



Mississippi Building Blocks
Promoting the statewide plan for early childhood education

Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools

A View from Mississippi

December 15, 2008

Mississippi is the only state that that does not finance any pre-kindergarten classes. It can't afford to, says Gov. Haley Barbour. Nevertheless, Barbour and other state officials are determined to give their youngest learners the advantages that children in other states have, to help them prepare for elementary school and for lives of learning and achievement. So they are teaming up with private industry to get it done.

"Mississippi doesn't have \$325 or \$350 million to start a 14th grade," Barbour told 750 educators, community advocates and business leaders during an Early Childhood Education Forum in Jackson in December, 2008. "That's just a cold fact, an unhappy fact."

But, he said, there is another way. Rather than create state-funded classes, Barbour said Mississippi should ensure there is "educational content" in preschools run by Head Start, churches and private organizations.

Some of Mississippi's leading businesses have pledged millions of dollars for a three-year pilot program, called Mississippi Building Blocks, that will help existing child care facilities and preschools provide quality education for young children. If the \$10.5 million pilot is successful, business leaders said they will urge the state to expand it to help many more of Mississippi's children.

Meanwhile, the state has created a rating system for preschools, a relatively inexpensive program that Barbour, a Republican, said would force them to compete for what he called a "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

"If there is a standard to be met that parents believe will give their children a better chance to succeed in life, parents will demand that the preschool meet that standard. And the Baptist preschools will and the Methodist preschools will and the Catholic preschools will. And then, you're going to have the for-profits. They're going to have to make the standard if they are going to compete," Barbour said. "The market will demand that if there is something you can do for my children that will give them a better chance of succeeding in life, I'm not going to tolerate that not being done."

About 90 percent of Mississippi's four-year-olds and 75 percent of its three-year-olds are in child care or preschool. But state officials and business leaders agree that many are not getting the start they deserve.

"Mississippi has one of the highest percentages of working mothers, in excess of 60 percent," said Jim Barksdale, chairman and president of the Barksdale Management Corporation and one of Mississippi's best-known entrepreneurs. "Their children, too often, are placed in custodial care with

little or no cognitive stimulation, not enough words and not enough exposure to books. We have got to change that so that when they get to kindergarten, they can start at the starting line.”

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) shares that goal. For the past few years, Mississippi has been one of eight locations nationwide to participate in a WKKF initiative known as SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids. SPARK works to improve education for vulnerable children by promoting partnerships among parents, early education providers, elementary school teachers and principals. The idea is to make children ready for schools and to make schools ready for children – to provide seamless transitions starting in the earliest years of life.

Gregory Taylor, WKKF’s vice president for Programs, said the Foundation considers Mississippi a “priority state.”

“Ultimately, the goal of our work is about success by third grade,” Taylor said. “To accomplish that, we’re going to be investing primarily in three areas: Family income and assets – we know that poor, vulnerable folks can’t save their way out of poverty; it’s about creating jobs, it’s about putting dollars in poor folks’ pockets so they can actually be better parents and caregivers for their children. It’s about health – we know unhealthy children don’t learn and so how do we promote health access and quality access for young children and their families to promote healthy living and healthy lifestyles. And it’s about education and learning – we know that education and learning happens both in school and in the community and so how do we really focus on issues like parent engagement, transition, alignment, teacher training and the like.”

SPARK serves nearly 800 Mississippi children in three counties. The program, a \$5 million demonstration project sponsored by WKKF and administered by the Children’s Defense Fund Southern Regional Office, began when the children were three and four and has followed them through the second grade, where they are now. Rhea Bishop, SPARK’s executive director in Mississippi, said it focuses on investing in children, improving the quality of education and linking ready children to ready schools.

“The mission here is to create replicable, integrated, aligned, family-focused learning communities so that children master skills and receive the cognitive, physical, family and community supports for school success,” she said. To accomplish that, SPARK creates local children’s partnerships with Head Start directors and teachers, public school kindergarten and first grade teachers, business leaders, members of the county and local school boards, parents and early child care providers.

“They work to raise awareness at the local grassroots level to make parents and family support the norm for that particular community, by focusing on parent engagement and empowerment, also making sure that the community is aware of the need for early childhood education. And prior to SPARK’s involvement in most of these communities, there was never a place or a meeting held where there were representatives from all of these groups working together on behalf of its youngest children,” Bishop said. “At the end of the process, supported by a strong local staff, we end up with children who are more successful and succeeding in Pre-K through third grade.”

Bishop quantified what SPARK has done in Mississippi: It has worked with more than 250 early childhood education providers; offered more than 5,000 professional development training hours; provided families with 10,000 books; enhanced more than 150 classroom environments in private child care facilities, Head Start and public schools; worked with nearly 1,200 parents and guardians; made 7,500 home visits; conducted nearly 2,500 child assessments, and completed more than 300 classroom evaluations.

