

STRUGGLES

SOUTHERN ECHO, INC. Summer/ Spring '08



ECHO PARTNERS WITH MDE AND MS VALLEY FOR THE 4TH ANNUAL DISMANTLING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP CONFERENCE



Hank Bounds, State Superintendent of Education for Mississippi, speaks on behalf of the Mississippi Department of Education at the Gap Conference.

In November 2007 more than 500 students, parents, educators, public officials, state education officials and university leaders participated at MS Valley State University in Itta Bena, MS in the two-day convening of the **4th Annual Conference of Education Stakeholders on Dismantling the Achievement Gap** conducted by the sponsoring partnership of Southern Echo, the MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable, the MS Dept. of Education and MS Valley State University. Just prior to the Conference more than 50 activists from the MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable, South West Organizing Project and Southwest Workers Union participated in a two-day convening in Greenwood, MS of the joint **South X Southwest Experiment**. The participants in this two-day event subsequently became part of the conference on

dismantling the achievement gap.

The 2007 Dismantling the Gap Conference program on November 12-13, 2007 focused on:

- Defining the needs of children at-risk in the public schools and the new policies and funding needed to address them;
- Understanding the new state Dropout Prevention Program and strategies for maximizing high school graduation rates;
- Emphasizing the critical role of parent and student participation at the state and local school district levels to impact the formation and implementation of education policies; and
- Urging parents, students, educators and public officials to make their voices heard at the legislature in 2008 to adopt and fund new public education programs designed to address the needs of children at-risk, dropout prevention and the accountability of education leaders in local school districts.

State Supt. of Education Hank Bounds and several key state education officials addressed the Conference to enable participants to understand the transformative goals and technical mechanics of the new dropout prevention strategies. Dr. Marvin Haire, Interim Director of the Delta Research and Cultural Institute at MS Valley State University **Cont'd pg.3**

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ECHO BUILDS MOMENTUM IN THE MARGUERITE CASEY "EQUAL VOICES" CAMPAIGN FOR FAMILIES

Southern Echo and the MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable are working to facilitate the movement to create a national family issues platform constructed by families as a part of The Marguerite Casey "Equal Voice for America's Families" campaign. More than 418 people representing 23 counties across the State of Mississippi were present in a meeting held on Saturday, May 3rd at the McLemore Ward Headstart Gymnasium in Greenville, MS as a result of this campaign. Prior to launching the MS Delta town hall meeting, Southern Echo began hosting cluster meetings with low income families across the Mississippi Delta and Gulf Coast counties. The cluster meetings served as a prerequisite for the Greenville meeting so that townspeople could develop topics from their counties to be more readily prepared.

The Greenville meeting consisted of table discussions revolving around two general issues: *What is it that is hindering families* and *what would be possible remedies to these hindrances?*

There were many issues that were identified from each table discussion with the most common being: *quality education; affordable housing; subsidi-*

dized childcare; living wages; and drug/violence rehabilitation centers. Along with these issues were possible solutions which were developed by the families so that a well constructed plan of action can be made by the individuals who will be affected. Among the solutions being proposed were: *upgrading school personnel; bring and retain jobs in MS; establish programs to promote peace amongst youth; and voting for more accountable officials; break communication barriers with students and their teachers; equitable wages for immigrants; attract and retain businesses.*

Family issues and the importance to cater to these specific issues are in need of discussion for gaining resolution with the absence of social and economic justice for lower-income families and people of color. The "Equal Voice for America's Families" campaign arises from the idea that no working family should live in poverty under any circumstance. The goal is to *"create a national platform of family issues; spark a national dialogue about the policies and attitudes that negatively impact families; ensure that dis-*

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ECHO REGRANTS \$120,000 FROM C.S. MOTT FOUNDATION AND PROVIDE TRAINING TO GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS AROUND MISSISSIPPI

In 2008, Southern Echo, in its capacity as an intermediary support organization for the C.S. Mott Foundation, re-granted \$120,000 to 7 grassroots community organizations in 4 southern states to support their grassroots community organizing work.

As a part of the C.S. Mott Foundation grant, Echo conducted a 2-day regional training on strategic planning ,

issue development and building organizational capacity as key elements of community organizing to empower communities. More than 45 activists from the 7 organizations attended the regional conference held in Jackson, MS.

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Youth enjoy the fellowship at The Marguerite Casey "Equal Voices" Conference.



Hollis Watkins, President of Southern Echo and Leroy Johnson, Executive Director, join in singing songs at the Marguerite Casey Conference.

