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The Family and Children Research Unit (FCRU) conducts research on issues affecting the health, safety, education, and economic well-being of children and families. It employs an interdisciplinary approach for program planning and evaluation while conducting basic and applied research to build effective service systems as well as inform state, local, and national policy makers. FCRU partnerships with public and private agencies allow for the development and implementation of common goals.



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Introduction

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Linda H. Southward

Introduction

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Introduction

Mississippi KIDS COUNT, now beginning its fifth year at MSU's Social Science Research Center, continues to focus upon the following broad areas: health, education, safety and economic well-being. The theme of the 2010/2011 MS KIDS COUNT Databook is education. The four components of education included in this Databook are:

- Early Care and Education
- Literacy
- Healthy Schools and
- Graduation Rates

While these areas are not inclusive of the numerous tributaries of an educational system, improvement in each of these areas is a pivotal marker of success to improve the current educational system in Mississippi for both current and future generations of Mississippi's children.

As children succeed in educational endeavors, pathways to overall positive outcomes are accelerated. Creating a more educated and productive citizenry holds great promise by increasing economic benefits to a larger number of Mississippi's children, their families and communities. Former Governor William Winter noted almost three decades ago that "The way out of poverty is by the school house door." His quote still rings true today. In December, 2010 Bill Gates noted "If there's one thing that can be done for the country, one thing, improving education rises so far above everything else!"

As noted above the four areas of this year's Databook include: early care and education, literacy, healthy schools and graduation rates. Each component includes an overview, data visualization, policy considerations and a success story. A few of the highlights include:

Early Care and Education

Given the overwhelming evidence and inescapable connection between children's brain development and the importance of nurturing this development to yield more positive outcomes for children, improving educational systems must include a strong foundation early on in children's lives. The first section (Early Care and Education), not only explores this connection, but highlights a number of efforts in Mississippi that are doing just that. The challenge is to determine strategically how this can best be implemented statewide, through collaborative efforts to include all of Mississippi's children.

Literacy

Increasing literacy levels of children is another crucial variable in the equation to improve the overall education level of Mississippi's children. It is of particular importance that children read on grade level by the end of third grade. If this level is not reached, the probability of children graduating on time or graduating at all is greatly diminished.



Introduction

Healthy Schools

Mississippi's schools are providing healthier environments, with the implementation of the Mississippi Healthy Students Act of 2007. In a recent study by Kolbo, et al. (2010), there was a strong association between higher fitness levels and higher grades of children in Mississippi, as well as a strong association between low absenteeism and higher fitness levels. Having schools fully implement the Healthy Students Act of 2007 is needed to assist students in making healthier choices.

Graduation Rates

Graduation rates in Mississippi have improved over the last several years and efforts such as "On the Bus," and America's Promise campaign appear to be working, yet there is much to be done, particularly in decreasing drop-out rates.

Success Stories

The success stories are in essence, achievements of communities, and individuals and groups within these communities throughout the state of Mississippi, who have 'stepped up to the plate' to make positive differences in children's lives. These communities provide a platform by which communities across Mississippi may be inspired to replicate the successes (For a full listing of the contributors to these success stories see pp. 2 and 3).

Ten National Indicators

Beginning in 1994, each year, the Annie E. Casey Foundation compiles state-level data on ten indicators, which are an overall assessment of children's well-being (see **Figure 1**). The Foundation uses these measures to rank all 50 states relative to one another, as well as to look at the nation as a whole. Based on these measures, each state is given a rank per indicator, as well as an overall rank. The most recent data available for all states are years 2008 and 2009. Rankings for individual years for each indicator (i.e., "Mississippi rank" in **Figure 1**) indicate how our state is doing on these ten measures of children's well-being relative to all the other states. Changes in rates or percentages between the year 2000 and the most recent years indicate whether or not our state is becoming relatively better or worse on a particular measure over time. Rankings and rates can be used to set goals for the status of children in a state.

Mississippi ranks 50th in seven of the ten national indicators measuring children's well-being. Mississippi was better in three categories since the year 2000: Infant mortality, teen deaths and high school dropouts. Mississippi has made tremendous progress in the categories of teens finishing their education and graduating. This has decreased from a 15.4 % in 2000 dropping out of school to 7% in 2009.