The need for SPARK and other programs that prepare children for kindergarten is particularly acute in Mississippi. Problems experienced in moderation in others states – poverty, dropout rates, illiteracy, joblessness – are writ large there. Its population of nearly 3 million continues to struggle with a history of racial segregation and discrimination. In parts of the state, there is a dual system of education: white children attend private schools, African American children attend public schools. Eighty percent of Mississippi public school children receive free or reduced lunch, according to Hank Bounds, the state’s superintendent of schools. Mississippi students had the lowest scores in math and science of children in any state in 2007, according to tests administered by the U.S. Education Department and analyzed by the American Institutes of Research, a nonprofit independent scientific research firm.

“We’re last on every list where we don’t want to be last and first on every list where we don’t want to be first,” Bounds said.

Mississippi, Bounds noted, “has the poorest population in the country. We know that children growing up in poverty are significantly less likely to live in print-rich, vocabulary-rich, experience-rich environments. On average, the child from poverty has heard 20 million fewer words than the affluent child by age five. On average, the affluent child has the same vocabulary level as the parent who lives in poverty. Eighty percent of brain development occurs during the first four years of life.”

A full three-quarters of Mississippi's children start kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed, Bounds said. He called attention to the state's shortcomings as a way to persuade business leaders to pony up money for the preschool project.

"Children who don't have academic experiences in the first few years of life, we know, enter kindergarten with limited vocabulary skills, and the interesting thing about that is that vocabulary levels of five-year-olds is a great predictor of future reading success," he said. "We know that kids who can't read by the end of the third grade are exponentially more likely to go to prison and they're more likely to drop out of school. Children who are not ready for school have higher retention rates and that costs the state money. They are much more likely to be pigeonholed into special education. These children are much less likely to become part of Mississippi's workforce. These children are much more likely to be welfare-dependent and part of the criminal justice system even as a juvenile.

"So for the business folks in this room, it's pretty clear why we have to have your support. We've got to think very differently about how we get kids ready to start the first day of kindergarten. We simply can't afford to have an enormous part of our student population enter kindergarten not knowing the difference between an 'A' and a 'Z.'"

Bounds emphasized that Mississippi is vying with its neighboring states and with the rest of the country for jobs and industry and that if its children can't compete, the whole state will suffer. Right now, he concluded, Mississippi's children, particularly those from low-income households, are not given the tools they need. That, in essence, hurts the entire state, rich and poor. Further, he said, business leaders will not want to locate in a state that doesn't provide good educational opportunities for its employees' children.

"It's a race," he said. "We're running a race and every state in this country is running the same race. The problem is that the starting line for our children isn't all in the same place. Those children who live in great environments, who have access to early education opportunities, who have parents that read to them every day start at one place, and everybody else starts way back down the road and it's virtually impossible to get all of our kids to third grade reading in just four years.

"Early education is a quality-of-life issue and it's an economic-development issue," Bounds continued. "Businesses aren't going to go to places where their employees aren't going to have places to put their children. It simply won't happen."

"We also know that several leading economists have proven that an investment in quality early education yields significant returns on each dollar. Even in good economic times, investment in early education yields a profit for the state. Imagine what it does in economic times such as we have now. We live in a competitive world and right now Mississippi has some real disadvantages when it comes to competing with our neighbors for jobs and new businesses."

Bounds argued that other southern states have pulled ahead by investing more money in education. He noted that a teacher who moved from Mississippi to Georgia immediately received a \$10,000 a year pay increase. (Mississippi's early care and education teachers in licensed centers earn about \$2 less an hour than their counterparts in other states, according to Cathy Grace, executive director of the Mississippi State University Early Childhood Institute.) Arkansas, Bounds said, spends \$1,300 more per student than Mississippi. Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee have been recognized nationally for their work with young children, he said. And Florida has universal pre-kindergarten.

In fact, Bounds went so far as to challenge his own governor: "You're going to hear from folks over and over and over that we just can't afford to add another grade or do more with early education. I think the question that we have to ask ourselves today is, 'Can we afford not to invest in our youngest, most vulnerable citizens?' I think the answer to that question is, no, we can't afford not to."

The hotel ballroom was salted with business leaders ready to answer the call for help. Jim Barksdale, a Mississippi native who formerly was the president and CEO of the Netscape Communications Corp., the CEO of AT&T Wireless Services and executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Federal Express Corp. (FedEx), started the Barksdale Reading Institute with \$100 million of his own money in 2000. In December, he pledged \$3 million to help finance the Mississippi Building Blocks project.

"These building blocks are not cheap or easy," he told the forum participants. "But the alternative is economically, socially, and, I think, morally unacceptable."

The sentiment was echoed by educators, advocates and business leaders, each of whom argued that Mississippi's children must be given the same advantages as children in other states.

