

Winter 2001

Southern Echo, Inc.

# Str ggles



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## Appeal from the President

Dear Friends and Southern Echo family,

Let me apologize to all of our family and friends who haven't heard from us in a while. Since our last newsletter (Winter 2000), we've worked very hard to deepen our support to community leaders, organizers and organizations committed to empowering communities of color in Mississippi and the Southern region. During the past two years we have significantly expanded our efforts in the region and added seven staff to assist with redistricting, education, environmental justice, resource development and office management.

At present, we are assisting communities in eight Southern states to learn to learn the history of redistricting, how to draw plans, and to understand the impact of recent US Supreme Court decisions on redistricting strategies.

We began the Southern Echo Grassroots Community Organizing Initiative, supported by the C. S. Mott Foundation, to provide seed funding and technical assistance to emerging organizations in South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Arkansas and Georgia. Approximately 20 emerging grassroots organizations have received funding and technical assistance. We are very excited about a new, Mott funded, re-granting program, that will enable us to provide funding and training to environmental justice organizations that are youth led or have a youth focus.

Through our intergenerational leadership model, we advanced our mission to develop a cadre of new leadership in Mississippi. Our environmental organizer, George Ross, who has been a part of our training process since he was in high school, has graduated from Alcorn University and come back to us as a staff member to move the work of our environmental justice program.

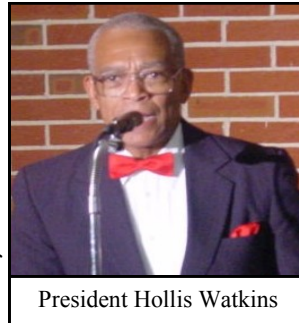
Another part of our mission is to enable grassroots communities to impact the formation of state and local policy. The Mississippi Education Working Group has become a vehicle through which the voice of parents and students is being heard at the state legislature and the State Department of Education.

This is only a brief glimpse of our work. Much more is revealed in this newsletter. In the next year we will continue to work to build this community empowerment process. We will also continue our Capital Endowment and Building Campaign to establish Echo's role as a land-based training and technical assistance center in the South that will be accessible to grassroots communities.

But note: the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> has dramatically affected the level of funding that foundations have available to support work rooted in community organizing strategies. Your support and financial contribution is critical to our survival and especially to our ability to meet the additional requests coming from local communities and officials. We need your help! If you have never been a member of Southern Echo, please become a member and join our efforts to build accountable leadership and organization in the region. If you have not renewed your membership in the past year, please do so.

Finally, please consider us when you are making decisions about your holiday and end of the year giving. With your support, we can continue this very important work. A membership and donation envelope is enclosed in this publication. Please enjoy this edition of *Struggles* and thank you for your support!

*Hollis Watkins*



President Hollis Watkins

## STRUGGLES

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**STRUGGLES** is published by *Southern Echo, Inc.*

*Southern Echo, Inc.* is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop and improve grassroots leadership among adults and young people throughout Mississippi and the southern region. Southern Echo emphasizes the importance of building strong community organization, through effective organizing work, as the essential means to advance the goal of empowering the community.

*Southern Echo* provides active, on-going training, technical and legal assistance to communities and individuals. Southern Echo also conducts residential training schools, workshops and community meetings.

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Cover Photos: Top, left, right—Drew, MS parents and students testifying before state education officials and state legislators in Drew. Bottom—GIS redistricting training session in Greenville,

Photo credits: The GIS training pictures by Brian Lipsett (SJARI); all other Mississippi pictures by Melvin Young. (Tunica)

## 137-page *Indictment* of Drew School District for abuse and mis-education presented by Voters League parents and students to MS Dept. of Education

**Drew, MS**—In a demonstration of broad-based unity at an evening public hearing Nov. 13 in the Drew Nutrition Site, more than 75 parents and students, both black and white, shared with state education officials and state legislators their stories of the abuse and mis-education of their children by Drew School District board members, administrators and some of the teachers.

The hearing marked the beginning of a full-blown investigation to which the State Dept. of Education has committed in response to the *Indictment* first filed by the *Drew Community Voters League* at a meeting with state department officials on Nov. 1 at state department headquarters in Jackson.

Voters League director Johnnie Johnson requested that state education officials adopt a new model of parent participation in the investigation. The Voters League wants state investigators to hear from parents at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the investigation process to ensure that the state understands the issues and has all the documentation it needs to make a complete and accurate report on the abuses and law violations by the Drew school district board, administrators and some teachers.



Ms. Johnnie Johnson outlines to the panel the *Indictment* and the agenda for the public hearing.

