



South Mississippi Pre-K4ward Coalition

*The solution to elevating the
educational capacity of the Region*

November 10, 2010

Background

The Master's Program Class of 2010 advocates that early education is essential to reaching the goals for K-12 education in the Coastal region—and our state's economy. Study of related research makes a clear case that quality education outcomes start with quality early childhood education. Quality early education for children from birth to age five will prevent the achievement gap, increase school readiness and build a solid foundation for college, career and life success. The choice is clear: Mississippi can continue to remediate from kindergarten through high school and beyond, or it can recognize that education starts at birth and invest in the foundation needed to develop a highly capable, adaptive and productive citizen.

Interesting Statistics regarding Early Childhood Development:

To fully understand the need to elevate educational capacity through early childhood programming, the facts facing Mississippi's youth must be considered.

-By the age of 3, 90% of a child's brain development has already occurred.

-The I.Q. of a child can be increased by as much as 25% when stimulation is provided to them prior to the age of five.

-In the State of Mississippi, 51% of the infants under age 2 are living in homes that are at poverty level or no more than 200% above the poverty level. In contrast, in the US 19.8% of our children live in poverty. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 12% of children live in extreme poverty along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

-Mississippi is the only state in the US that *does not mandate* five year olds attend kindergarten.

- Mississippi spends only \$3 million on early childhood programming while nearby states spend much more. Arkansas spends \$114 million while Georgia spends \$349 million; Louisiana commits \$117 million of their budget to early childhood. Alabama spends only \$19 million, but requires that child care centers meet the national quality standards to receive state funds. They are only one of 2 states in the US that have that requirement.

-Today, 1 out of every 14 of Mississippi's five year olds cannot move successfully from K-5 to first grade due to lack of skills mastered. (There is a direct correlation to educational levels of parents and academic success of children.)

- In a recent evaluation of a sample group of Mississippi child care centers, none of them scored over a 3 on the ITER-S rating scale, which evaluates the environment of the classroom. A score of 3 is considered an "unsafe" environment for children; a 4 is the national mid-point. In this sample, most MS centers rated only a custodial care rating. (The scale is from 1-5 with 5 being excellent.)

-"There are 1,740 licensed child care centers in Mississippi," said Dr. Laurie Smith, Executive Director of Mississippi Building Blocks. "Those are all small businesses. They need the help and resources to provide the quality of care that the research says young children need." There are currently only 1740 *licensed* child care centers in Mississippi and yet, 80% of our children under 5 are in some type of child care. Licensing of a child care facility does not implement any elements of the curriculum that is taught. It relates only to the safety and health standards that DHS requires.

-Early childhood research shows that providing a quality curriculum will reduce student drop outs and the amount of criminal involvement, but will increase employment rates, wages earned, achievement in school, home ownership, and tax contributions to name a few.

-Mississippi's student drop-out rate is listed between 20% and 50% of our students depending on the source you use to identify it.

- Coastal drop-out rates by School District¹:

Bay-Waveland School District: 14.7%

Biloxi School District: 13%

Gulfport School District: 15.9%

Hancock County School District: 15.9%

Harrison County School District: 16.3%

Jackson County School District: 16.1%

Long Beach School District: 12.7%

Ocean Springs School District: 8.5%

¹ Mississippi Report Card Information

Pass Christian School District: 9.1

Pascagoula School District: 14.7%

-The average cost to a parent for one year of quality child care for their child in Mississippi is \$5,400, nearly the same as college tuition for one year at our state colleges. Interestingly, Mississippi is only one of 9 states in the country that does not provide state programming for parents who cannot afford quality child care.

-If value is determined by salary ranges, it is important to note that in Mississippi, many child care employees are paid *less than* minimum wage. The average yearly wage for a child care worker in the U.S. is only \$19,670; which is less than a bellhop, who earns on average \$22,620, or a pet sitter, who makes an average of \$21,180.

Examples of Early Childhood Education Initiatives on the Coast

Excel by Five was originally initiated and funded by Chevron. This program asks communities to study how well they support children under five and their families. It has four major components--Community Involvement; Family and Parent Support; Early Care and Education and Health and Safety--it asks communities to look at as they move through the certification process that says your city expects to see all children *Excel by Five!* (Existing **Excel By 5** Programs are Jackson County/Moss Point/Pascagoula School District – Excel By 5 – Dr. Connie Jo Williams. Biloxi School District is working on the certification. Hancock County School District is taking on the program in Hancock County and was just recently accepted as an Excel By 5 Candidate Community. It is in the process of developing its board of directors, adopting a charter, electing officers and deciding on its focus.)

By investing in the education of young children, businesses would be growing a better workforce, ultimately bringing more opportunities to Mississippi. Some major corporations are already doing it, like Chevron's Excel By 5 initiative in Jackson County. "Chevron has been at this for about 10 years," says Steve Renfro of Chevron. "What early childhood needs more than anything else in the state is leadership, and businesses can provide that leadership. The money is not the most important thing. The leadership is."

