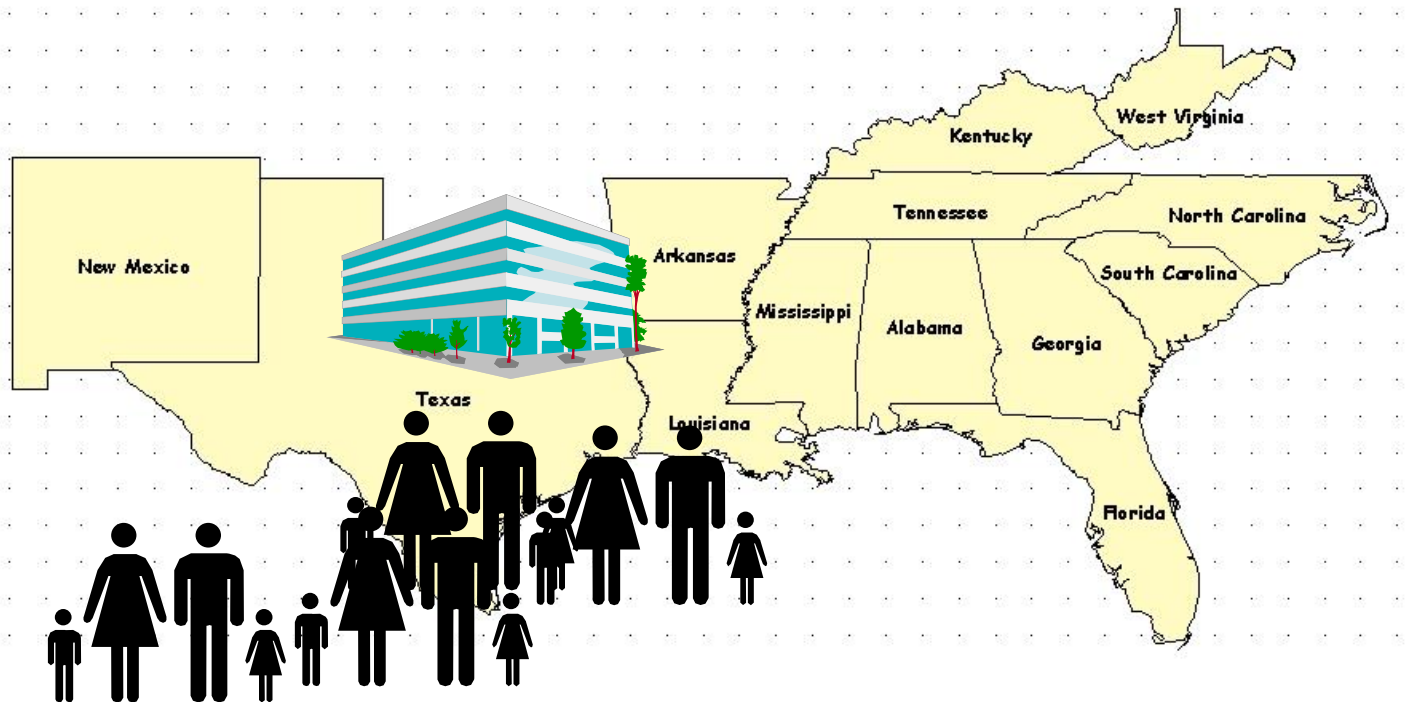


Healthy Schools:
Experimenting with the language of struggle
to clarify policy and strategy choices

A Working Paper

by

**The Mississippi Coalition for the
Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse**



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It is outrageous in 2005 that a disproportionate percentage of children of color and low-wealth in Mississippi, and the southern and southwest regions, continue to be faced with 2nd class educations. Notwithstanding the progress in student performance in recent years that has resulted from more rigorous academic standards and better funding, a disproportionate percentage of students of color and low-wealth are ill-prepared and under-prepared at the primary, secondary and college levels, have lower high school graduation rates, and staggering dropout rates before the 12th grade or after the first year of college. At the same time, the State of Mississippi continues to permit local school districts to sanction the violent beating of children with large wooden paddles, extension cords and other weapons, and Mississippi leads the nation in abusing students in this manner.