The Voters League presented to the panelists a 137-page *Indictment Against the Drew Municipal School District*, divided into 14 chapters, to document the systematic, widespread terrorizing of parents and students and deliberate failure to educate students.

Steve Williams, Special Assistant to State Supt. Of Education Richard Thompson, and Nikisha Ware, Director of Parental Relations and Legislative Support represented the State Dept. of Education at the hearing.

The hearing panel also included the school district's legislative representatives, Sen. Willie Simmons and Rep. Robert Huddleston, Legislative Black Caucus chair Rufus Straughter, and Caucus Secretary Ester Harrison and Rep. Reecy Dickson, both of whom are on the House Education Committee. Also on the panel was State PTA Pres. Shirley Carlidge.

Two high school students opened the program with prayers, and another called for the state to investigate and make fundamental changes in the school district. During the



State education officials and state legislators listen to parents and students describe complaints about conditions in Drew schools.

three hour program many parents testified to misconduct by school officials, including physical beatings of children, hostility toward parents, arrests and threats of arrest of parents and students who exercise their legal rights, and the slashing of curriculum, arts, music and sports. \*

## Johnson demands victory or new election, Poll officials, police admit illegal conduct

**Drew, MS**—It's municipal election night — June 5, 2001. The polls are ready to close. If Johnnie Johnson beat former state rep Charles Waldrup for the Alderperson at large seat, the Drew board becomes majority black for the first time in history.

The poll manager is the wife of current school board chair William Dubard, who fought the school desegregation suits brought by Ms. Bertha Mae Carter in the late 1960s.

When polls close, ballot boxes are to be sealed to prevent vote fraud afterward. But the poll manager called police to have all candidates and poll watchers removed *before* the boxes were sealed! Candidate Johnson demanded her right to see the boxes sealed, but was forced out of the building by the police *before* the boxes were sealed. Later that night Chief of Police Burner Smith apologized to candidate Johnson and acknowledged that he was wrong to remove her from the polling place and threaten arrest. The following morning the poll manager and poll worker, reluctantly and testily, admitted to Johnson that they were wrong to have forced candidates and poll watchers to leave before the boxes were sealed.

Johnson brought suit in Circuit Court to show that enough registered voters were illegally denied their right to vote, or their affidavit ballots not counted, that she will overcome Waldrup's alleged eight vote margin of victory, or at least be entitled to a



## Drew, Indianola develop joint Sunflower County fight

**Sunflower County, MS**—Parents and students from the Drew School District in the northern third of the county have joined forces with their counterparts in the Indianola School District in the southern third of the county to forge a joint fight to protect students and parents from abuse by their districts and the local court systems.

During 2001 the *Drew Community Voters League* and the *Indianola Parent Student Group* have held several workshops to train parents and students on the decision-making structure in local school districts, and two training sessions concerning how to enforce the rights of children with special needs.

At the same time, the DCVL and IPSG are working with the legal staff of Southern Echo, several local attorneys, and attorneys from the *Center for Law and Education*, and the *Advancement Project* in Washington, DC, and officials in the State Dept. of Education, to develop a working understanding of the law, and to create community accessible materials.

As part of this process, DCVL and IPSG staff and volunteers are working together in each others school districts



Drew Community Voters League Director Johnnie Johnson, left, and Indianola Parent Student Group leader Betty Petty.

to support students and parents in administrative and disciplinary proceedings, and in the Sunflower County Youth Court.

Schools officials in both the Drew and Indianola districts are using the Youth Court as an arm of the school discipline practices. The Youth Court Referee, without regard to state legal procedures, or the substantive rights of students and parents, willingly sends children with special needs, and other children, to the detention center, or threatens them with arrest, without regard to the actual facts of these cases.

DCVL and IPSG are planning a joint complaint about the abusive use of the Youth Court by their school districts to PEER, the investigative arm of the state legislature, and also a comprehensive lawsuit against these practices, with assistance from Southern Echo and the Advancement Project. \*

## Greenville activists links education, redistricting, elections

**Greenville, MS**—In 2001 the Greenville School District merged two high schools and forced 9th graders to make career-based curriculum choices for their entire high school careers that limited their access to other educational opportunities, without significant community input.

Community activists Joyce Parker, Larry Muhammad, and others were fed up. They formed *Concerned Parents and Community Friends for Education* to demand a voice in the decision-making process. Although the school district listened to, but also ignored, their concerns, the growing group of concerned citizens learned much from their initial efforts to work together.

As part of their strategy they attended meetings of the Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG) to

meet activist parents and students who had been working in their local school districts for several years. As a result, Greenville activists had access to hard information about the laws, rules and regulations affecting how school districts are supposed to do business, and made strong relationships with people active in work locally and at the state level.

