mississippi forward. It's going to take you, Mississippi.

Have a great Thanksgiving.

Rachel Hicks

Executive Director

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

POLICY ADVOCACY

Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens (CHART) Initiative

Federal Funding for CHART

As we noted in our previous Update, Mississippi First worked with the Mississippi Department of Health (MDH) to submit the state's abbreviated application for the Personal Responsibility and Education Program (PREP). The fund, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was created to assist states in educating youth ages 10-19 on the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, through the use of abstinence and contraception.

In early October, MDH was notified that it would receive \$537,218 in grant funds for FY2010. Now, MDH must complete a "Post-Award State Plan" by February 1 to draw down its award dollars. Many of these dollars will be sub-granted to school districts adopting the CHART model policy for the purpose of implementing comprehensive sex education programs. Other dollars will fund MDH-provided training and technical assistance for school personnel in districts implementing a PREP sub-grant.

Mississippi First is thrilled to be an integral part of this exciting development. We will keep you updated on the project's progress through our Update, blog, and website.

More Troubling Statistics

While our previous updates about the CHART Initiative have focused heavily on teen childbearing, MSF also recognizes that sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are also a major problem among Mississippi teenagers. According to health statistics provided by the Centers for Disease Control, Mississippi leads the nation in teenage infection rates (15-19) for Chlamydia and gonorrhea. While the bulk of our upcoming advocacy efforts will go to counties with high teen birth rates, we will also work in counties with lower teen birth rates but very high STI rates.

List of counties with high birth rates or infection rates (indicates that the county is not among those with the highest birth rates)*

Teen Birth Rates	Chlamydia	Gonorrhea
Tunica	Holmes	Washington
Coahoma	Tunica	Leflore
Tallahatchie	Coahoma	Hinds*
Panola	Humphreys	Humphreys
Neshoba	Leflore	Noxubee*
Scott	Tallahatchie	Holmes
Humphreys	Jefferson*	Lauderdale*
Covington	Washington	Coahoma
Holmes	Yazoo	Forrest*
Yazoo	Claiborne*	Sunflower*
Washington	Hinds*	
Chickasaw	Bolivar*	
Simpson	Sunflower*	
Leflore	Noxubee*	
George	Copiah*	
Tippah	Sharkey*	
Wayne		
Benton		

School Turnaround

US Department of Education Announces FY2010 School Improvement Grant Process

On November 1, the USDE notified state departments of education that the FY2010 application process for School Improvement Grants was officially underway. States must submit revised applications by December 3.

MSF on the Road

Rachel @ the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Conference in Nashville

Last month, Executive Director Rachel Hicks attended the PIE Conference in Nashville, TN. PIE is MSF's favorite conference to attend, not only because the panels are informative and engaging, but because the attendees are all doing great things for kids. What Rachel learned at the conference will be making its way into Updates and papers over the course of the year. To read more about the PIE Network and see some of the papers that were discussed at the conference, check out their website: <http://www.pie-network.org/web/guest/home>.

Sanford @ the Independent Sector Annual Conference in Atlanta

While Rachel attended the PIE Conference in Nashville, Deputy Director Sanford Johnson was at the Independent Sector Annual Conference in Atlanta. The Independent Sector is an organization designed to give nonprofit and philanthropic organizations a forum to connect, while sharing ideas and success stories. While at the conference, Sanford learned from leaders of several successful organizations as they discussed issues related to raising capital in tough economic times, using technology to build capacity, and boosting community engagement. Each of these issues have been central to our efforts to grow MSF. By far the greatest takeaway from the conference, besides Rep. John Lewis's keynote address, was the confirmation of the important role the "independent sector" (nonprofits and foundations) plays in helping our public and private sectors solve our most pressing challenges.

To find out more about Independent Sector and the annual conference, visit their website:

<http://independentsector.org/home>

DEMOCRACY REVITALIZATION

MSF @ Ole Miss

Over the past month, several students at Ole Miss have been getting together to discuss public policy and civic engagement. Several months of outreach efforts resulted in an October 14th meeting of students that were interested in getting involved with MSF. The first meeting was a brainstorming session, in which they came up with great ideas for new public policy goals, advocacy projects, and strategies to boost civic engagement on campus. Since that first meeting, students have formed a steering committee, through which members plan future meetings of the group.

In recent meetings of the Ole Miss group, students have been actively involved in policy discussions and activities. Cody Bode talked to the group about the Board of Education meeting he went to on campus. Cortez Moss presented the CHART model policy he

created during his summer internship with MSF. And several students have expressed interest in taking part in our advocacy efforts to get public school districts to provide comprehensive sex education through the CHART Initiative. As this campus organizing effort continues, we will keep you informed about new developments.

In addition to the success at Ole Miss, outreach efforts are also taking place at other campuses, including Mississippi State, Jackson State, and Millsaps. If you're interested in taking part in these efforts, please contact Sanford Johnson at sanford@mississippifirst.org.

IN THE NEWS

Higher Education

The High Costs of Dropping Out

A new report from the American Institute for Research (AIR) highlights the alarming amount of state and federal funds that are spent on students that dropout of college after their first year. The [report](#), entitled "Finishing the First Lap: The Cost of First-Year Student Attrition in America's Four-Year Colleges and Universities", shows that first-year-only students cost the U.S. over \$9 billion during the five-year study (2003-08). This figure includes \$6.2 billion in state expenditures for colleges and universities, along with \$1.4 billion (state) and \$1.5 billion (federal) in grants for students that never reach their sophomore year.