Child poverty has continually increased in Mississippi, affecting 233,000 children. This indicator reflects the number of parents not working full-time or not able to find year-round employment (300,000) in 2009.

Introduction

When reviewing the map, a geographic pattern is evident in establishing the KIDS COUNT overall rank. The majority of the lowest ranked states are located in the south, with the second to lowest category surrounding them. In 2010 New Hampshire is ranked at number one in the U.S., with Mississippi ranked last at 50th.

Figure 2

KIDS COUNT Data Book Indicators: Mississippi						
Indicator	Year 2000 (rate or %)	Current Year	Current Year (rate or %)	Current Year (# of children)	Change since 2000*	MS Rank
Low-birthweight babies (less than 5.5 pounds)	10.7%	2007	12.3%	5,703	Worse	50th
Infant Mortality (per 1,000)	10.7	2007	10%	467	Better	50th
Child deaths, ages 1-14 (per 100,000)	36.6	2007	34	203	Better	50th
Teen deaths from all causes, ages 15-19 (per 100,000)	103.4	2007	98	216	Better	49th
Teen births, ages 15-19 (per 1,000)	70.1	2007	72	7,811	Worse	50th
Teens (16-19) who are high school dropouts	15.4%	2009	7%	14,000	Better	29th
Teens (16-19) not attending school and not working	11%	2009	12%	24,000	Worse	45th
Children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment	36%	2009	39%	300,000	Worse	50th
Children in poverty (100%)	26.4%	2009	31%	233,000	Worse	50th
Children in single-parent families	42.7%	2009	48%	337,000	Worse	50th

