



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Shaping Our Future



**Driven by the fact that
Mississippi has historically
been last, our founders set a
bold vision: a Mississippi first in
education nationally.**

Mississippi First is dramatically accelerating our impact. We are dedicated to advancing the best education ideas through the policy continuum—research and analysis, public awareness and issue education, advocacy, implementation, and evaluation. A small but mighty team led by Rachel Canter and governed by a board of directors, Mississippi First champions transformative policy solutions, ensuring educational excellence for every Mississippi child.



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FROM OUR LEADER

Within these pages,

we are pleased to present our latest annual report. We couldn't be prouder of our accomplishments this year, including achieving a long-held goal of ours—making the state's public education funding formula more transparent, more equitable, and more focused on the needs of public school students. We also helped win increased funding for public schools by approximately 10% over last year's appropriation and increased funding to our state-funded pre-K program.

In addition to these historic legislative wins, Mississippi First continued to provide useful research for understanding and improving public education. We published two critical public opinion polls:

- Our first-ever poll focused on early education found broad support for both pre-K and

early learning among Mississippians of all walks of life.

- Our charter school poll found that while charter school parents express extremely high satisfaction with their schools, many parents still do not know charter schools are public schools.

Finally, we began planning for new research on the educator pipeline, the new funding formula, and the next iteration of our *State of Pre-K* series. We also continue to administer a host of support programs for both traditional and charter schools.

Our dedicated team works hard each day to fulfill our mission to ensure educational excellence for every child in Mississippi. Leading this team has been the honor of a lifetime, but after 16 years, I have decided that I will leave my position by June 2025. I am filled with gratitude for the journey we have shared (and you can read more about my decision on page 20).

We hope that you will find pride in our work and continue to support us on this path. We sincerely thank you for your donations, no matter their size, and your belief in the work we are leading for the children of Mississippi.

Rachel Canter

Rachel Canter

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

OUR STAFF AND BOARD

“Mississippi First helped make history with the passage of the Mississippi Student Funding Formula, but more importantly, public school students will now have equitable access to resources for their education.”
— Rachel Canter

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Director of Special Projects



MICAYLA TATUM
Director of Early Childhood Policy



OUR FOCUS AREAS

The mission of Mississippi First

is to champion transformative policy solutions, ensuring educational excellence for every Mississippi child. Our work is focused on four areas:



EARLY EDUCATION

After successfully advocating the passage and expansion of the Early Learning Collaborative Act, Mississippi's state-funded pre-K program, we are dedicated to ensuring quality as the program scales, protecting our gains since 2013, and deepening our work in the 0-5 space through research and advocacy.



PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

We research and promote high-quality charter schools and are dedicated to creating the conditions for high-quality seat growth, including supporting new school incubation, access to facilities, new talent pipelines, quality initiatives, and advocacy.



TEACHERS & LEADERS

As part of our educator pipeline work, we support and advocate for policy solutions that will increase equitable access to quality teachers and leaders.



FUTURE OF SCHOOLS

The pandemic showcased the ways in which our education system serves many students poorly. We research and promote policy solutions to the challenges that impact the future of schools.



OUR ACHIEVEMENTS



EARLY EDUCATION

In 2024,

Mississippi First continued to champion transformative policy solutions for early childhood education, solidifying our commitment to ensuring every Mississippi child has access to high-quality pre-K and early learning opportunities. We finalized a birth-to-five policy agenda, laying the groundwork for impactful advocacy and programming in the 0-5 space. This long-term vision is bolstered by a statewide public opinion poll revealing overwhelming support for pre-K and early childhood education—affirming the importance of our mission.

To support educators and policymakers, we developed a blended pre-K toolkit, set for release in FY25, and published an early education briefing book tailored for state officials. Additionally, we began research for the fourth iteration of our *State of Pre-K* report, a comprehensive analysis of pre-K access and quality in communities across the state. Together, these initiatives reflect our unwavering focus on building a brighter future for Mississippi's youngest learners.