GAP CONFERENCE (CONTINUED FROM PG. 1)

at key points in the conference presented syntheses of the presentations and linked them to the historical race and class underpinnings of the education and economic problems that faced Delta communities. Students and adult leaders from each of the MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable organizations each presented a different facet of the problems confronting children at-risk in the public schools and their recommendations for policy changes needed to ameliorate these conditions. These presentations, designed by the students and presented primarily by the students, were clearly the highlight of the conference for the audience in which approximately two-thirds were students from middle and high schools across the Delta.

During the conference participants broke down into more than a dozen smaller workshops to define who should be understood to be at risk and why, to identify the major obstacles and barriers that they confront, and to recommend needed policy changes to maximize the capacity of children at-risk to succeed rather than fail in the public education process.

At the end of the conference the feedback from participants who have been with this process since 2004 was that this was the best conference thus far and that we should certainly have another one like this in 2008. Southern Echo and Roundtable organizations will have to address whether we ought to have another conference of this kind in 2008, or whether we ought to take a different approach in light of evolving circumstances at the local and state levels. This will be part of our planning process early in 2008.

The November 10-11, 2007 South

X Southwest Experiment gathering program focused on:

- Enabling youth activists from New Mexico, Texas and Mississippi to meet and share who they are, talk casually and eat together, work together, share ideas and explore common ground, socialize, and share culture, music and dance;
- Explore the separate histories of the three regions as a basis for lifting up their common ground around oppression by colonial and imperial powers, exploitation of their labor and theft of their land; systematic denial to their communities of effective education; suppression of their capacity to compete economically and build community wealth and economic independence; the suppression of their capacity to participate effectively in the political process; and the histories of resistance, struggle and organization in each region that have been the basis for effecting fundamental changes;
- Explore the role of language and story-telling in their respective cultures and to recognize the need to address the impact of language differences as part of the process of removing historic barriers; and
- Explore the cross-regional malicious stereotypes that have been deeply rooted in the national culture and that have been used to sow disrespect and distrust, but which when recognized and acknowledged can be overcome.

Participants were enthusiastic about the two-day process. The agenda

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MARGUERITE CASEY, (CONTINUED)

-cussion; build a movement of families to sustain long-term change; and increase civic engagement among families. Southern Echo has taken the initiative to ensure that low income families and people of color have the opportunity to participate in policy making that directly affects the way they live.

One component of effective organizing that Echo employs is to provide various counties the opportunity to work together as a unit. Uniting competing counties to break barriers is imperative so that these families can work together to tackle these issues that inevitably affect each one of them similarly. "One of the tasks that needed to be tackled was to breach the competition amongst county lines created by the government to keep lower income families at odds," stated Leroy Johnson, Executive Director of Echo.

This is why the agenda for the MS Delta Town Hall Meeting provided a "Fellowship Café" and entertainment to allow individuals to socialize and fellowship with each other, while enhancing their efforts to work together.

Along with the families and various organizations, elected officials were present so they could be involved with the problem-solution discussions that will uplift these communities. The meeting in Greenville served as a preliminary meeting for a meeting in Birmingham, Alabama on September 6.

There will be 3, 500 people representing families from a combination of all of the following states: Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, and Florida. There will also be a simulcast meeting in Chicago and Los Angeles with at least 3,500 representatives in both states which yields 10, 500 representatives in all. These meetings will be geared toward issues that

speak out to poor and working class families to initiate a platform that may transform the lives of the families in these communities that are trapped at the bottom of America's economic ladder.

The goal is to become recognized through national, local, and state press coverage so that America can become mindful of the specific needs of lower income families and people of color. "We need to generate a national committee that provides an agenda to improve the lives of working class families and children that will be issued to national parties to become an agenda of elected officials, such as the upcoming president, to make policies enacted that would really produce change in the community for these families," stated Leroy Johnson on the meeting to take place in Birmingham.

Southern Echo has gathered other Mississippi groups to get involved with assisting this movement. Among these various groups and organizations are: *Action Communication & Education Reform (Montgomery County)*; *Activists With A Purpose (Grenada County)*; *Citizens for a better Greenville (Washington County)*; *Citizens for Educational Awareness (Montgomery County)*; *Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County (Tunica County)*; *Nollie Citizens for Quality Education (Holmes County)*; *Sunflower Parent & Student Organization (Sunflower County)*; *Parents and Youth United for a Better Webster County (Webster County)*; and *Youth Innovation Movement Solutions (Montgomery County)*.