At the request of Concerned Parents Echo staff members have conducted a number of workshops in Greenville on community organizing around education issues, the school district decision-making process, organizing around redistricting, and how to run a political campaign.

Concerned Parents has participated in MEWG efforts at the state level on

school discipline and special education issues. The local group has also enabled its members to participate in in-state and out-of-state training sessions on education issues.



Joyce Parker

Joyce Parker said, "We do things today we didn't know how to do a year ago, thanks to Echo and MEWG."

Parents worked to create fair districts to give the 70% black majority a chance to elect accountable city council members. However, the white mayor broke a tie vote that split along racial lines to adopt a plan that dilutes black voting strength. Parker is running for election to one of the city council seats in the December 10, 2001 election. \*

**MEWG provided models and relationships through training, technical, and legal assistance.**

## Holmes, Indianola build coalition to fight for children with special needs, hold public hearings, fight in court

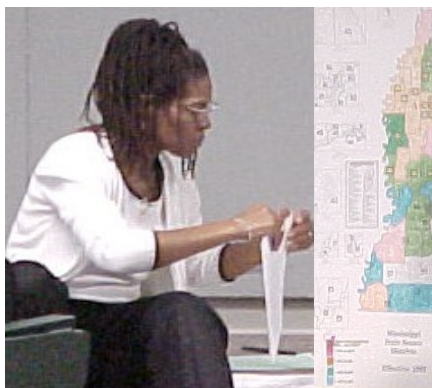
**Jackson, MS**—As MS Atty. Gen. Mike Moore, who says he brought the famous tobacco cases to protect the health of children, moves in federal court to terminate 25-year old orders in the *Mattie T.* case that Mississippi comply with federal laws to provide effective education and support services to children with special needs, parents across the state have banded together to force the state to comply with federal and state laws regarding children with special needs.

*Citizens for Quality Education (Holmes County)* and the *Indianola Parent Student Group* have joined with *Parents United as Partners*, *Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities*, and the *MS Assoc. of Children with Learning Disabilities* to create a new coalition, *Concerned Citizens for Quality Special Education Programs*, to resist the state's efforts to lift outstanding court orders with which the state has never complied, and to force the state to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Sec. 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title I, and the state laws and regulations that guarantee rights to children with special needs.



Sen. Education Committee Chair Alice Harden, left, and CQE co-coordinator Ellen Reddy at special needs hearing Nov. 1 at State Capitol.

At the urging of the coalition, Senate Education Committee chair Alice Harden, a former teacher in the Jackson public schools, held a public hearing at the state capitol on Nov. 1, and another at MS Valley State University on Nov. 7, to hear testimony from parents and education specialists on the failure of the State Dept. of Education to require local school districts to implement the



CQE co-coordinator Helen Johnson at hearing Nov. 7 at MS Valley State with maps showing 15 new prisons located in majority black areas that have critical teacher shortages, high drop-out rates, high poverty rates and low student performance on standardized tests.

rights of children established by law and detailed in federal court orders.

At the same time, the coalition is working with the Southern Disability Law Center, based in Mississippi, and the Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Alabama, to hold the state in contempt for its failure to comply with the terms of the consent decree it signed in the *Mattie T.* case.

Investigations by the Holmes County and Indianola organizations show that local school districts, especially in the overwhelmingly black schools in the Delta, **fail** to:

- use Child Find to identify students with special needs,
  - to do assessments of children who have exhibited physical or emotional needs that affect their educational opportunities,
  - to develop Individual Education Plans for each student with special needs,
  - to involve parents in every step of the process and to advise them of their rights under the law, and
  - to provide the support services for the children required by law.
- At the same time, these districts:
- punish children for engaging in the very behavior for which they have been diagnosed as being a child with special needs,



At the old Supreme Court Chamber in the State Capitol Nov. 1, parents listen to testimony about the state's failure to comply with laws protecting children with special needs.

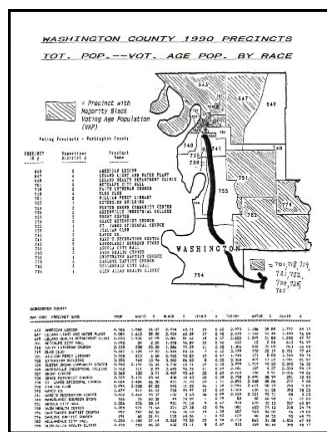
- suspend or expel children with special needs in violation of the limitations set by federal and state laws and guidelines, and
- use the Youth Court system to drive these children out of the school system, rather than to provide the education and support services to which they are entitled by law.