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data center

KIDS COUNT Overall Rank, 2010

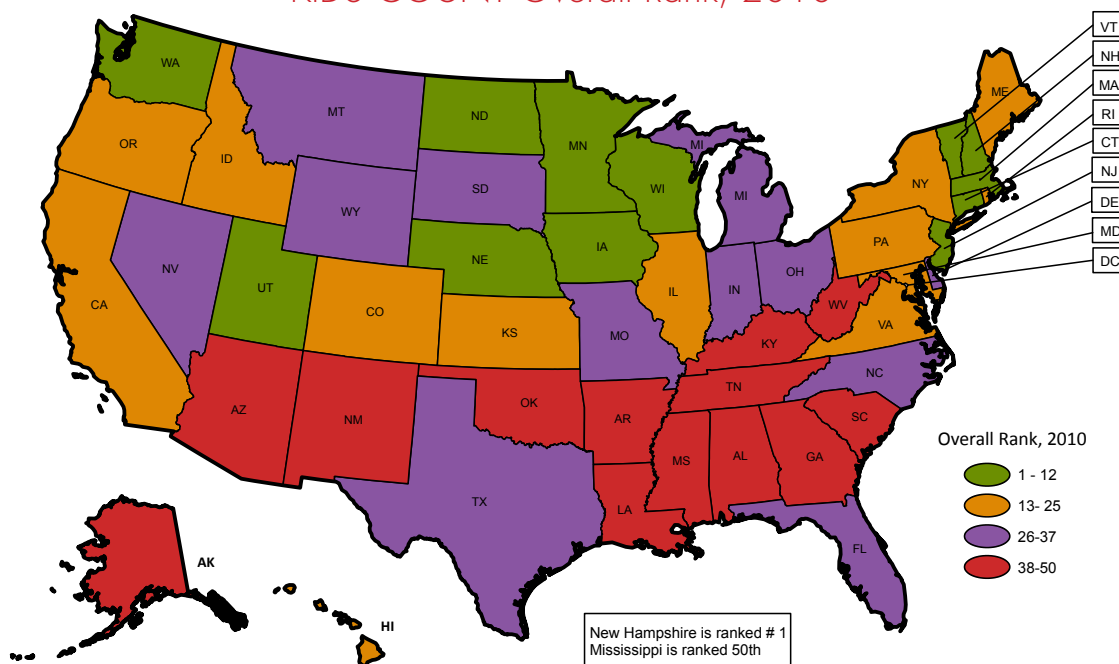


Figure 2

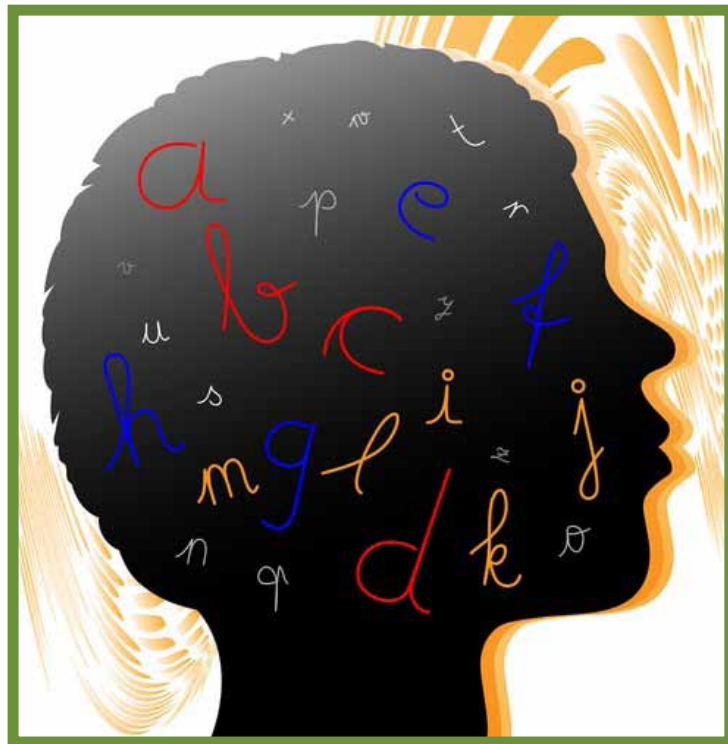
*Excludes the District of Columbia

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Early Care and Education

Introduction

Early education is crucial to supporting healthy childhood development and to providing a strong foundation for future schooling and general success. Defined as education between birth and age eight by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), early childhood education is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for both the child as well as the community as a whole (National Association for the Education of Young Children, (n.d.)). Scientific studies suggest that participation in high quality early education, which includes elements such as trained and skilled teachers, small class sizes, and frequent child interaction and participation, improves cognitive and social development among all, but especially among low-income children (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Research shows that children develop 90% of their adult-size brains in the first five years of life, and therefore the provision of abundant information, proper stimulation and sufficient encouragement are keys to future success (Math and Reading Help, n.d.). Relationships that children form with parents, caregivers, teachers and other adults early in their lives actually shape brain circuits and establish bases for later developmental outcomes, including academic accomplishment, mental health and interpersonal skills (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The quality of a child's early education and interactions at the early important stages of brain circuit development are "crucial to determining the strength or weakness of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will be able to think and to regulate emotions" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).



The education that a child receives prior to the beginning of primary school may occur in a variety of settings, including center-based care, parental care, relative care, or non-relative care (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Center-based care includes governmental Early Head Start and Head Start programs, as well as other forms of pre-school, kindergarten, and daycare (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In 2005, a national study found that approximately 57% of children aged three through five were enrolled in a center-based program, although those programs were more common among the children of wealthier, college-educated parents. Outside of center-based programs, 26% of children received only parental care, while relatives and non-relatives cared for the remainder of the children (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Early Care and Education

The Harvard University Center for the Developing Child has found six elements that distinguish effective center-based early childhood education programs (whether pre-school, kindergarten or daycare). These include: qualified and appropriately compensated personnel, small group sizes and high adult-child ratios, language rich environments, developmentally appropriate curricula, safe physical settings, and warm and responsive adult-child interactions (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.).

While attention to Pre-K, kindergarten and afterschool programs are crucial, it is also important to note that, as mentioned above, early education includes infants and toddlers, and a focus must be placed on the provision of stimulation and quality care to those children as well. It has been shown that as public support and attention is placed on the provision of care to children aged three and four, the provision of care for younger children in some places may have suffered (Ackerman and Barnett, 2009). High-quality infant and toddler care, however, has been proven to enhance child development and is particularly crucial for disadvantaged children. Thus coordinated planning, infrastructure, data systems, professional development and funding are crucial components of a comprehensive early care and education system. This should begin at infancy and continue throughout childhood.