EARLY LEARNING COLLABORATIVES

Mississippi First played a pivotal role in strengthening the early learning collaborative (ELC) pre-K program, a cornerstone of the state's early education system. Through ongoing collaboration with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), we provided technical assistance to ensure the program's success and advocated for a \$5 million funding increase. This critical win enabled MDE to raise the per-pupil funding rate to \$3,500, directly benefiting children and educators alike.

In alignment with our commitment to quality, we supported the transition of state-invested pre-K program funds into the higher-quality ELC program, ensuring sustainable growth and accountability. These efforts build on our foundational work in establishing state-funded pre-K through the landmark Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013, underscoring our dedication to educational excellence for every Mississippi child.





OUR ACHIEVEMENTS



CHARTER SCHOOLS

In 2024,

Mississippi First advanced its commitment to high-quality charter schools, focusing on research, funding, community engagement, and advocacy.

RESEARCH & INSIGHTS

We commissioned two key reports—one on financial best practices for charter schools and another evaluating the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board. We also conducted a statewide poll on charter schools, with plans for focus groups and a public awareness campaign to deepen understanding and support.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Our educator pipeline programs, including SPARKS and the Study.com initiative, continued to equip future leaders, with SPARKS set to conclude in 2026. We launched the Operations Residency to train charter school operations leaders and celebrated the final year of our summer Charter School Fellowship.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The Start-Up Fund made its first disbursement, and the Cash Collateral Fund secured its second participant, providing critical resources for charter school growth through partners like HOPE Credit Union.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Through the district-charter community of practice and parent and community advisory group, we engaged stakeholders as partners in improving the charter sector.

QUALITY & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Our technical support led to significant improvements in charter school grades by the end of the 2023-2024 school year. Additionally, the Charter Schools Program grant grew to three subgrantees.

ADVOCACY FOR LEGISLATIVE REFORM

We championed reforms to improve Mississippi's charter school law, laying the groundwork for a sustainable and impactful future.



OUR ACHIEVEMENTS



TEACHERS & LEADERS

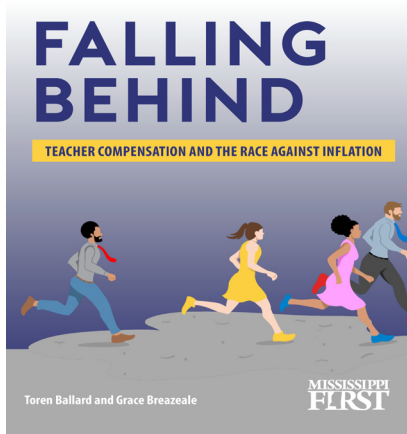
Ensuring a strong educator pipeline

has been one of our primary goals since 2019. In the most recent fiscal year, Mississippi First deepened our research into educator attrition risk by publishing *Falling Behind* in September 2023 (see next page). We also began preparing for a new statewide survey of teachers to be administered in Winter 2024. Finally, Mississippi First successfully advocated for one of the recommendations in *Falling Behind* and our earlier report, *Eyeing the Exit*, to expand the Winter-Reed Teacher Loan Repayment Program to include alternate route and veteran teachers and to provide as many awards as funds available. We remain committed to expanding the size and quality of the educator pipeline so that every child may have a great teacher in their Mississippi public school classroom.

Our 2024 Research

FALLING BEHIND

Mississippi First published another seminal report, *Falling Behind*, examining the impact of the 2022 teacher pay raise on teacher attrition risk factors. This report was based on a 2023 follow-up survey of teachers.



FINDINGS

- 1) The results from the 2022-2023 Mississippi Teacher Survey give us a lens into the realities of Mississippi educators.
- 2) Record inflation has largely negated the impact of the 2022 teacher pay raise.
- 3) About half of teachers continue to report being likely to leave their classroom within the next year.
- 4) Financial insecurity remains widespread among Mississippi teachers, despite the 2022 pay raise.
- 5) Black teachers and their peers of color continue to report troubling levels of financial insecurity and attrition risk.
- 6) Financial insecurity remains one of the most reliable predictors of attrition.