Headstart Program – According to the Mississippi Headstart Association, there are currently 11 Headstart Programs in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson Counties that served qualified children under age five in a pre-school program. The Biloxi School District and Harrison County School District recently ended their respective Headstart Program as a result of recent budget cuts. (Unfortunately, only about 10% of the teachers leading Headstart classrooms are certified teachers.)

Mississippi Building Blocks (Mississippi Economic Council) - *Mississippi Building Blocks* is a pilot program conceived in 2009 that is being privately funded by individuals and corporations. It is based on best-practice instructional approaches that are totally research based and provides

classroom mentors, parent advocates, business advisors to the centers, needed classroom resources, and incentive pay to participating teachers who achieve certification.

The overall aim of Mississippi Building Blocks is to improve school readiness of children being served in child care centers that participate in the program. Additionally, the program is designed to increase the number of centers that participate in the Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System (MCCQSS) program. Participating centers will receive a higher reimbursement rate by providing higher quality care. The program is serving a random sampling of child care centers throughout Mississippi and includes centers who currently serve families with children who qualify for Child Care Development Fund and TANF child care certificates.

There are also many private early education programs along the Mississippi Gulf Coast that have exhibited success.

Social Issues resulting from lack of ECE

Lack of success in education often times leads to drop-outs, and each year over 10,000 of Mississippi's students make the decision to drop-out of school. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the total lost lifetime earning capacity of Mississippians who do not graduate is \$4.3 billion dollars.

The cost to the state is more than just unrealized General Fund revenue, though. Male and female students with low academic achievement are twice as likely to become parents by their senior year of high school compared to students with high academic achievement. One statistic shows that teen girls in the bottom 20% of basic reading and math skills are five times more likely to become mothers over a two-year high school period than teen girls in the top 20% which has the potential to generate a cycle of a different kind.

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center, 75% of America's state prison inmates are high school dropouts and 59% of America's federal prison inmates did not complete high school.

U.S. Department of Justice research shows that youths incarcerated with adults are eight times more likely to commit suicide than in juvenile facilities, five times more likely to be sexually assaulted, three times more likely to be assaulted by prison staff and 50 percent more likely to be assaulted with a weapon than youths in a juvenile facility. And incarcerating children in the adult system not only puts them at risk of unspeakable abuses – it fails to protect communities. The Department of Justice also has found “higher recidivism rates among juveniles convicted for violent offense in criminal court when compared with similar offenders retained in juvenile court.”

For far too many children, the path to prison can begin in our under-funded schools. Rather than invest in the basic educational and social services that will help troubled young children succeed, many schools rely on harsh, “zero-tolerance” discipline policies that result in suspensions, drop-outs or arrests for even minor, nonviolent misbehavior. These policies often send students into a

juvenile justice system that criminalizes many of them; some begin an education then that will benefit no one.

Representatives say early learning programs not only help reduce crime in the long term, but that it saves millions of dollars in the state's education budget in the short term. "What we're trying to get across to the legislators is that there's a net \$16 savings. For every dollar we spend on early childhood education, we save \$16 because we'd spend it on social programs, incarceration, treatment and rehabilitation later," explains Attorney General Jim Hood.

According to an article entitled "Early Childhood Education for All", studies have shown that nationally, preschool programs yield a \$12.90 return on every dollar spent. With the state and federal returns of that magnitude, how can we fail to consider implementing early childhood programming?

Economic Development Issues

As Blake Wilson, President of the Mississippi Economic Council states, early childhood education is really an economic issue. "Consider that 85 percent of workers' children are in some kind of daycare in Mississippi today. This is a huge issue, because it relates to absenteeism. It relates to having happy workers, workers that aren't worried about their kids."

Of Mississippi's 2.91 million people, about 1.53 million participate in the workforce making the participation rate just 68%, well below the national average. Reasons vary for the 900,000 Mississippians who are working aged (16-64) but not employed. These include those that are enrolled in college and not working, mothers who choose to stay at home, or the disabled. However, even when these variables are accounted for, there are still about 250,000 so-called "discouraged workers." Likely included in this statistic are those mothers who do not choose to stay at home but do so because of a lack of access to affordable, quality childcare in their community. Michael Petro said, "Businesses lose some \$3 billion annually in childcare breakdowns. So it's not just a long term issue. It's a short term issue." Petro is a representative from the National Committee for Economic Development out of Washington, D.C.

Guest speaker and Vice President of the Southern Education Foundation, Steve Suitts has written multiple books and conducted research articles about the importance of early childhood education programs. "Almost more than anything else we can think of predetermines the future," Suitts said. The reason, Suitts said, is for the social and economic benefits this program could bring to Mississippi. "A high school drop-out in Mississippi is three times more likely to be unemployed right now than someone who's got some college education." Suitts also said early childhood development would help prevent students falling behind a grade, which in turn is often a contributor to drop out rates. The Southern Education Foundation reported that from 1998 to 2008, students falling behind cost the state \$2 billion dollars.

