

**Community Comments to the
Legislative Task Force
To Study Underperforming Schools and School Districts
January 11, 2010**

Submitted by the following organizations:

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Nollie Citizens for Quality Education, Holmes County, MS;
Citizens for a Better Greenville, Washington County, MS;
Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County; Tunica, MS;
Sunflower County Parents and Students Organization, Indianola, MS;
Activists With A Purpose, Grenada County, MS;
Action Communication and Education Reform, Montgomery County;
Youth Innovation Movement Solutions, Lee County, MS;
Parents and Youth United for a Better Webster County; and
Citizens for Educational Awareness, Montgomery County**

Overview

These Comments submitted by Southern Echo and the MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable organizations to the Legislative Task Force on Underperforming Schools are submitted prior to and in advance of any recommendations made by the Task Force as the result of its work during 2009. At the same time these Comments are submitted in light of:

- a. the work of the Task Force during the 2009 legislative session,
- b. the presentations and testimony made to the Task Force during its 2009 public meetings,
- c. the outcomes of the work of the Task Force in 2008, and
- d. the current education and budget realities in Mississippi as the 2010 legislative year begins.

These Comments focus on 4 issues:

- a. The Underperforming School Turnaround Process established through the Children First Act of 2009;
- b. Charter Schools;
- c. School Consolidation; and
- d. Lack of Meaningful Voice for the communities most impacted by the work of the Task Force in the deliberative, decision-making and recommendation processes of the Task Force.

First, a little background:

Southern Echo has been working vigorously to improve public education in Mississippi for twenty years. The other organizations in the MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable have been working to improve public education for as long as 20 years and as recently as 5 years. We have all been working together in the Roundtable to improve Mississippi education since 2005. The primary focus of our work has been in the Mississippi Delta region, where the issues concerning underperforming schools are most pronounced and concentrated.

The education problems in the MS Delta region were **not** created by parental or student indifference to the need for all children for a quality first-rate public education. Quite to the contrary. The problems with which we are struggling so hard to overcome today are the result of the intended consequences of conscious education and other public policies, customs and practices that were

designed to limit the access of African American children to a quality education, meaningful economic opportunity and effective access to the political process. Notwithstanding the extraordinary efforts to change these policies, customs and practices during the past 15 years, the problems and dilemmas created by these historic policies, customs and practices remain deeply rooted in the culture.

The problems we face today are the outcomes of policies, customs and practices. In order to overcome the consequences of these barriers rooted in the past, our strategy must be to include the historically-excluded communities most affected by the efforts to reform among the *architects* of education policy, and not merely the *objects* of such policies. We need to appreciate the importance of this shift toward meaningful democratic inclusion as essential to the development of a more knowledgeable policy process and as a core value in the creation of a fair society.

The Turnaround Process

The 2009 Legislature passed and the Governor signed the Children First Act, which was prepared by the Task Force and recommended to the Legislature for adoption. Among the key provisions was the framing of a critical new Turnaround Process for Low Performing Schools. The Turnaround Process was touted by Task Force members, legislators and the leadership of the State Board of Education and the MS Dept. of Education as among the most significant authorizations in Mississippi education history for fundamental change through:

- a. enhanced accountability benchmarks and standards,
- b. training programs for school boards, administrators and teachers; and
- c. intervention by MS Dept. of Education personnel to support growth and development at the local school district level.

Since the 2009 legislative session the MS Dept. of Education has gone through an extensive regulatory process to:

- a. adopt benchmarks and standards to assess and evaluate local school districts under the mandate of the Children First Act;
- b. determine how best to support local school districts;
- c. set standards and benchmarks for the performance of conservators appointed to assist local school districts;
- d. devise exit strategies for conservators to ensure transparency for school district administrators and education stakeholders in community; and
- e. provide continued support for local school districts so that they do not backslide once improvements are achieved.

A major facet of the Turnaround Process is the creation by the MS Dept. of Education of disciplined teams of skilled persons who can provide training and technical assistance to those school districts that are determined to be failing or at risk of failing. However, it appears that the Turnaround Process is now in limbo ... stalled, if you will. The Turnaround Process, to be effective, will require efficient, focused leadership and staffing by the MS Dept. of Education, and significant funding by the State Legislature to enable the MS Dept. of Education to follow through on these mandates by the Children First Act of 2009.

The Task Force determined in 2008 that the Turnaround Process is:

- a. essential to the development of a quality public educational opportunity for all children,
- b. that quality public schools are essential to the future economic development of the state, and

- c. that such economic development is necessary to the building of a tax base that can support the effective growth and development of a quality public education system.