When parents complain to the local school district, they are usually ignored. When the parents take their complaints to the state, it has been the practice of the State Dept. of Education to refer the parents back to the local school district on the premise that these are local matters.

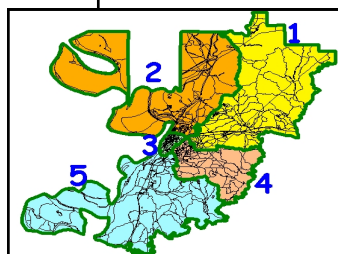
In response, Citizens for Quality Education (CQE) filed a formal complaint with the State Dept. of Education, demanding an investigation of the county school district.

After investigation, state officials determined that the district was not in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Act because it failed to identify students in need, provide assessments or Individual Education Plans, or the needed services.

The Holmes County School District developed a corrective action plan, but claims it does not have funds to implement it. CQE is moving to press the state to force the school district to comply with the plan. \*



This county census data map was created in 1991 with the technology available: scissors, tape, white out, a photocopier, and time.



This Warren County, MS redistricting plan was created in 2001 on a Dell laptop computer with Arcview 3.2 GIS mapping software, captured as an image and converted into a "jpeg" with another software program, WinGrab, inserted into the newsletter through Microsoft Publisher software, and printed on an HP 8550 color laserjet printer.



Echo Pres. Hollis Watkins assists Echo staffers Mattie Stoddard, left, and Meredith McGee during 2001 GIS-redistricting training.

## On the Redistricting Front: Mississippi

Mississippi—Echo's redistricting team throughout 2001 has fanned out across Mississippi to:

- do training on redistricting issues with NAACP county, state and regional conventions, and with numerous local NAACP organizations across the state,
- testify at public hearings held by the state legislature on Congressional redistricting,
- held dozens of workshops at the county and city level to train community people to participate in the redistricting process,
- held several training sessions to enable Echo staff and community people to become literate in the use of GIS mapping skills,
- and provided technical and legal assistance to community groups in the preparation of congressional, state legislative, county and city redistricting plans.

Echo and local groups have received extensive training and technical assistance from the *Environmental Background Information Center (EBIC)*, the *Social Justice Action Research Institute (SJARI)*, and the *Progressive Technology Project (PTP)* in support of efforts to draw fair plans.

At the request of the MS Legislative Black Caucus, Echo staff members are now providing technical assistance in the drawing of legislative districts. \*

## On the Redistricting Front: Southern region

Southern region—Echo's redistricting team is assisting local community groups and NAACP chapters with training and technical assistance on redistricting in South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, and Florida.

South Carolina redistricting activists have come to Mississippi, and Echo staff have gone to South Caro-

lina, so that local community groups could obtain hands-on training in drawing plans, and using GIS software to facilitate the creation of plans. In addition, Echo held several multi-day training sessions on community organizing around redistricting.

In each of the other states Echo staff has provided training on redistrict-

ing that has focused on the principles of redistricting, and hands-on practice in the drawing of plans.

In addition, with the assistance of Brian Lipsett, of SJARI (see above), Echo helped local groups to download census data into local computers to enable community groups to draw their own plans. \*

## On the Redistricting Front: Training

Training—In the spring of 2001 Echo staff and South Carolina staff undertook a 3-week joint training in Greenville, MS on how to use Arcview GIS software in the redistricting process.

Shortly thereafter, Echo staff conducted a 2-day training for other Echo staff and community leaders from across Mississippi on the principles of redistrict-

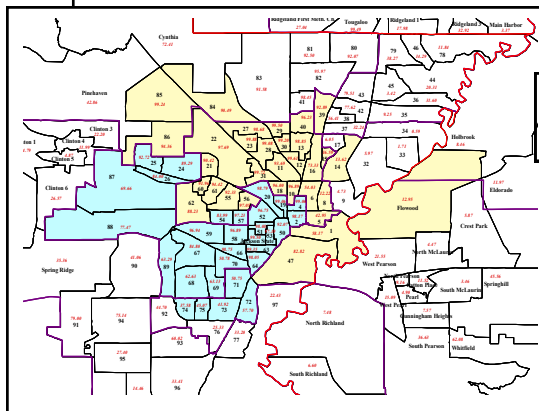
ing and the application of GIS mapping to redistricting.

This training provided the foundation for the Echo redistricting team to be able to respond efficiently to the widespread requests for assistance that have come from the town, county and state levels in Mississippi, and from communities in other states.