"If our society is to prosper in the future, we will need to make sure that all children have the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. But recent science demonstrates that many children's futures are undermined when stress damages the early developing architecture of the brain."

Lynn Davey, FrameWorks Institute



Early Care and Education

Early childhood describes a relatively brief period of time in a person's life, but its impact on human development is considerable. In order to protect its future, Mississippi must invest in its young children by ensuring access to affordable and high quality early childhood education.



Importance of Providing Quality Early Care and Education:

The “why” question of the importance of providing high quality early care and education has been answered, namely that early experiences **do influence** brain circuitry. The science has undeniably answered that question.

We also know the following, as reported by researcher, Kathleen McCartney (2009):

- *High-quality early care and education experience can begin to lessen the negative effects of poverty on children's academic achievement*
- *The greater the number of experiences that children (from 6-54 months of age) have in high-quality child care tend to have higher levels, on average, of reading and math achievements through the elementary school years*
- *Among children in poverty, early interventions help to build the early academic skills needed for long-term school success. For policies to be effective, they must consider the core concepts of child development*

Early Care and Education

- *Child development is a foundation for community and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society*
- *Brains are built over time*
- *The interactive influence of genes and experiences literally shape the architecture of the developing brain, and the active ingredient is the “serve and return” nature of children’s engagement in relationship with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community*
- *Both brain architecture and developing abilities are built “from the bottom up,” with the simple circuits and skills providing the scaffolding for more advance circuits and skills over time*
- *Toxic stress in early childhood is associated with persistent effects on the nervous system and stress hormone systems that can damage developing brain architecture and lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health*
- *Creating the right conditions for early childhood development is likely to be more effective and less costly than addressing problems at a later age*



Early Care and Education

Current State of Early Childhood Education in Mississippi

Twenty five years ago, the state of Mississippi established a voluntary kindergarten program for all five-year-old children. The Mississippi legislature has also established various task forces to assess the state of early education, developed collaborative efforts among public and private Pre-K programs and Head Start programs, offered grants to early education and child care centers, and provided tools and resources for parents and child care workers. Despite these strengths and real achievements, early education and child care in Mississippi is acutely lacking as Mississippi is one of only nine states that do not have state funded Pre-K programs (Pre-K Now, n.d.); and Mississippi is the only Southern state without a Pre-K program (Holland, 2008). This section will provide an overview of the above-mentioned legislative accomplishments and what is currently in existence in Mississippi, but additional action is necessary in Mississippi to increase access to and quality of early childhood education.

Begun in 1965, the Head Start program is one of the most well known examples of early childhood education. In fiscal year 2007, over 900,000 children were enrolled in Head Start programs across the country. Additionally, in 2007 there were 26,657 children enrolled in Mississippi Head Start, which received \$162 million in funding that fiscal year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). In Mississippi, approximately 17,004 children are enrolled in Head Start and 11,045 in Early Head Start (Governor's Office, Mississippi Department of Head Start).



Early Care and Education



The Mississippi legislature has enacted various pieces of legislation in the last several years that endeavor to provide sufficient oversight, coordination and management of early education programs. These laws work to ensure basic standards and levels of support across Mississippi programs.

Senate Bill 2636, which was signed into law in 2003, provides for evaluations to be conducted on the status of early childhood education programs, both public and private, in Mississippi. This effort includes establishing an oversight committee, providing recommendations on the need for more public school Pre-K programs in the state, and detailing the steps necessary to ensure Pre-K programs meet or exceed the established standards (S.B. 2636, Mississippi 2003, enacted).