"We need to generate a national committee that provides an agenda to improve the lives of working class families and children that will be issued to national parties to become an agenda of elected officials"

(CONTINUED FROM PG. 3)

combined presentations about organizational histories about struggle with small group work on the current issues that students face in their respective public school settings, and recommendations for policy changes to address them. As part of the next steps it was agreed to hold multi-day gatherings in San Antonio, TX and Albuquerque, NM during the spring and summer of 2008. These are now in the planning stage.

It should be noted that on February 15-16, 2008 the Southwest Workers Union is holding a workshop in San Antonio,

TX on organizing around civic engagement and voting rights and has invited leadership from SWOP, Southern Echo and Community Voices Heard (NYC) to assist in the workshop process. All parties agreed that this kind of mutual collaboration and support is an appropriate extension of the South X Southwest Experiment. As part of the agenda in San Antonio, SWOP and Echo have been asked to make presentations on the history of their work around voting rights and civic participation to enable activists in Texas to see their work in a broader historical context.

MOTT FOUNDATION (CONTINUED FROM PG 2)

from Thursday, March 13 to Friday, March 14, 2008.

In addition, throughout the year, Southern Echo will make site visits to each grassroots community organization to provide technical assistance to the local groups in support of the work they are doing, and to provide additional training for clusters of organizations in different parts of the southern region.

The eight states from which local groups applied under this regrant program are North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee.

The 2-day regional training for the grantees gave special focus this year to strategic planning so that the program of work of the organization effectively addresses the policy objectives of the organization. Building on this foundation, the training turned to how do you strategically frame your issues as it relates to your program of work to get the maximum buy in and ownership

from the community.

The training also addressed the issues of working in coalitions and collaborations as strategies to broaden base of support, share resources, and increase capacity. The discussions focused on values and principles that should guide coalitions and collaborations, as well as obstacles and challenges to working inside of coalitions and collaborations and the importance of the organizing work.

Southern Echo's training provided an in-depth look at how to fundraise from foundations and within communities as well as how to manage funds responsibly and diligently as it relates to fiscal management.

The Organizations that received the grants were:

- **Advocates for Community and Rural Education**
(Everton, Arkansas)
- **Chimuranga**
(Laurens, South Carolina)
- **Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County Inc.**
(Tunica, Mississippi)
- **Indianola Parent Student Group**
(Indianola, MS)
- **Nollie Citizens for Quality Education**
(Lexington, Mississippi)
- **South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Group**
(Estill, South Carolina)
- **Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network**
(Durham, NC)

Gap Conference



Marguerite Casey Conference



Lifting the Voice of Mississippi Families



Mott Gathering



Lifting the Voice of Mississippi Families



Lifting the Voice of Mississippi Families



Lifting the Voice of Mississippi Families



About Southern Echo

Southern Echo is a leadership education, training, and development organization founded in 1989 and based in Jackson, Mississippi. Echo is committed to building new, accountable grassroots leadership and organization, based on an **inter-generational model**, through training, technical and legal assistance. Echo staff works with and in support of African-American and working class community leadership and organizations throughout rural Mississippi, and organizations in 11 other states.



Echo training focuses on enabling grassroots people to develop a effective skills and the working tools of community organizing. This includes the building of political skills, organizational development and policy formation at the grassroots level. The primary goal is to build the capacity of grassroots leadership and organizations to empower their communities to **fight racism**. The **Empowerment** of grassroots communities is necessary to enable people to hold the political, educational, economic and environmental systems **accountable** to the needs and interests of the African -American and poor communities.

PROGRESSIVE HOUSE COALITION REVEALS STRENGTHS

Jackson, MS – As a result of the 2007 legislative elections, the Legislative Black Caucus increased to 50 legislators, 37 in the House and 13 in the Senate. Mississippi now has the largest percentage of African American legislators among all states: 28.7 percent. Mississippi's black voting age population is approximately 30 percent.

In the House of Representatives a progressive coalition comprised of most of the Legislative Black Caucus members and a minority of white representatives worked together to prevent supporters of the Governor's legislative agenda from taking effective control of the House.

At the same time, Republican Governor Haley Barbour tightened his working control over the Senate through the newly-elected Republican Lt. Governor, Phil Bryant, who presides over the Senate and picks all of the committee chairs.

In the House all of the Republicans and some conservative Democrats joined forces to support a conservative Democrat to challenge the re-election of the more progressive incumbent Speaker, Rep. Billy McCoy. The showdown for control of the House

took place as soon as the House took up the first order of business on opening day in January: election of the temporary Speaker of the House.