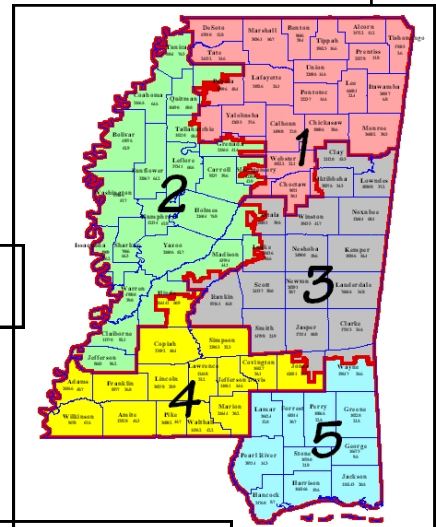
Echo obtained the technical equipment, training and technical support through grants provided by the *Ford Foundation*, *Rockefeller Foundation*, and the *Progressive Technology Project (PTP)*. Technical training and support has been provided by EBIC, SJARI and PTP. In turn, Echo has provided such support to communities. \*



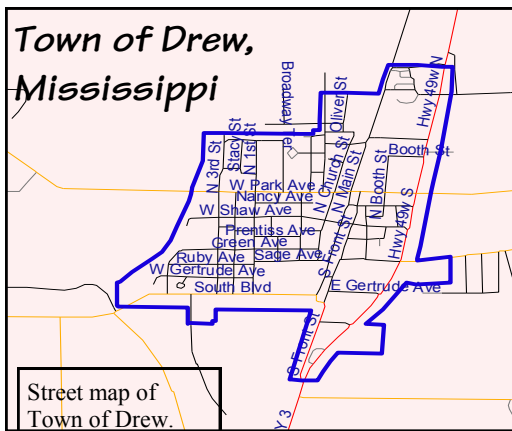
## Redistricting in pictures and maps



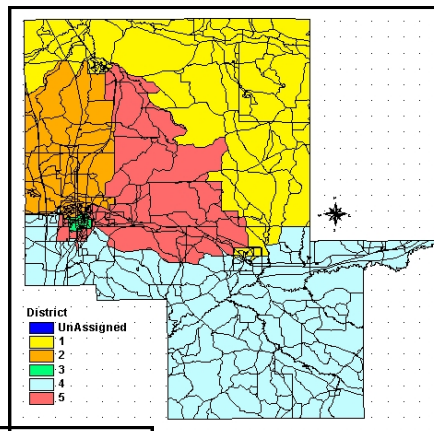
A pair of proposed legislative districts.



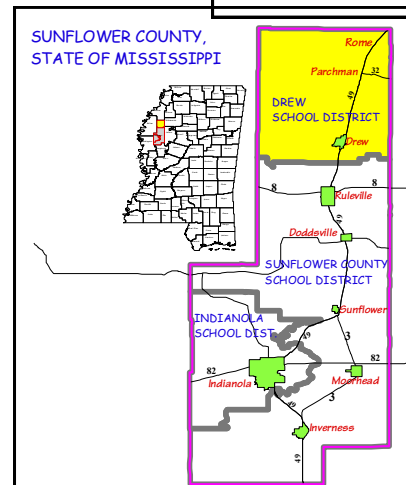
MS Congressional districts in 2001.



Street map of  
Town of Drew.



Montgomery County, MS: one proposed county board of supervisors redistricting plan drawn by community.



Sunflower County, MS  
school districts, with Drew  
school district highlighted.



GIS mapping training  
at Greenville, MS.



## Tunica organization wins school board majority, Teens roll

**Tunica County, MS**—During 2001 *Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County* watched three of its long-time activists and supporters take control of the Tunica County School Board, hired an additional full-time, paid staff person from within the ranks of its volunteers to help move the agenda of the organization, and built a youth-led component, *Tunica Teens in Action* to strengthen its leadership development and training program among its younger members.

On the heels of the 2000 election sweep, Concerned Citizens member Larry Braziel was elected chair of the school board, ousting from the helm long-time chair Oscar Price, who for four years had vigorously supported the attempt to build a virtually all-white public elementary school in Robinsonville in north Tunica County.

Under the control of the state-appointed conservator student performance on standardized tests fell through the floor. The new board will have to overcome the negative consequences.

Concerned Citizens is working with the new board majority to build a long-term strategy for improving the quality of education delivered to the students and to make each of the public school buildings available as centers accessible to the entire community.

*Tunica Teens in Action* has brought together children from elementary to high school to learn about their history and culture, to perform plays and hold a variety of cultural events for the community. In addition, the children have been taken on several trips to civil rights museums in Memphis and Birmingham, and to historically black colleges in Mississippi.



Tunica teens visit a Mississippi college.