Several pieces of legislation have also been enacted to provide support to early childhood education programs in various ways. In 2007, the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2007 authorized the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) to “implement a voluntary early child care and education grant program.” This program facilitates collaborative efforts among entities such as Head Start, child care centers, and public school Pre-K programs, and allows eligible entities to apply for funds to enhance or expand their services (S.B. 2667, Mississippi 2007, enacted). In 2009, the Children First Act was signed into law, which requires underperforming school districts to establish a community-based council that is focused on Pre-K through higher education” (S.B. 2628, Mississippi 2009, enacted). That same year, Section 37-7-301 of the Mississippi Code was amended to authorize school districts to “operate and expend funds from any available sources for voluntary early childhood education programs” (S.B. 2314, Mississippi 2009, enacted). These laws all have the common aim of supporting Pre-K programs by allowing for collaboration among educational entities and community resources to implement, fund, and improve early childhood education.

Early Care and Education

In 2008 the Governor's State Early Childhood Advisory Council was formed, as mandated by the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Reauthorization Act (State Early Childhood Advisory Council of Mississippi, 2008). The council's purpose is to advise the Governor on the development of a comprehensive system of coordinated services for young children in the state. Since its inception, annual reports (2008, 2009, and 2010) have been completed and submitted to the Governor (R. Williams-Bishop, personal communication, December, 2010), describing the formation, assigned responsibilities, and activities of the Council, with a common theme of creating one coordinated system of quality care and education for Mississippi's children birth to five. The most recent recommendations for realizing this vision include:



- i. Appoint (by the Governor) an Executive Director for the State Early Childhood Advisory Council through which programs and services related to the education, health, mental health and social services for children (and their families) prior to birth through age eight will be better coordinated
- ii. Develop a family/child-centered information/data system and sharing process that will ensure significant improvement in the delivery of high quality early care and education services built around a logic model where information collected will serve to improve the system or service(s) in question
- iii. Develop and implement a work force development plan for individuals seeking to be employed as early childhood educator
- iv. Develop a process by which early childhood services occur for the purpose of supplying communities with information and coordinated service models for replication across the state
- v. Review and revise existing registry requirements related to family childcare homes
- vi. Develop and implement a process by which health access issues are addressed for children ages zero to five

Through its research and recommendations, the council has "crafted a plan for early care and education services at the local level connected through statewide systems for young children and their families."

By establishing oversight and advisory committees, facilitating collaboration, and allowing greater flexibility for the funding of Pre-K programs, the laws outlined above aim to provide the resources and support necessary to enable early childhood education programs in the state to expand their services and maintain a minimum standard of quality.

Early Care and Education

State Resources for Parents and Child Care Workers

Mississippi has also enacted programs and policies whose aims are variously to provide resources, support, training, and assistance to parents and/or early child care providers. Examples of these types of programs are as follows:

- The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 2006 instituted a number of measures affecting early childhood education. Among them was Section 16 of the Act, which provided that the Office for Children and Youth (OCY) in MDHS would “develop and implement a pilot voluntary Quality Rating System” for early childcare and education programs that would be phased in over a five year period. Such a rating system would enable better monitoring and improved training for teachers. Section 17 also required the OCY to assess the need for a program that would provide incentives for teachers and directors in participating programs to advance their own education (S.B. 2602, Mississippi, 2009, enacted). To make child care more accessible to working families, Mississippi offers an income tax credit of 50% of the actual cost of employer-sponsored, state certified dependent day care (Mississippi Building Blocks, n.d.). This credit is available to all types of businesses and is limited to 50% of the Mississippi income tax liability. The Mississippi Child Care Resource and Referral network (MSCCR&R) is a system serving child care providers and parents seeking referrals for child care. The objectives of MSCCR&R include: providing technical assistance to licensed child care providers and home providers utilizing the Mississippi Early Learning Guidelines for three and four year old children, offering training and career building tools to early care and education providers, and maintaining a database of licensed centers to help parents find child care (Coordinated Access to the Research and Extension System, 2010). In the 2008 fiscal year, the state granted \$1 million to the organization (Mississippi Building Blocks, n.d.).
- The Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System (MCCQSS) is a voluntary pilot quality rating system in 60 Mississippi counties (MCCQSS, 2010). The MCCQSS seeks to promote the implementation of an age-appropriate curriculum in childcare centers across the state. The Office of Children and Youth (OCY) in MDHS contracted with Mississippi State University’s Early Childhood Institute to enact the program, and the state legislature appropriated \$2 million for it in the 2008 fiscal year (Mississippi Building Blocks, n.d.).