OUR ACHIEVEMENTS



FUTURE OF SCHOOLS

Mississippi First proposed

and passed a new, weighted student funding formula for all public schools that will significantly increase equity for low-income students and students with disabilities, among others. The legislature also dramatically increased funding to all public schools as part of the bill's passage.

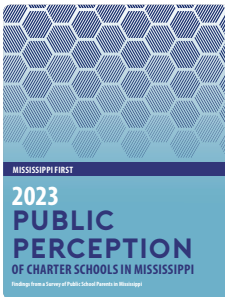
Mississippi First continued to support public schools by providing advice and expertise to policymakers on legislation and other policymaking.

OTHER WORK PUBLISHED IN FY24



2023 PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN MISSISSIPPI

This survey provides valuable insights into Mississippians' views on the importance, affordability, and accessibility of early childhood education.



2023 PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN MISSISSIPPI

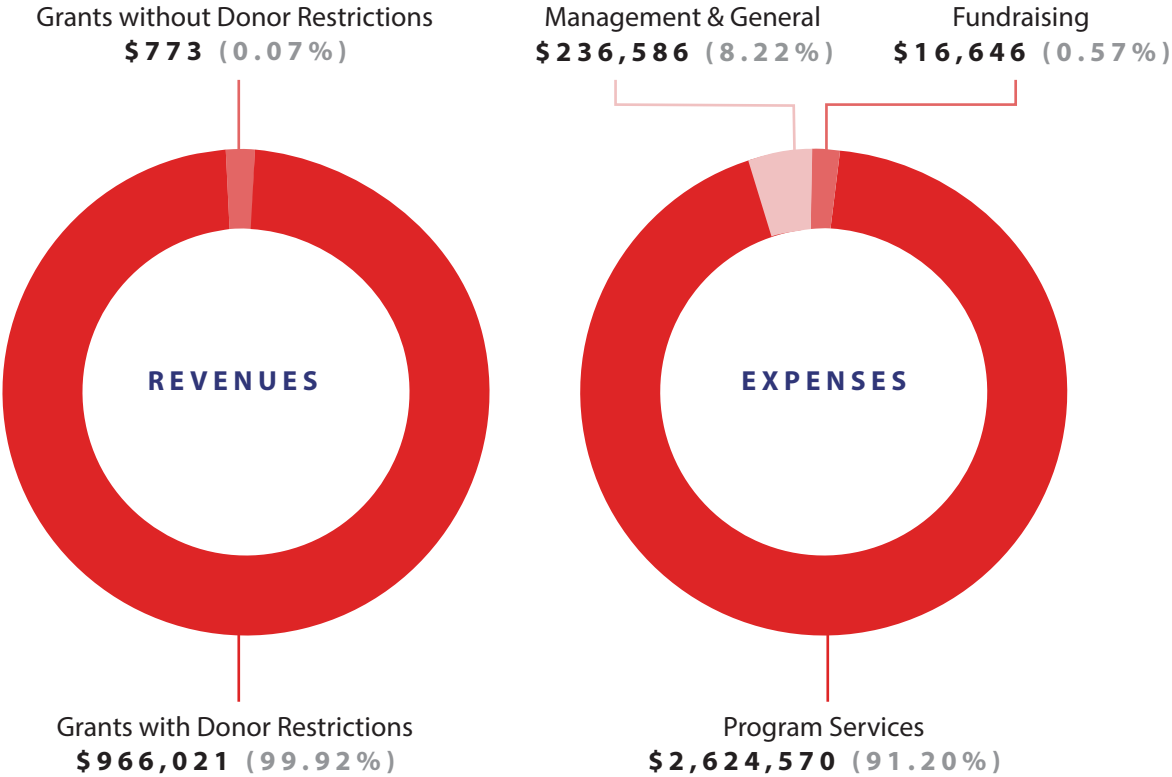
This report offers critical insights into public understanding and support of charter schools in Mississippi, based on a comprehensive survey conducted by the Survey Research Lab at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center.



2024 PRE-K IN MISSISSIPPI: BRIEFING BOOK

This briefing book offers a comprehensive analysis of the current state of pre-K education in Mississippi, offering valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers and educators.