Concerned Citizens is also closely monitoring compliance by the school district's state-appointed conservator to ensure that the school district remains in compliance with the federal court school desegregation orders concerning the new elementary school built in north Tunica, and to assess the quality of construction at the school that opened for the first time in the Fall of 2001. \*

## Lifting New Voices youth visit New York City, South Africa

**Jackson, MS, New York City, and Durban, South Africa**—Under the auspices of the Lifting New Voices program, in July 2001, five activists from *Action Communication and Education Reform* (Montgomery County, MS), *Indianola Parent Student Group* (Indianola, MS) and Southern Echo traveled to Bronx, NY to participate in a week long peer exchange program with Youth Force, Inc.

Youth Force is a youth-led activist organization that fights to protect the rights of young people of color in the Bronx. The Mississippi youth had an opportunity to learn about the organizing models used by Youth Force, and a chance to see New York City.

Roderick Moore, Echo's Youth Facilitator, Betty Petty, Echo's After School Coordinator and a leader in the Indianola organization, *Chris Caldwell* and *Latitia Woods*, youth workers from the Montgomery County group, and *Kimberly Galvin*, a high school senior who has worked the Indianola group

since the 6th grade, made the trip to the Big Apple.

Later in July four Youth Force participants toured Mississippi to get a feel for how organizing work is done in one of the most rural states in the nation. They visited many of the key sites of the civil rights battleground and participated in discussions about the importance of understanding the history of struggle.

One of the major differences that the young people noted in the work of the two organizations was the geographical scope of the work. In big-city New York, the organizing work tends to be based in small geographical neighborhoods or apartment buildings involving thousands of people living very close together. But in Mississippi the organizing work stretches across several hundred miles where much smaller



Echo staffer George Ross, in Durban, South Africa with Slade Cole and Donna Dudley of Southern Regional Economic Justice Network (SREJN) and local children at the 2001 UN Conference.

numbers of people leave much further apart.

In August Echo Asst. Dir. Brenda Hyde, staffers George Ross and Mac Epps attended the UN World Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia in Durban, South Africa. As part of the Youth Delegation they saw the harsh conditions that exist in rural South Africa, heard views of groups from Africa and Asia, and shared ideas with young people from everywhere. \*



## Montgomery community wins fight to create city districts, builds links to electoral process and education policy fights

**Kilmichael, MS**—Kilmichael citizens in this small, east Montgomery County town scored a major victory when they successfully negotiated with the town's Board of Aldermen to change from an at-large election system to the creation of 5 separate wards. As a result, Kilmichael will be dividing the town into districts for the first time.

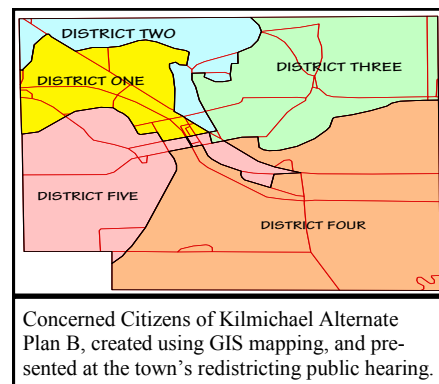
*Action Communication and Education Reform*, a county wide grassroots group, and *Concerned Citizens of Kilmichael*, a town-wide organization, are working together to fight for fair districting plans at the town and county levels.

More than 20 Kilmichael citizens, with training, technical and legal assistance from Southern Echo, and support from Action Communication, worked together over a period of weeks to learn redistricting principles, how to draw a

redistricting plan, and then created several alternate plans that reflected communities of interests about streets, lights, schools, economic development, and fair employment practices.

Concerned Citizens' plan, presented to the Aldermen at a public hearing, created three compact districts with black voting age majorities based on communities of interest, although the census shows the town evenly split between white and black citizens. Town officials rejected the plan in order to adopt a plan with only two districts with black voting age majorities.

Action Communication, with support from Concerned Citizens and Southern Echo, is holding the same kind of training sessions to build a plan for the County Board of Supervisors. The goal is to create three compact districts with black voting age majori-



ties, based on communities of interest around their rural school district. Organizing around school district issues and the elections at the same time will help each effort.

Officials are afraid of the community plans because they give the black community an opportunity to elect majorities on these boards for the first time in the history of the county. \*

## Majority black school board fights white superintendent for future

**Duck Hill, MS**—*Action Communication and Education Reform* won a federal court fight to require that only voters within the rural, Montgomery County School District be able to vote in the county school elections.

But in the absence of a black candidate for county superintendent of schools, a white candidate hostile to the black community won again, anyway.

But, the black community elected a majority of the county school board for the first time, and Alfonso White, a leader in Action Reform was designated as school board chair. White is also on the Board of Directors of Southern Echo.