For children this process undermines the sense of self, subverts native talents, denies critical thinking and dispute resolution tools needed to negotiate life in a complex society, and sets our children up for failure. Ultimately, this process has placed so many of our children in the pipeline from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse. This is not healthy!

All children are entitled to a quality, 1st class public education. This must be the moral center in a modern democratic society. This moral center ought to be the conscience of the constitutional framework on which societal legitimacy resides. It also must inform the political process through which rights, duties and responsibilities are negotiated in the formation and implementation of public policy.

As the United States Supreme Court stated in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments.... It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

A 1st class public education requires a healthy environment. A healthy environment is a supportive, redemptive environment, rooted in high expectations for achievement and a spirit of

democratic citizenship, not a punitive and ultimately exclusionary framework, driven by fear, antagonism, visions of compliant submission to authority, and an expectation of failure.

Healthy schools will only result if it is the intended consequence of conscious policies. It is on the evolving turf that exists between envisioned ideal and on-the-ground reality that we must experiment with progressive strategies and policies that are research-based and fueled by the positive energy and creativity of education stakeholders, especially parents and students.

Toward these ends the Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse, and many of the grassroots organizations and other education stakeholders with which it works, are experimenting with the concept of how to create and maintain “healthy schools”. As a work in progress, this concept is not fully developed and will be greatly enriched by further experience, research, discussion and feedback from the diverse perspectives through which education stakeholders view these issues.

At the same time, based on our collective experience, research and extensive discussions with education stakeholders and consultants across the state and region, we have begun to piece together some specific elements that appear to be essential to the creation and maintenance of a healthy school environment.

We recognize that there are a wide range of problems, a potpourri of remedial strategies, and a diverse range of disciplines designed to enable people to create and implement remedial strategies. At this point we are not attempting to formulate a comprehensive overview, but rather a targeted approach to some aspects that will lift up *a way of thinking about the problems* that ought to be adaptable and transferable to other aspects that we do not touch upon here.

Perspective: Concerns and Values

Most of our children will go to public schools. These students are the citizens, parents, workers, leaders and entrepreneurs of the future. What happens when they are in school will have a major impact on the paths they will follow. The present molds the future. They need healthy schools to maximize their potential and opportunities to become healthy and effective citizens, parents, workers, leaders and entrepreneurs. We can't have healthy communities without healthy people in them. In this way public schools play a pivotal role in preparing or failing to prepare children. Healthy schools contribute to building healthy communities. Unhealthy schools ... well!

We can't have healthy schools through which to build healthy communities without healthy educators and other school personnel, on the one hand, and healthy children, on the

other. It will take more than good hearts and good will to create and sustain healthy schools that deliver a quality, 1st class education to all students.

A healthy school should provide an atmosphere of high expectation and meaningful strategies for the effective development of the physical, social, emotional, mental and spiritual needs of each child. Schools need to embrace an analytical approach that is rooted in respect for the individuality of each child, and the parents or guardians of each child, all as members of the school family.

State accountability laws and regulations, federal Title I and federal No Child Left Behind require that every child be considered as an individual, especially where a wide variety of factors may indicate that the child is “at risk”. Toward this end, public schools must abandon the negative customs and practices that stereotype children, especially children of color and low-wealth, as difficult, disruptive, dangerous and expendable. There is no room for the contempt, disrespect and distrust that some educators exhibit toward parents, students and community. A healthy schools program must necessarily come to grips with this phenomenon. It is a dilemma that cannot be ignored because it is the problem, in our experience, that is most often brought to the fore by parents and students when they discuss issues that arise inside the schools. These kinds of experiences undermine respect for the education process within the families, and families comprise the core of any community.