OUR FINANCIALS



Mississippi First operates on a fiscal year, June-July. Due to accrual accounting rules, revenues supporting FY24 expenses were booked as “received” in a prior year.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN 2025

In 2025, we will continue our work to advance research-based policies in each of our focus areas:



EARLY EDUCATION

While continuing to support pre-K, we will expand our focus to researching and improving the childcare system with emphasis on quality and childcare educator pay and licensure.



PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

We will deepen our work to support charter schools and advocate for significant changes to the charter school law in the hopes of changing and improving the trajectory of approved charter schools.



TEACHERS & LEADERS

We will continue to support our recommendations for another teacher pay raise and other incentives like teacher loan forgiveness.



FUTURE OF SCHOOLS

We will continue to be a voice of reason for policymakers and for a Mississippi first in education.

CLOSING LETTER

Dear friends, colleagues, and supporters,

I was 19 when I decided that I would devote my life to what eventually became Mississippi First. It was the summer of 2002, and No Child Left Behind was set to go into effect that fall. I had spent the summer as an intern in the Mississippi Governor's Office and was tasked with spearheading a grant application to help Mississippi get ready for the changes that this new federal law would require.

Through that process, I met the then-superintendent of Cleveland Public Schools. He told me a story about children in Cleveland who were too poor to afford running water and came with their families each week to the fire station to fill up buckets and jugs. These were the children, he impressed upon me, that we are saying can no longer be left behind. What was unstated, but nonetheless seemed to echo so loud to me, was that our country, and our state, would rather forget these children—our children, my children—and each new initiative was only lip service to the idea of something better made by cynical politicians in Washington.

I went home that evening feeling determined and more than a little defiant. A Starkville kid who grew up attending public schools, I have never been able to accept the idea that just

because the state and its children are poor, and just because our history is among the darkest in the nation, we will never be able to be better or do better than last place. "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life," I told a friend. "I want to change Mississippi so that every child, including the kids in Cleveland, can get a great education in Mississippi public schools."

It took seven years, and a lot of twists and turns, from that moment until I moved to Jackson in 2008 to start Mississippi First. From the very beginning, leading this organization has been a labor of love, sweat, and more than a few tears—no more so than today, when after 16 years I am writing to share that I will leave my position by June 2025. I came to this decision after many months of long, careful thought.

My first and largest reason is deeply personal. When I started Mississippi First, I was young and single and responsible to no one other than myself and my ideals. In the intervening years, I have traversed many of the milestones of adulthood, most importantly getting married and having two children. It has become increasingly obvious to me that the pressures of this job are unsustainable if I want to have the time and energy to be present for my kids as they

approach their formative adolescent years. To put it bluntly, I need to take a break from devoting so much energy to Mississippi's children to focus on my own.

Secondly, I want Mississippi First, the organization I've led and cared about so deeply, to have a long life regardless of whether I stay at the helm. The transition from a founder to a successor is often rocky for an organization, and the longer I stay, the harder I know it will be. I need to leave Mississippi First while the organization is strong enough to survive, and I believe that time is now, after 16 years of historic wins, including this past year's generational accomplishment in writing a new, more equitable public school funding formula law. I believe new leadership will open new possibilities.

The usual terms—"bittersweet," "mixed emotions"—do not adequately describe what I'm feeling now. One of the questions I've grappled with over the years is when will it be enough? When will I have done enough to make good on the promises I made when I was 19? With the wisdom of experience, I honestly do not know whether I can ever do enough. I do know that I need to step back from the day-to-day challenges of this position for a brief while so I can sustain my commitment to this work over many years ahead.

Leading Mississippi First has been the honor of a lifetime, and I am so grateful to all my allies, near and far, who have sustained me as I have done this difficult work in this difficult place. I am proud of what we have accomplished together, and I am sorry to leave you.

There will be time for tears, and lessons learned, and future plans. Most importantly, there is still a little more time to get things done before my last day in this seat; I hope we can make the most of it.

My best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel Canter". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Rachel Canter

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



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mississippifirst.org