"I think there is an absolutely overwhelming momentum here in Mississippi to understand that there is a direct link between what happens to a child from the moment they are born through their early years of life, what kind of student they become, what their view toward school is, how successful they are in school," said Claiborne Barksdale, CEO of the Barksdale Reading Institute established by his brother. "Too many children start out too far behind. We don't have enough miracle workers, Anne Sullivans, in our public schools to get these children caught up...We have got to change the experience that these children have in these child care centers. And that's what Mississippi Building Blocks is all about."

Nancy Loomer, executive director of The Parents' Campaign, a network committed to improving public schools, said the state had no option but to spend more money on its youngest children. She painted a bleak picture of the alternative.

"What happens to children when we fail to make that investment? They hit kindergarten. They are not ready. They begin to fail early on. Failure comes to kind of define their whole K-12 experience. They drop out of school. They have difficulty finding employment. They're employed in low-wage jobs when they do find employment. It costs our state a bundle to fund the remediation that we need in schools. And then again, those people largely end up on public assistance," Loomer said. "And so our state is paying dearly for our failure to invest early on in our children's education."

Loomer said that because so many preschool children in Mississippi come from low-income families, child care and early education programs work hard to hold down their costs. That means they don't have enough money for ongoing teacher training and other critical expenses, she said. That's where the new Mississippi Building Blocks program will step in.

"It's designed to give existing child care centers the resources that they need to bring our children up to where they need to be before they get to kindergarten," Loomer explained. In its first three years, she said, the pilot program will serve 50 child care centers. It is a small subset of the 1,700 licensed centers statewide, but a start. During the first year, the program will operate in 150 classrooms with about 1,500 infants and toddlers. During the second year, the program will expand to include three-year-olds, and will serve about 3,500 children. In the third year, it will add four-year-olds and will serve about 5,500 children.

Mississippi Building Blocks will help child care centers by providing program facilitators, classroom materials and resources, on-site teacher mentors and a professional development training model. It will provide business advisers

to help child care centers keep fees low and still remain profitable, and parent advocates who will visit homes and help parents learn what they can do to help their children reach age-appropriate milestones. The advocates also will be able to provide referrals when parents need extra help.

Loomer said the program will include rigorous evaluations conducted by outside assessors. Among other things, they'll be looking at child outcomes and tracking children for a number of years.

"The point is making sure that we're making a difference in these children's lives," Loomer said.

In the short term, Loomer said, teaching and parenting will improve, and schools will be better prepared for their young students. In the long term, she said she hopes the program will become a model that can be expanded to the entire state. "And when we do that, we're going to reduce our dropout rate. We're going to increase our graduation rate. We're going to have better job-readiness among these children. And so they're going to be working at higher salaries. We're going to have fewer interactions with the criminal justice system, reduce public assistance roles, and all of those things will mean brighter futures for our children and more prosperity for our state," Loomer said.

Business leaders at the forum were eager to demonstrate their support for the new program and for investing in early education. One after another, they talked about how important it is to invest in children on the front end, before they enter elementary school, so that they'll be more productive as adults.

"Those children are the job candidates for the jobs of our future," said Aubrey Patterson, chairman and CEO of BancorpSouth and education chair for Momentum Mississippi, a public-private partnership aimed at developing economic and employment opportunities. "And whether you're talking about information technology or Toyota manufacturing or everything in between, we're talking about jobs of the future that have an educational component like none that, historically, we have seen."

Charles Kolb, president of the Washington-based Committee for Economic Development, urged the educators in the room to "consider the business community as your ally."

"They get the concept of investment and human capital," he said. "It may be self-interest, but the truly enlightened ones understand that self-interest is also the state's interest and also the country's interest."

So it was that during the one-day forum, business and philanthropic leaders pledged \$4.6 million toward the \$10.5 million goal for the Mississippi Building Blocks program. The program will continue to seek contributions from individuals, businesses and foundations, said Anthony J. Topazi, chairman of the Mississippi Economic Council, the state's chamber of commerce, and Momentum Mississippi, a public-private partnership appointment by the governor, as well as president and CEO of Mississippi Power.

"And I can tell you, sitting at the table with many business leaders, I already know they can't wait to sign up," Topazi announced. "And so we have no doubt whatsoever that we're going to raise the \$10.5 million that we need."

The important thing to remember, Barbour said, is that the starting place for children who will be productive, competitive adult workers is not kindergarten, but early childhood education. And he said Mississippi can make sure its children get the right start even if its budget is tighter than those of most states.

"We shouldn't ever forget that just because we can't pay \$325 million to do something the way Connecticut does, it doesn't mean we can't do it," Barbour insisted. "We can do it our way, make it the right way, and I believe at the end of the day, our state and our people will be far better off for us recognizing that we had to do this our own way."

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