As a result, there has been a dramatic shift in how education policy is formed in the county school district. As the board fights the superintendent for the future of the school district:

- The school board hired a black

female attorney to represent the board, the first time for either a black person or a woman;

- The superintendent no longer unilaterally determines the meeting agenda, but must share this process with the board;
- The superintendent tried to hire her friend, a principal in the Drew school district, as an elementary school principal. Since Action Reform and the *Drew Voters League* work together in the *MS Education Working Group*, Action Reform found out from Drew parents that the candidate for principal from Drew had a reputation for hostility and violence toward children, barred parents from the schoolhouse, and refused to follow federal and state law or local school regulations in the discipline of children. After advice as to

their powers by the new school board attorney, the Montgomery school board rejected the candidate proposed by the superintendent and hired a different candidate.

- In response to these affronts by the board, the superintendent first proposed that the Montgomery school district merge with the majority white Town of Winona school district, and now wants to close the Duck Hill Elementary School and force elementary age children to ride the bus 45 to 50 miles a day to the school in Kilmichael on the other side of the county. The board is fighting both of these demands by the superintendent.

Action Reform is obtaining technical and legal assistance from Southern Echo and the *Rural Community and Education Trust* on the financial resource, budget policy and legal issues that face the newly elected board. \*

## C.S. Mott renews Echo-ISO for community organizing work, New Echo-ISO will support youth environmental organizing

**Jackson, MS**—The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has renewed one grant and awarded another to Echo to provide intermediate support and technical assistance to grassroots community groups doing organizing work in the South.

Since 1999, Echo has served as an Intermediary Support Organization (ISO) to distribute \$150,000 in seed grants to new, emerging organizations in eight Southern states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Alabama.

Under the community organizing grant program a community group must be working to build local organizations to empower the community. Other criteria for eligibility are (1) organizations can not be older than 5 years; (2) organizations can not have more than five full-time staff and (3) organizations can not have budgets over

\$100,000.

Each year Echo sponsors a networking training to enable grantees to come together and learn about the work of other groups outside of their communities and states.

As a result of this program, some of the groups have started to form regional collaborations. For instance, Citizens for Quality Education in Holmes

County, MS and Concerned Citizens of Iberville Parish in White Castle, LA are working together to develop laws in Mississippi that protect schools against pesticide spraying by modeling Louisiana's School Pesticide Laws.

In 2001, Southern Echo received an

additional award of \$137,000 from C.S. Mott's Environmental program to become an Environmental Support Organization (ESO) to stimulate work in the states of North Carolina, Tennessee,

Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina. These

grants will provide 2-year funding and technical assistance to environmental justice groups that are youth-led or that have a strong

youth component. The goal is to enable groups to grow new leaders who are committed to the vision of the organization.

The deadline for application to this program is January 7, 2002. \*

**Through Mott grants, Echo provides grants and TA to support both grassroots organizing and youth-based environmental work in several Southern states.**

## MS builds 15 prisons in majority black counties to help push children from schoolhouse to jailhouse

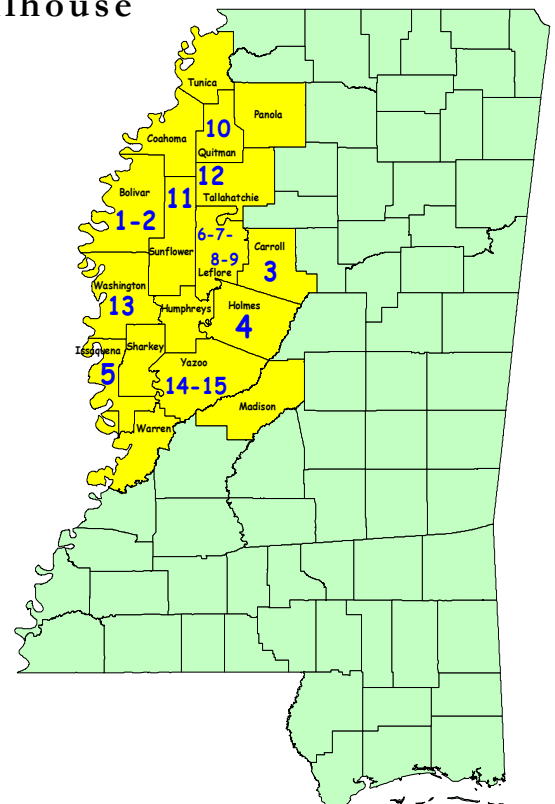
**Jackson, MS**—During the past decade the State of Mississippi has built a combination of fifteen state-owned and private-owned prisons and detention centers in the heart of the Delta, where

- the highest concentration of black and poor families live,
- The highest rates of children eligible for free lunch,
- the highest concentration of school with teacher shortages and teachers who have emergency certificates and/or are not certified to teach in the subject areas they teach,
- there is a concentration of public school districts with the fewest resources in the state,
- the highest concentration of schools whose students perform poorly on state-sponsored standardized tests, and

- the highest student drop-out rates.