The test of who had majority support in the chamber was undertaken through the proxy fight over the election of the temporary Speaker, who under the rules actually conducts the election of the permanent Speaker. Whoever had the votes to determine the temporary Speaker would have the votes to control the election of the permanent Speaker.

It took three tense roll call ballots to determine the new Speaker. On the first two ballots, each of which ended in a tie – 61 to 61 – 34 of the 37 black legislators joined with 27 white legislators to support the candidate who supported incumbent Speaker McCoy. Three black legislators joined 58 white legislators to support the surrogate of the challenger.

On the 3rd ballot one black legislator switched her vote from the challenger's candidate to the incumbent's candidate to provide a 62 to 60 victory for incumbent Speaker McCoy.

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ECHO LAUNCHES THE SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES ENVIRONMENTAL AND LAND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Southern Echo has undertaken a program of intermediate support called the Sustainable Rural Communities Environmental and Land Development Initiative (SRCELDI). The essence of the SRCELDI is to abate, prevent, and reserve land owned by African Americans; and achieve community sustainability with economic development and

the use of land being parts of community sustainability.

SRCELDI's concept of sustainability involves meeting the needs of African Americans and other people of low wealth in the present with out compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It accounts for

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PROGRESSIVE HOUSE COALITION (CONTINUED FROM PG 6)

After that, with the die cast, the actual vote for the Speaker appeared almost routine and Speaker McCoy was re-elected.

This process determined the balance of power in the House through the 2011 legislative session because the Speaker appoints all committee chairs and determines to which committees all bills are sent for consideration. If the challenger had won, it was believed that the Governor would have had a working control of both houses of the legislature to advance his policy agendas. The next statewide elections are in 2011.

- However, the legislature did not give any serious consideration to increased funding for **children at risk**, notwithstanding the report of the 2007 Commission on children at risk that called for substantial increased funding.
- The legislature also did not provide any funding for **early childhood learning**, notwithstanding the report of the 2007 Commission on children at-risk that called for funding a pilot project. Mississippi is the only state in the south that does not provide any state funding for early childhood learning.

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As this is written the Governor has called a special session and is adding to the agenda of the special session as the special session unfolds.

Some of the key outcomes of the regular 2008 session were:

- The **Mississippi Adequate Education Program** (MAEP) formula was fully funded for the 2nd consecutive year. In contrast to 2007, this year there was no battle over the appropriation.
- The Senate passed, but the House defeated, all registration that would have required **voter identification** or a **massive registration of all voters** in the state.
- The legislation passed a draconian anti-immigrant bill providing severe penalty for businesses that employ undocumented workers.

Vision
Mission
& Values

The **Mission** of Southern Echo, Inc is to empower local communities through the development of effective leadership and unified community organization.

SRCELDI (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

the long-term value of natural resources (renewable and non-renewable) and gives individual incentives to protect or promote environmental values.

SRCELDI at Southern Echo is a program of inter-mediate support for the Ford Foundation in communities of African Americans and other people of low-wealth in five southern states: Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina.

The program has been implemented in the entire state of Mississippi, nine counties in eastern South Carolina along the I-95 corridor, southern Georgia, the 12 counties of Alabama's Black Belt region, and the 10 southern parishes of Louisiana impacted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The inter-mediate support consists of the following items: a micro-grants program of up to fifteen (15) grants ranging from 25,000 to 40,000 dollars with the possibility of a special grant up to 50,000 dollars; a technical assistance provider that provides each micro-grantee the opportunity to obtain assis-

tance; and Southern Echo working with the micro-grantees to assess which grantee might benefit during the grant process from working in clusters to share their training, assistance, and program of work.

Since the abolition of slavery and the advent of Reconstruction, communities of African Americans and other people of low-wealth across the southern region have experienced a dire need of effective access to information, training, and technical assistance to support the development of the following: new and independently owned business enterprises, sustainable and alternative agricultural enterprises, timber growth, sufficient capital, young people involved in programs of work, and skills and tools to build grass-root community organizations.

Studies revealed that effective access to information, training, and technical assistance gives individuals the control of entrepreneurial opportunity, the means to engage in production agriculture and the capacity to provide a quality education for their children.

WALKING OUR TALK ON DROP-OUT PREVENTION

An Editorial by Leroy Johnson

How many high school students finishing the school year this month will be back in the fall? On paper, Mississippi's commitment to retaining them looks impressive. The state set a goal of cutting the drop-out rate in half over the next five years. But will we walk our talk?

