



Equipping stakeholders to Navigate the takeover landscape

Understanding the Takeover Landscape

As the seasons change from summer to fall we are confronted with more than expectations of cooler fall nights. The atmospherics in Mississippi immediately and nationwide are coalescing around a breaking point of school district takeovers. A closer look at the takeover landscape reveals districts with many common denominators. Predominately majority minority districts, black and brown, urban and rural are being placed under the control of state departments of education. Because this is no longer in the experimental phase, we are left with an urgent need to better understand what solutions are available to navigate the takeover landscape.

We have recently witnessed the attempted and still too close to call takeover of the Jackson Public School District, second largest school district in Mississippi. Because of this we are all left to ponder fundamental questions of why, how and what more could have been done to avoid the loss of local control. There numerous perceptions and well-intentioned theories presented to justify the declarations of takeover. Accompanied equally by animus, disorientation, anger, circumspection, and disaffection the communities are left to examine underfunding against certain areas of overachievement.

As the empirical evidence surrounding the takeover landscape mounts, it reveals an uneven track record and varying motivations for what should be viewed as extreme action by states to remove local control in favor of appointed state emissaries. The task of every community with similar characteristics is to prepare for the coming tide of takeover. The mechanics of readiness are the driving force in combatting takeovers. In his 2015 reporting on the Little Rock School District takeover, Greg Topo provides a grim roadmap, “as schools nationwide begin to see the results of new math and reading tests based on tougher Common Core standards, they could find themselves the targets of similar moves.”

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, one of the groups that created many of the Common Core tests, predicted that as few as 32% of students in a few grades would reach "proficient" levels in math. (Topo, 2015). Such bleak predictions often provide necessary cover for takeover dialogue.

To counter what seems like sudden actions by state departments of education, school districts, families, students, community leaders, activists, and all taxpayers have a role that should be developed. Most stakeholders are not aware of the resources available. The same stakeholders resent the perceptions placed on their students and communities. And while the perceptions of lack of school security, low test scores, inability to teach and learn are rampant with each fresh takeover, we cannot ignore the resources available to shape stakeholder's understanding of takeovers and what symptoms must be treated to avoid the same fate.

Southern Echo as a Mission Critical Resource for Communities

When Southern Echo was formed in 1989 African American and low wealth white families remained effectively excluded from participation in policy formation and implementation at all levels of government, notwithstanding that many African Americans had been elected to public office. (Southern Echo, 2017). In response to this circumstance Southern Echo designed a training, technical and legal assistance strategy to



build the capacity of African American families to utilize community organizing tools and skills to form a network of new, accountable grassroots community organizations, on an inter-generational model.

The primary goal is to empower the community. When community organizations are strong they can build bridges across the traditional barriers of race, class, gender, political affiliation and geography to fight effectively for fair and just public policies that address the needs of all segments of society. (Southern Echo, 2017).

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop effective accountable grassroots leadership in the African-American communities in rural Mississippi and the surrounding region through comprehensive training and technical assistance programs. (Southern Echo, 2017). With an extensive understanding of the mechanisms already in place to enhance parent, community, and stakeholder involvement, Southern Echo is uniquely qualified to assist in improving the landscape and prepare district readiness.

The objective is to work with parents, families, and communities to build strong and effective partnerships that can help children, families, and communities thrive. Parental, family and community engagement is an ongoing process that increases active participation, communication, and collaboration between parents, families, schools and communities with the goal of educating the whole child to ensure student achievement and success. (Parental, Family and Community Engagement 2016 Educator Equity Leadership Institute: November 7th, 2016, 2016).

Specific Training: Effective use of P-16 and ESSEA

The Children First Act of 2009, 37-18-5 (4), mandated that the State Board of Education promulgate regulations for the creation by failing school districts of broad-based, diverse Community P-16 Councils designed to work to build strong communities and to report its progress to the entire community. (A Manual on How to Implement P-16 Community Engagement Councils, 2011).

P-16 Community Engagement provides an officially mandated structure for building a community voice and community perspective on how to build healthy, quality schools and communities in which the community is mandated to provide leadership to the process. Effective use of P-16 creates an important opportunity to bring community participation in a serious framework for the creation of recommendations for the adoption and implementation of policies relating to public education, juvenile justice, health and other issues. Done well it can become a structured, powerful voice for parents and students, and other education stakeholders. (p. 18).