Many parents and students consider the framework of “safe and orderly schools” as a mechanism through which to transform public schools from centers of learning and growth into plantations with walls where the focus is on punishment and suppression of students, rather than quality education and effective civic engagement. In our experience in Mississippi, many African American and low-wealth white families recount how safe and orderly schools concepts are used to justify policies and practices that systematically push their children out of school. Latino communities in Texas and New Mexico report a similar experience. Children that are not in school cannot get a quality education. Dysfunctional in-school suspension programs and educationally moribund Alternative School settings exacerbate the systemic under-preparation of our children.

Children have problems. How do we know that? They are children! State and federal laws and regulations require that when children get into difficulties individual assessments must be done and individualized remedies are supposed to be provided. Specific federal and state dollars are appropriated to support the local school districts in the fulfillment of these duties and responsibilities. However, what is supposed to happen often does not happen.

When children are suspended and expelled unnecessarily they are not simply undercut in their ability to keep up with their classes. They are often thrown onto the streets without any support programs or counseling, productive work, or available recreation centers in which they can engage in positive activities under competent guidance. Suspensions and expulsions are the path to dropping out altogether. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, Mississippi has a statewide student dropout rate of 40 percent. When this evolves into the train from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse, school administrators and teachers must face their responsibility as the conductors. Children who are pressed into the juvenile justice system become much more likely to wind up in the adult justice system.

Unfortunately, there is increasing pressure, using the mantra of safe and orderly schools, to make local law enforcement and the Youth Courts disciplinary arms of the local school district administration. Some teachers do not understand child development and do not know how to talk with their students, so they throw them out of class. Some principals are so hostile to the children and their parents that they prefer to bounce the students into the juvenile justice system rather than determine how to solve problems that arise within the school. Some principals are spending more time at Youth Court than in their school building. That is not an effective use of education dollars, nor is it a design for a healthy school or healthy community.

Office of Positive Behavior Intervention and Local School District Healthy Schools Teams

In Mississippi we are proposing to establish an *Office of Positive Behavior Intervention* under the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Healthy Schools. The *goal* of this office would be to coordinate a system of care for students, from a holistic view of their needs and interests, in order to create an enhanced student-learning environment. Through this lens it would be necessary to consider the educational, social, emotional, mental and physical environments in which students function. It will also be necessary to address the needs of parents, teachers and administrators, who are integrally involved in the education and growth of our children.

The *work* of this Office would be to take an inter-disciplinary approach to training, consultation, direct services and professional referrals in support of the diverse needs of students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Rather than operate on largely separate, parallel turfs in a relatively uncoordinated manner, the *strategy* would be to bring together the relevant professional disciplines -- school psychologists, social workers, mental health therapists and health services (including school nurses), child nutritionists and school counselors -- to pool their

strengths and resources under the umbrella of a *healthy schools team*. At the outset the Office of Positive Behavior Intervention would need to determine which services can be coordinated on an inter-disciplinary basis and which services would more appropriately remain outside the coordinated process of the healthy schools team.

Local school districts need such personnel in order to comply with the identification, assessment and provision of services to students and families that are required for compliance under the modified consent decree in the federal court case of *Mattie T*. They are also needed for compliance with Mississippi's Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2005, which requires that children be placed in the least restrictive environments at school or in the community, the creation of local behavior modification strategies and individualized behavior modification plans, more effective Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and the assessments needed for the youth court reviews of the circumstances of children before, during or after court proceedings and any incarceration that may take place. These personnel are also needed to support strategies to minimize and end the use of violence, both physical and emotional, toward children by adults. Corporal punishment is a primary example: it is banned in most states and it is not a research-based practice. Quite to the contrary, the research shows that the resort to violence is ineffective as a core strategy to maintain order in the classroom or the school building.

At the same time, teachers that have left the teaching profession identify their difficulties with maintaining classroom discipline and with classroom management as primary reasons for their departure. In order to attract and retain the quality teachers needed for the success of the healthy schools concept, it would be necessary to provide meaningful training for teachers in how better to manage the classroom and how to employ research-based alternative practices that eliminate the need to resort to violence.