The above listed programs thus constitute a solid effort by Mississippi to begin providing access to strong early childhood education for all Mississippi children. As noted elsewhere, however, additional steps must be taken.

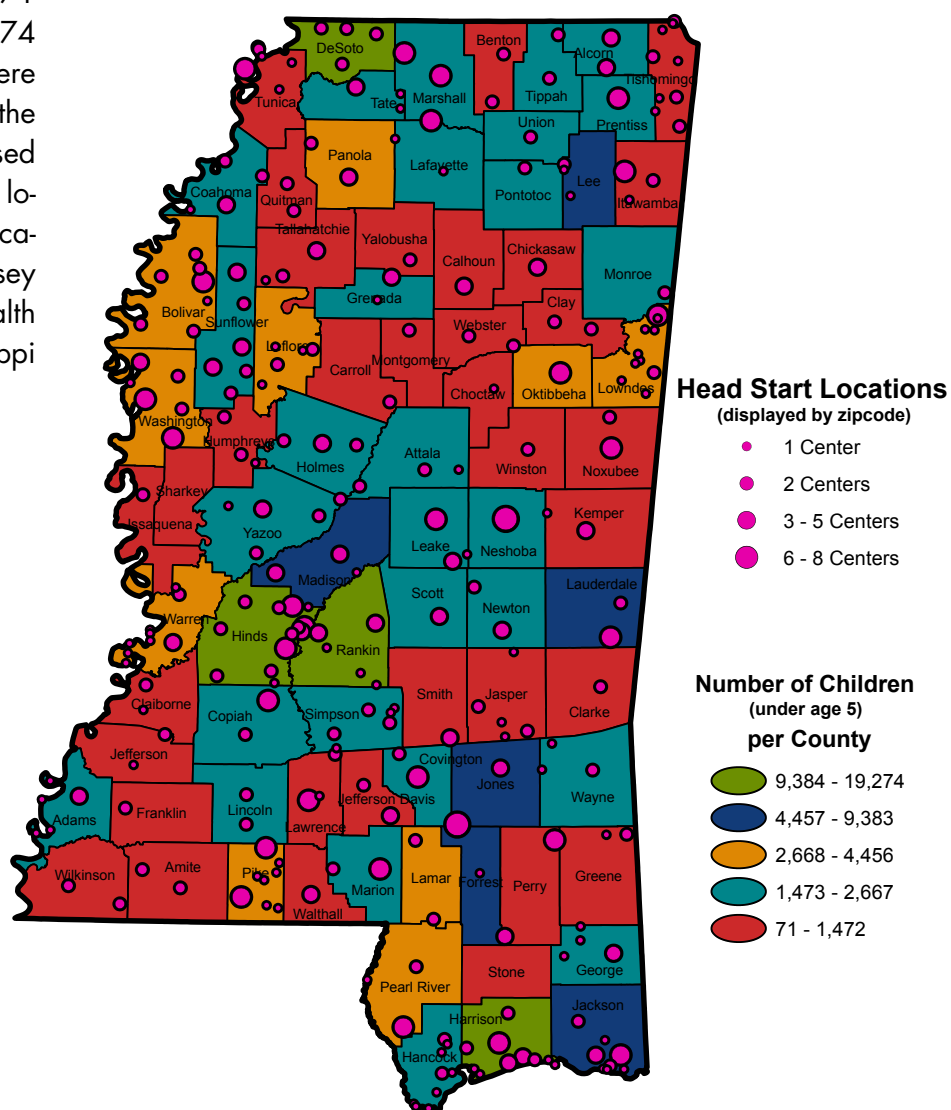


Early Care and Education

Data Section

The underlying colors on this map (**Figure 1**) measure the under age five population in each of Mississippi's 82 counties, with ranges from a low of 71 children (Issaquena) to a high of 19,274 (Hinds). The population categories were chosen based on natural breaks in the rankings of the counties. Superimposed on the counties are dots denoting the location and number of Head Start locations in each county (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.; Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.; Mississippi Head Start Association, n.d.).