Recommendations regarding the Turnaround Process

Whether the full Turnaround Process will be implemented is at risk. We recommend the following to fulfill the commitments of the Task Force, the State Dept. of Education, the State Legislature and the Governor that were adopted as state law in the Children First Act of 2009:

- a. that the Task Force urge the State Board of Education and the new State Supt. of Education, Dr. Tom Burnham, to publicly commit to implement without delay the Turnaround Process set forth in the Children First Act of 2009 to strengthen the capacity of low performing school districts;
- b. that the Task Force strongly recommend to the 2010 Legislature that, notwithstanding the current budget crisis, the Legislature appropriate sufficient funds to enable the MS Dept. of Education to implement all facets of the Turnaround Process.

Charter Schools

This is **not** the time for the Task Force to recommend experimentation with charter schools as a means through which to provide an alternative to low performing schools.

The Task Force heard extensive authoritative testimony from Dr. Ron Zimmer, Michigan State University. Under intensive examination by Task Force members, Dr. Zimmer was clear: “Charter schools are not a silver bullet if the goal is to improve schools”. In short, like traditional public schools, some do well and some do not. Furthermore, Dr. Zimmer noted, the charter school models were largely based in urban areas and around urban culture, not rural areas and rural culture. In addition, he explained that the economic success of many of these schools tends to depend on the capacity of the charter schools to draw from large population bases because their economic viability tends to depend on their capacity to enroll large numbers of students.

Even Sen. Michael Watson, a strong charter school supporter, noted in his commentary to the Task Force that “Charter schools are not a silver bullet.”

In 2009 three major studies comparing charter schools with traditional public schools were published that demonstrated that students in charter schools across the country have not performed better than students in traditional public schools. [See the executive summaries and full reports of the Rand Corporation, Stanford University, and University of Michigan studies posted on the Southern Echo website, www.southernecho.org., at this link: http://southernecho.org/s/?page_id=1570 .]

In 2008 Dr. Jeffrey Henig, of Teachers College, Columbia University, published a report that evaluated the several recent studies of KIPP schools. [See the report on the Southern Echo website, www.southernecho.org, at this link: http://southernecho.org/s/?page_id=1570 .] Dr. Henig noted in his analysis of the studies that the students in many of the KIPP schools that have been studied have outperformed students in comparable traditional public schools. But he also notes that the KIPP schools that have been studied are the ones that have given permission to access their data, which is not otherwise a public record. Since a great many KIPP schools fail, this raises a serious question about the selectivity of these studies. Further, the data in successful KIPP schools also show that many KIPP schools have high student drop-out rates, which may tilt the favorability of the results through the elimination of underperforming students. In addition, the data shows extremely high teacher

turnover rates because there is such a heavy dependence on Teach for America to supply new teachers for the KIPP schools. This raises serious questions, Dr. Henig suggests, about the long-term viability of the KIPP model, especially for rural areas, when there is such a dependence on attracting teachers through a national federal program, rather than developing them from within the state.

A core value in education reform that has emerged in recent years is that strategies for improvement need to be rooted in *research-based evidence*. The research evidence thus far does **not** support the notion that existing charter school models are a prescription for fundamental improvement in education for small population, primarily rural communities which already have insufficient resources to support the public schools and there are already significant shortages of certified, qualified teachers.

Why authorizing charter schools in Mississippi is the wrong path at this time

All proposed legislation to authorized charter schools in Mississippi have included substantial diversion of state, local funding and federal funding away from the resource-strapped traditional public schools to the untried experimental charter schools. The proposed funding of charter schools would provide to the charter schools, for example:

- a. for each student attending a charter school the charter school would receive the base student cost plus the enhancement for children at risk generated by the MAEP formula without protecting the local school district from any financial harm that results from the loss of operating funds without any corresponding reduction in its operating expenses;
- b. up to \$100,000 *per charter school* from a state charter school stimulus revolving fund to provide start up funds for the charter school;
- c. a pro rata share of transportation funds, Title I funds, and other financial resources that are allocated to local school districts on the basis of the number of students.

At a time when the competing budget proposals in the 2010 Legislature range from cutting educating funding from 5 to 15 percent, it is unthinkable that in 2010 the State Legislature should authorize substantial further diversions of funds from the local school districts to untested charter school experiments. At the same time, since the 2009 Children First Act mandated a major Turnaround Process that needs substantial new funding to implement, it makes no sense for the State Legislature to authorize the substantial diversion of education resources to untested charter school experiments. These funds should be invested in the improvement of the existing traditional public schools as the Task Force recommended when it crafted the Children First Act.