National studies show that private prison developers seek to locate their prisons in those areas where the 3rd grade reading levels are the lowest. Developers have identified a direct correlation between low student performance in the early years, school drop-out rates, and a high concentration of candidates for the prison system.

Although studies show, and Mississippi education policy requires, that parent involvement be seen as a key antidote to the poison of bad schools, many Delta districts resist meaningful parental involvement.\*



## MEWG fights 3-strikes “ghetto student stigma bill”

**Jackson, MS**—During the 2001 legislative session the *Mississippi Education Working Group* campaigned among community people, educators, state education officials and legislators to prevent the passage by the state legislature of a bill to make it easier for public school teachers and administrators to drive children from the schoolhouse to the streets, from where they often find the path to the jailhouse.

MEWG called the legislation the “ghetto student stigma bill”. In the face of intense community opposition the bill’s supporters resorted to procedural chicanery to pass the bill before legislators could change their minds.

The basic outline of Senate Bill 2239 is that students can be classified as “habitually disruptive” after two disciplinary incidents in the same year. Once *stigmatized*, under the terms of

the law, the student shall be *automatically* expelled if there is a third incident during the same school year. The bill does not provide for the exercise of discretion on the part of school officials.

Once a student is classified as “habitually disruptive” there is no provision for removal of the “stigma”.

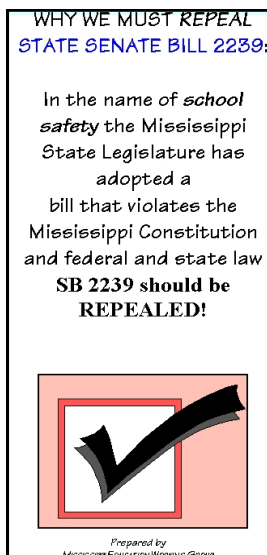
Parents and students from across the state, using MEWG’s organizational capacity at the state level, attacked the bill for being aimed at black and poor children and “draconian” in its harshness. To make the law more palatable, lawmakers removed the automatic expulsion provisions for children under 12 years.

MEWG issued a brochure for legislators, educators and community activists describing the numerous ways that SB 2239 violates fundamental constitutional rights and federal and state laws protecting children with special needs.

Under pressure, the AG issued a written opinion that questioned the legality and constitutionality of some of the bill’s provisions and urged caution in its use.

MEWG will continue to fight for the repeal of the bill, which has a two-year sunshine provision.

Some school administrators threaten students with use of the bill,



## Ford “Collaborations that Count” 3-year grant to MEWG renewed

**Jackson, MS**—The Ford Foundation has renewed for three more years its *Collaborations that Count* program that supports state-wide coalitions in the South and West, including the *Mississippi Education Working Group*.

MEWG assists grassroots community organizations to pool their strengths and re-

sources to impact the formation of education policy at the state level in support of the work done at the local school district level to create a quality,

first-rate educational opportunity for all children.

One feature of the program is that it brings these funded organizations together during the year to enable organizers and activists to build relationships, share an understanding of the work, and to learn about the different organizational models for effective work in support of local communities.\*

***Collaborations that Count* helps to fund the work of MEWG to impact education policy at the state level.**

## Rural Trust to provide technical support to education groups

**Jackson, MS**—The Rural Community and Education Trust committed to community-based organizations working to improve rural education that it will provide various forms of technical and legal assistance to aid in their efforts.

In October, 2001 the Rural Trust brought groups from as disparate rural areas as Alaska, New Mexico, Missis-

sippi, Georgia and North Carolina to a training conference in Atlanta where people had the chance to learn how the geography and culture of the different areas impacted the development of organizing methods.

At the conference technical experts provided work sessions on key education problem, such as how to enable local community groups to build an

understanding of local and state education budgets, and how to impact the way in which budgets are funded.

Rural Trust staff members committed to providing technical assistance to MEWG groups working with newly-elected black majorities on two Mississippi school boards to understand and devise strategies to deal with budget difficulties facing the districts. \*





## Community Drawing Board



Ford Collaboration in Las Vegas



LNV trip to NYC



Philadelphia, PA  
education training



Drew public hearing



Atlanta Rural Trust Conf.



SPF training at Tougaloo, MS



Echo Board meeting, Charleston, MS



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