Who is impacted? Population of children aged 0-4 on the Mississippi Gulf Coast:

By Race				
	White	Black	Other	Total
<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Number</u>
2009	17,736	6,405	2,023	26,164
Total	17,736	6,405	2,023	26,164

The Solution

The solution to elevating the educational capacity of the Region is to develop the **South Mississippi Pre-K4ward Coalition**, a coast-wide coalition to establish a comprehensive early childhood education program that involves collaboration among school districts, private childcare centers and pre-school providers, parents, community leaders and the business community. The program would involve the voluntary participation by the various stakeholders.

The future strength of the Mississippi Gulf Coast depends upon the healthy development of our youngest citizens. Therefore, this initiative will build upon existing resources, foster public-private partnerships, insure collaborative planning, implementation, and mobilize communities to: support and strengthen families. Its purpose will be to assure that all children grow and develop to their full potential, provide high quality, accessible, affordable early care and education options, and promote public awareness of the importance of a child's first years for the well-being of all children on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

This coalition would implement a strategy that focuses on community engagement, sharing community resources, and collaboration to improve early childhood development.

The coalition would be led by an Executive Director responsible for coordinating the program, working with the stakeholders and the coalition that forms, while providing resources for the coalition, and ensuring progression towards implementation. (This includes conducting a regional economic impact assessment.)

Each community would have representatives on the coalition that works with community members to develop a tailored solution to meets the specific needs of that community. The community coalition members would work together to share best practices, provide training, and measure results with one another.

Proposed Process

1. Hire an executive director funded by the GCBC and a three year commitment to secure funding for the program
2. Identify advocates from each school district and each community that will support and direct this effort
3. Identify community liaisons that will work with the private sector for funding and volunteers
4. Create a research function that will capture the data to measure success of the program
5. Create a communication/marketing strategy for connecting the results of the program with economic development.

In the future, the Coalition could address other issues that impact education on the Coast, including:

- Mandatory Kindergarten for every child in the state
- Upgrading the qualifications for Superintendent and School Board Members
- Improving Vocational and Technical offerings

Opportunities Presented

- Dedicated infrastructure to ensure implementation with stated expectations and measurable results
- Ability to have a coast-wide focus on early childhood education that produces measurable data to show progress
- Economic development tool for current businesses and potential businesses
- Ability to create a collaboration among the various stakeholders
- Strengthening the connection between the quality of education and the effectiveness of our economic engine

- Reducing the dropout rate by improving the success factors for children by the third grade

Current Challenges

- Funding for the salary of the Executive Director and the basic infrastructure of the program
- Full results won't be seen for several years
- There could be initial opposition by child care industry (who may potentially view the coalition's efforts as affecting their market)
- Convincing each school district and community to join
- Community fears that the executive director will not fairly apportion time and efforts and belief
- Disbelief that "it can happen in Mississippi"
- Achieving success in spite of those who lack a real commitment to improving education
- Overcoming the mentality that we can't work together as a community
- Denial that the current system is not working
- The politics of education
- Lack of a mandatory pre-K requirement
- Adding "another program" in a time of limited resources and budgets constraints at the school district level

Strategies

- To develop and promote an environment where each child has access to high quality early childhood education regardless of their socio-economic background by ensuring that all childcare providers have high quality teachers and the resources necessary to cultivate learning from birth to kindergarten
- To equip parents with the tools necessary to provide a home environment that cultivates learning from birth to kindergarten by providing them with resources and support systems
- To create alignment between schools, child care providers, and the private sector to maximize the shared interest in developing a pipeline from education to the workforce by establishing a forum where these stakeholders can share ideas, promote dialogue, support each other, and identify resources to promote common interests
- To increase the quality of all early childhood teachers and child care providers by giving them access to continuing education, learning tools, curricula, and skills training to better prepare children for a successful education experience
- To improve the quality of education overall by ensuring that children entering the education system are poised to thrive and excel
- To ensure the relative success of each community by cultivating ownership and pride in the success of their education system
- To engage the community by securing the support of key community leaders that will be advocates for the coalition in their respective communities
- To develop community pride in our school systems by showing the results of the coalition and its impact on the quality of high school graduates and eventual workforce in South Mississippi
- To create a meaningful dialogue and fostering trust between all of the stakeholders by creating a neutral forum (i.e. unregulated) where common interests can take precedence over required formats mandated structures, or legal requirements
- To ensure accountability by regularly publishing the progress and results in the Sun Herald, the Journal of South Mississippi Business, Gulf Coast Business Council publications, the coalition website and other media sources

Conclusion:

The challenges facing Mississippi's educational capacity are not insurmountable. The solution presented is not the entire answer to the problem, but establishes an essential framework for developing an ongoing solution. The challenges presented are not static, thus the Coalition strategy must be dynamic, responsive, and flexible enough to meet the demands as they change over time. One essential and crucial element of the solution is the collaboration between the stakeholders. Everyone impacted is at the table, engaged in dialogue and a part of the solution. There are bits and pieces of the solution in place currently, but the Coalition brings them all together and empowers an adhesive, structured, and focused vehicle.

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