Recommendations regarding charter schools

Whatever personal views Task Force members have about charter schools, the Task Force ought to recommend to the State Legislature that in 2010 the Legislature should forego any legislation regarding charter schools.

School Consolidation

In 2008 and 2009 the Task Force has received significant testimony regarding issues surrounding the concept of school consolidation in Mississippi. In 2009 the testimony came from the Southern Regional Education Board leadership, which conducted a study of the Mississippi situation on behalf of the Task Force. This is what we have learned from the research-based evidence presented to the Task Force:

- a. that Mississippi school districts, in terms of number of students, are “average in size” when compared to school districts nationally and in the southern region;
- b. that in Mississippi the consolidation of school districts will not likely result in any significant economic savings, and may actually result in an increase in expenses;
- c. the quality of education delivered to students does not necessarily improve when schools are consolidated;
- d. that consolidation tends to result in larger class sizes when economies are attempted through the reduction in the number of teachers in the new consolidated systems; and
- e. in rural areas the consolidation of districts over large geographic spans tends to reduce meaningful parental participation among families that do not live in the vicinity of the newly consolidated schools.

There is a major difference between consolidation of schools to achieve economies of scale, and consolidation to eliminate the dilemma of low-performing school districts by eliminating them through absorption into other better-performing districts. At this point the Task Force has not received any research-based evidence to support the notion that school consolidation would result in meaningful economies or improvement in the quality of education delivered to the students.

The Turnaround Process was designed to address the problems of low-performing schools. Massive school consolidation, such as urged by Governor Barbour, would abort the student performance and growth formulas of the new accountability model. The need to re-structure the districts and schools and mix together disparate student bodies and administrators would require a complete re-evaluation of district level and school level assessments. It would generate an administrative nightmare for those involved in the Turnaround Process. The political, economic, structural, legal and constitutional problems would bring the state-based education reform process to a halt. In short, massive school consolidation would divert all attention away from education reform to the complexities of consolidation. Such a diversion is not in the best interest of the children.

If there are specific school districts where there is a demonstrable and sound basis for consolidation, then these consolidations should be handled on a case-by-case basis. There is already sufficient Mississippi law to enable this to be accomplished, as it was, for example in Natchez-Adams, Vicksburg-Warren and South Delta school districts.

Recommendation on School Consolidation

The Task Force should urge the State Legislature to decline to authorize school consolidation on the premise of any economic savings or as a major education reform strategy.

Lack of Meaningful Community Voices on this and other Task Forces

It is time that we have the same opportunity as everyone else to be the architects of policy, not just the objects of policy.

We appreciate the opportunity to present our views to this Task Force, and other Task Forces. But there is a significant difference between having the opportunity to present for 5 minutes and to be part of the *deliberative* and *decision-making processes* in which Task Forces engage.

The Task Forces relating to education always have significant representation from the business community. But almost never is there representation of parents, students, advocacy groups or alliances

of education stakeholders, especially from the communities that are the objects of the policies being considered by the Task Forces.

If those who select the Task Force members can figure out how to pick and choose business representatives from among the thousands of businesses and hundreds of business groups in the state, then it should be possible to do the same with parents, students and education advocacy groups who come from and work within the communities most affected by the policies promoted, or avoided, by Task Forces.

Every major reform study calls for meaningful parental participation in the formation and implementation of education policy. Federal and state laws lift up this value. Nevertheless, this remains a major hurdle at the local school district level. It is important for the state Task Forces to model the meaningful inclusion of parents and students to demonstrate the validity of this approach.

Yes, we have the opportunity and ability to talk with our legislators. We have the opportunity and ability to talk with our educators at the state and local level. But that is not the same as being part of the decision-making of the Task Force about what should and should not be included in reports or proposals for legislation. Our experiences and perspectives are not “at the table” when this part of the process takes place.

If we are to create a fair and just moral center for our political process, then it must be as inclusive as possible in a meaningful way. People have different views about how to shape this process, about where to draw the line. Our view is that if representatives of business can be included, so can we. We think the line ought to be drawn anew to include parents, students and education advocacy groups inside Task Forces created to address education policy.

Recommendations regarding a more inclusive, democratic process

If this Task Force is extended for another year, parents and students from communities with underperforming schools who have been working to improve their education systems ought to be added to the Task Force.

Future Task Forces ought to include in its membership parents, students and representation from education advocacy organizations from communities with underperforming schools who have been working to improve their education systems.

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