Healthy schools teams would also need to use their special perspective to address the issues of suspension and expulsion of students. Rather than maximizing the amount of time that students can be put out of school and out of the learning process, healthy schools need to have research-based alternative strategies that keep children in school, and that enable them to function in school more effectively. As part of this process, students, parents, teachers and administrators would need a process through which they can acquire effective conflict resolution skills. In addition, there is a heightened necessity to use these strategies in Mississippi's *Alternative Schools*, where by definition the children are *at risk* by virtue of their assignment away from the mainstream.

The availability of this kind of process should not depend on which local school district a child attends. Under this plan every local school district would be required to employ either a school psychologist, social worker, mental health therapist or school counselor, who would have a Masters-level degree or equivalent, to coordinate these activities at the school district level. This district-level employee would be responsible for the implementation of the healthy school goals in each of the school buildings that are served by the school district.

This district-level “coordinator” would be employed by the local school district. However, the work of the “coordinator” would be *supervised* through the Office of Positive Behavior Intervention at the state level. The reason for this is to ensure that the healthy school team and its coordinator have a degree of independence from the traditional political pressure that local school district employees can experience when under the supervision of a local school district superintendent or building principal. From another vantage point, many times school psychologists, social workers and mental health therapists acculturate into the district under the political control of the superintendent. As a result, tensions develop between loyalty to the administration and support for the needs and interests of the children and their families. For this process to work effectively, healthy school team members will need a degree of independence so that they can provide sufficient support for children and families to assist in the transformation of the culture of the school district from where it is to where it needs to be. In other words, the healthy school team needs a degree of professional insulation to be effective, especially where some of the approaches it designs for solving problems may be counter-intuitive in the existing culture of a particular local school district.

In this regard the healthy schools teams would need a meaningful measure of state funding to protect the professional independence of the healthy schools teams. If the healthy schools teams personnel are totally dependent on local revenues and federal dollars under local control they may be subject to pressure that their jobs would no longer be funded at the local school district level. As a consequence, their ability to provide services would become the victim of strategic reductions in force.

As a matter of practical reality some local administrators may feel that supervision of the healthy schools team by officials at the State Department of Education is an inappropriate and unwarranted infringement on the authority of local administrators. Assuming, without conceding, that this is true, it is a minor cost when compared with the benefits to be provided to students, parents, teachers and administrators from healthy schools teams that are not fearful that unpopular analyses will lead to arbitrary and capricious interference with or termination of the

program. Healthy schools teams must be able to focus on providing forthright professional assessments and remedies using uniform statewide standards adapted and applied in the context of local school districts.

The development of statewide goals and standards would not seek to impose a singular healthy school strategy for every local school district. Rather, the goal would be to lift up and support local initiatives to adopt already proven research-based practices, or to create new strategies rooted in research-based analyses, as the means through which to meet the underlying goals and standards. For example, a local school district could elect to adopt such heretofore-successful research-based practices as Dr. James Comer's "child development model", or the "responsive classroom model", or the "positive behavior intervention support" process.

It will be important for the healthy schools teams to utilize research-based practices to ensure that there is documented evidence of success when these practices have been employed. In order to ensure that research-based practices are used by healthy schools teams and the local school districts served, a Mississippi-based university should monitor and evaluate the impact of the work of the healthy schools team and report the findings to the Office of Positive Behavior Intervention.

From time to time, in order to fulfill the healthy school goals, it may be necessary and appropriate for the healthy schools team to coordinate its efforts with the *teacher support team*. At such time the coordinator of the healthy schools team and the coordinator of the teacher support team would co-coordinate their joint efforts.

The success of this healthy schools strategy will depend, in part, on the development of a cadre of personnel from the various disciplines that will comprise the healthy schools teams so that the needs of each local school district can be met. Therefore, it would be necessary for the Office of Positive Behavior Intervention to present to the State Department of Education a set of recommendations for the creation of a process that will effectively address these personnel needs. In turn, the State Department of Education would need to work with Mississippi's universities and colleges to implement those recommendations that it adopts as a matter of policy.

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