The national "Diplomas Count" report, released by *Education Week* last week, once again put Mississippi in the bottom 10 states, with only 62% of high school freshmen eventually getting a

diploma, compared with 70% nationally. More than half of African American boys don't graduate.

The Mississippi Rising Conference in Biloxi, state educators reaffirmed the Board of Education's "Five Strategies" to boost these dismal graduation rates. One of these strategies is to "Increase the quantity and quality of teachers," recognizing that large classes and poor teaching lead some students to drop out. Almost a third of MS secondary school classes are taught by teachers who didn't major or minor in the field they are teaching. **Cont'd pg. 9**

Organizations that received grants in the SRCELDI cycle:

- Nollie Citizens for Quality Education, Inc. (Holmes County, MS)
- South Rankin County Farmers Assoc. (Rankin County, MS)
- Mississippi Engaged in Green Agriculture (Bolivar County)
- West Holmes Community Development Organization (Holmes County)
- Marion County Self-Help Organization, Inc. (Marion County)
- Winston County Self-Help Cooperative (Winston County, MS)
- Family Farmers Cooperative (Marshall County, MS)
- South Plaquemines United Fisheries Cooperative (Plaquemines Parish, LA)
- Federation of Southern Cooperative Land Assistance Fund (Sumter, AL)
- McIntosh SEED (McIntosh County, GA)
- Southeast Georgia Community Development Corporation (Glynn, GA)
- Berean Community Development Corporation (SC)
- South Carolina United Action (Orangeburg, SC)
- Chimuranga (Laurens Co, SC)

DROP-OUT PREVENTION (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8)

This strategy will require a partnership among the MS Department of Education, the universities, the State Legislature, and the community to attract and retain quality teachers.

Many students are 'push-outs' more than drop-outs. Suspensions and expulsions for dress code violations, arguments, and other non-violent offenses derail students who could have been, and should have been, kept in school. Numerous studies show that corporal punishment -- beating students in school -- is counter-productive.

For low-income and other at-risk students, the state spends about \$5,000 less per student per year than the amount recommended by Augenblick and Associates, the nationally-recognized education consulting firm employed by the State Legislature to determine the necessary costs.

Some may complain that we can't afford to spend more on quality education. But in fact we can't afford *not* to. Over the last year, the number of manufacturing jobs in Mississippi fell by almost four percent, while the number of professional and business services jobs grew. We need to educate our young people for the jobs of the future. Investments in quality education will come back to us many-fold in taxes paid by productive workers and in fewer people incarcerated.

Despite our state's low taxes and business costs, *Forbes Magazine's* 2007 report on "Best States for Business" ranked Mississippi #43 out of 50, because of our low educational attainment. The Chamber of Commerce ran a full-page ad in support of funding quality education earlier this year, because they know that a poorly trained workforce makes Mississippi less attractive to investment capital.

More and more jobs require not just high school but a college degree. But two-thirds of Mississippi high school graduates are not ready for college. Nationally, over a third of eighth graders take algebra, but just one in twenty in Mississippi.

As a parent, I've experienced the frustration of trying to get my children prepared for college. My son had no certified science and math teachers in high school. We sent him to a math summer camp and got him tutoring, and now he's doing fine in college. But why did I have to pay out of pocket for education services I had already paid for with my taxes?

Thanks to the new Office of Drop-Out Prevention, every school district is now required to have a Drop-Out Prevention Plan, and the first plans were just approved this spring. Next year will be first year they go into operation.

Community involvement will be the key to making sure the Drop-Out Prevention Plans are implemented. Southern Echo helped organize the Town Hall Meeting held in Greenville in May, where over 400 people discussed education problems. We supported the well-attended "Get on the Bus" Teen and Adult Summits sponsored by the Board of Education. This groundswell of public involvement is a positive sign. School districts will succeed only if they sit down with community organizations, parents and students, listen to our experiences, and collaborate on solutions. My hope is that when the students promoted into 8th grade this month turn 18 in 2013, so many of them graduate that Mississippi sets a new national record for most-improved high-school education.

Leroy Johnson is the Executive Director of Southern Echo, a statewide leadership education, training and development organization based in Jackson. He moderated the Town Hall Meeting on education in Greenville in May, sponsored by the Equal Voice Campaign of the Marguerite Casey Foundation.



Leroy Johnson, Executive Director of Southern Echo



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