Southern Echo was certified as one of only two (2) P-16 training providers by the Mississippi Department of Education in 2011. Southern Echo, Inc. has been active across the state of Mississippi helping school districts, schools, and communities to effectively establish P-16 Community Engagement Councils since 2011-Present. Southern Echo, Inc. along with members of the Mississippi Delta Catalyst Roundtable wrote the P-16 Guidelines adopted and used by MDE. (p.3).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, sought to mitigate the negative impact of poverty on educational opportunity by sending federal dollars through Title I to areas of concentrated poverty. (Scott, 2017). Southern Echo is in direct alignment to the spirit of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who believed that “full educational opportunity” should be “our first national goal.” From its inception, ESEA was a civil rights law. ESEA offered new grants to districts serving low-income students, federal grants for textbooks and library books, funding for special education centers, and scholarships for low-income college students.



Additionally, the law provided federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education (ed.gov).

Southern Echo is working to educate the grassroots communities across the State of Mississippi on the national and state requirements of implementing ESSA in each local school district. Southern Echo is working in collaboration with the Dignity in Schools Campaign to encourage the local community to demand the Mississippi State Plan includes school climate and safety as an indicator of overall school quality and student success. (Southern Echo, 2017).

Applying A National Lens to the growing Mississippi Takeover

The takeover landscape did not start in Mississippi. Yet, Mississippi is at the vanguard with almost 20 takeovers in a 26-year span. (Barnes, 2017). Considering the mixed results across the entire landscape, the seeming uniform characteristics of districts ripe for takeover, it is imperative to understand why local control continues to be stripped. In doing so, a pattern of perception continues to hover as a rain cloud. And while the trend began in 2001, it has shown no signs of receding; only accelerating.

There is no consensus among researchers about whether any particular form of school governance—including state takeovers, mayoral control, or elected local boards—leads to better student performance or fiscal management. Experts say that too many other factors are involved, such as funding levels, the demographics of the student body, and the quality of leadership in state and city governments, in the school districts, and in individual schools. But there is strong agreement that any governance system must avoid uncertainty about responsibility and accountability in order for schools to make progress. Since the 1990s, states have played an active role in local school governance in many parts of urban America, hoping to address financial difficulties, mismanagement, and/or poor academic performance, and often supplanting local school boards. (The PEW Charitable Trust, 2017).

Whether the issues are based on lack of fiduciary responsibility, lack of school security, poor academic performance, poor standardized test scores, declining classroom teacher talent or any other issue, the takeovers from coast to coast have not actually fared well in repairing the perceived issues. In fact, they have been mixed in results and often create new known, unknown issues. The time is right to question the efficacy of this approach, if for no other reason than it is often a solution searching for a problem. “Rather than continued obeisance at the altar of unproven governance reforms, states should prioritize promising community-schools’ models and research-based strategies, such as extended-day learning, site-based health services, and quality early education.” (Kent McGuire, 2017).

Community Action is THE Call to Action

The mechanics of readiness are the driving force in combatting takeovers. National attention is on the Jackson Public School District, as it hangs in limbo. However, we now know that school districts across Mississippi will potentially face the prospect of takeover. Because we know this I challenge you to discuss, research, plan, organize and most importantly act. In this instance, action takes many forms, community has a vital role to play in navigating the continuing tide of heightened scrutiny. When the problem is viewed, many of the resources needed to prepare are already in place.



Southern Echo can provide critical resources to assist in stemming the tide. Proactive measures such as attending school meetings, school board functions, and community awareness will go a very long way in preparing your communities to have substantive conversations with stakeholders, administration and Department of Education officials. Reactive measures will leave you disappointed, confused and wondering why the mechanics of takeover are moving so fast. Takeovers are signaled well in advance of the formal pro forma meetings held in your school district. As we see all over the United States, urban, majority black and brown school districts are first to be taken over. Applying this, by now, well known information to Mississippi, we can forecast the same socio-economic, racial make-up and other key parameters to school districts in the urban, rural and the delta regions of the state.

Look around you and examine the economic makeup of your school district, assess the student population, pay attention to the performance ratings issued by the Mississippi Department of Education, interact with your school board and ask them the tough questions. Southern Echo can partner with you to formulate a plan of action, organize critical community stakeholders, and provide crucial training that will prepare you to navigate the takeover landscape.

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