The report also includes data for each state and the District of Columbia. According to the AIR study, over \$88 million state and federal dollars have been spent over the past five years on first-year-only students in Mississippi. This amount includes over \$70 million state dollars. During the five years of this study, Mississippi spent \$66.7 million in state appropriations to 4-year colleges and universities, along with \$4.1 million in grants, for students that never made it to their sophomore year. The additional \$18.8 million came in the form of federal grants. Keep in mind that these costs only cover students that drop after after *the first year*, without mentioning the additional cost of students that drop out later.

There are several reasons why so many high school graduates drop out of college after their first year. Personal situations such as family problems, illness, or financial troubles do happen. However, a bigger driver of dropouts is that our current K-12 education system has produced far too many high school graduates who are unprepared for success in college. Mississippi high school students are not required to take the number advanced math and science classes needed for college success. Several districts throughout the state, particularly small districts, cannot (or do not) even provide

these classes. Yet in recent weeks, the Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) Board decided not to require more advanced classes or raise the minimum number of credit hours. Granted, ensuring that every high school in the state offers physics and other classes would produce some challenges. But as the AIR study shows, keeping sub-par standards in place for even one more year will ultimately cost our state millions of additional dollars, as unprepared college freshmen are forced to either take remedial classes or drop out altogether.

K-12 Accountability

State Accountability Labels Released

In September, the State Board of Education released [accountability labels](#) for schools and districts based on the previously released 2009-2010 data. The labels, which brilliant editorial cartoonist Marshall Ramsey [equated to flotation devices](#), are based on a combination of a school's "Quality Distribution Index" score, growth measure result, and (for high schools only, obviously) high school completion index. At the top end of the scale, there were more districts and schools rated as "successful," "high performing," or "star" this year than last, indicating that schools and districts are showing achievement gains, at least by Mississippi's measures. This progress at the top end of the scale corresponds with a shrinkage of schools and districts falling to the "academic watch," "low-performing," "at-risk-of-failing," and "failing" categories.

In addition to their function as a public awareness tool for how schools are doing, the labels serve an important accountability purpose: districts that are rated as "failing" for two consecutive years are at-risk of state takeover under the *Children First Act of 2009*. Since last year was the first year the state assigned accountability labels, the first group meeting the two-year definition is comprised of

[Kemper County School District](#) DeKalb, MS
[West Tallahatchie School District](#) Webb, MS
[Hazlehurst City School District](#) Hazlehurst, MS
[Okolona Separate School District](#) Okolona, MS
[Drew School District](#) Drew, MS

Since Hazlehurst City and Okolona Separate are already under state conservatorship, Kemper County, West Tallahatchie, and Drew are next in line for possible takeover due to academic reasons. (It should be noted that the state can takeover districts at any time for financial reasons or because a district fails an accreditation audit badly enough that the state is concerned for the immediate health and safety of the students in the district.) After being rated "at-risk-of-failing" in 2008-2009, Hollandale joins the list of failing districts for 2009-2010. However, good news did come for a few districts:

Coahoma County and North Panola, which were both rated as failing in 2008-2009 have moved to “academic watch.” Indianola, also failing in 2008-2009, is now labeled “at-risk-of-failing.” Currently, both Indianola and North Panola are under conservatorship and are likely to remain there until gains by the districts are both stronger and sustained.

State Board of Education

MS Board of Education Meeting

The Mississippi Board of Education met in Oxford on October 21, 2010. Many different issues were discussed, the bulk of which consisted of small language changes in different policies and also some new contracts and grants. However, there were some interesting discussions regarding graduation requirements, the state longitudinal data system, accountability, and evaluation. There was discussion of a proposal to raise the graduation requirements. Members wanted to eliminate the credit given for multiple study hall hours. Many students acquire multiple credits for study hall. Many students enter college in Mississippi feeling under-prepared and raising requirements may hopefully help solve this problem.

The Board also received a brief on the statewide Longitudinal Data System (LDS). The LDS is a data system capable of tracking student information over multiple years in multiple schools. Many comments suggested that the state suffered from a lack of organization, but the LDS may be a step in the right direction. Mississippi is the first state to pull all state departments together using the LDS and ranks in the top 10 in the U.S. in the LDS technology. The LDS may also be useful in improving accountability methods. Board members expressed a desire to build in specific goals with measurable periods of time. They expressed a need for more assessment points each year and also a shortage of measuring points in the state mandates. The LDS system can be used to address these problems and allow the state to identify who is responsible in school and student shortcomings.

NOVEMBER PREVIEW

MSF Welcomes Millsaps Intern

A senior Public Management major at Millsaps College, Victoria Romano joined the Mississippi First team in November as our first school-year intern. Victoria is passionate about public education, particularly the role of single-sex education might play in promoting achievement. While at Millsaps, she has been very active in a variety of student organization and community service projects and is currently organizing the first-annual Mississippi Young Women’s Leadership Summit. In her time at Mississippi First, Victoria will be helping staff with our charter schools work. She can be reached at victoria@mississippifirst.org.

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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.