Population of Children Under Age Five
and Head Start Centers, 2008



Sources: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center; Department of Health and Human Services

Figure 1

Early Care and Education

Head Start Program Locations

Figure 2

Head Start Program Locations		
AGENCY	AGENCY ADDRESS	SERVICE AREA
Mississippi Head Start Collaboration Office	P.O. Box 139 Jackson, M.S 39205-00139 601.576.2021	Jackson, MS
Mississippi Head Start Association	921 N. Congress Street Jackson, MS 39202 601.969.6979	Jackson, MS
Mississippi Head Start Association	100 W. Front Street Hattiesburg, MS 39401 601.545.8110	Forrest County
Adams Jefferson Franklin County (AJFC) Community Action Agency	1038 B. North Union Street Natchez, MS 39180 601.442.8681	Adams, Jefferson, Wilkinson, and Amite Counties
Bolivar County Community Action Agency, Inc.	810 East Sunflower Rd. Suite 120 Cleveland, MS 38732 662.846.1491	Bolivar County
Central Mississippi, Inc. Head Start/Early Head Start	P.O. Box 749 Winona, MS 38967 662.283.2227	Carroll, Montgomery, Webster, Choctaw, Attala, and Holmes Counties
Coahoma Opportunities, Inc. Head Start	115 Issaquena Ave. Clarksdale, MS 38614 662.624.4887	Coahoma County
Five County Child Development Head Start	P.O. Box 1195 Prentiss, MS 39474 601.792.5191	Simpson, Lawrence, Jefferson Davis, and Covington Counties
Friends of Children of Mississippi, Inc. Head Start/Early Head Start	6425 Lakeover Rd. Jackson, MS 39213 601.321.0960	Issaquena, Sharkey, Humphreys, Leake, Madison, Copiah, Rankin, Newton, Clarke, Jasper, Smith, Greene, Jones, Wayne, and Kemper Counties
Gulf Coast Community Action Agency Head Start/Early Head Start	500 24th Street Gulfport, MS 39507 228.897.7718	Harrison County
Hinds County Human Resource Agency Head Start/Early Head Start	258 Maddox Road Jackson, MS 39212 601.923.3940	Hinds County

Head Start Program Locations		
AGENCY	AGENCY ADDRESS	SERVICE AREA
Hollandale School District Early Head Start	P.O. Box 352 Hollandale, MS 38748 662.827.5651	Hollandale, MS
Institute of Community Services (ICS), Inc. Head Start/ Early Head Start	P.O. Box 160 Holly Springs, MS 38635 662.252.1582	Tunica, Tate, Marshall, DeSoto, Quitman, Panola, Lafayette, Tallahatchie, Grenada, Clay, Oktibbeha, Lowndes, and Noxubee Counties
Jackson County Civic Action Community Head Start	5343 Jefferson Ave. Moss Point, MS 39563 228.769.3264	Jackson County
Mississippi Action for Progress, Inc. Community Action Agency	1751 Morson Road Jackson, MS 39209 601.923.4100/741	Alcorn, Tippah, Prentiss, Tishomingo, Union, Itawamba, Yalobusha, Calhoun, Chickasaw, Winston, Neshoba, Scott, Lauderdale, Warren, Claiborne, Lincoln, Perry, Pearl River, Franklin, Hancock, Leflore, Monroe, Lee, Pontotoc, and Yazoo Counties
Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Head Start/Early Head Start	P.O. Box 6010 Choctaw, MS 39350 601.650.1680	Newton, Neshoba, and Leake Counties
Moore Community House Early Head Start	P.O. Box 204 Biloxi, MS 39530 228.669.2990	Harrison County
Pearl River Valley Opportunity (PVRO) Community Action Agency Head Start/Early Head Start	P.O. Box 188 Columbia, MS 39429 601.736.9564	Pike, Walthall, Marion, Lamar, and Stone Counties
Pinebelt Association for Community Enhancement (PACE) Head Start/Early Head Start	100 W. Front Street Hattiesburg, MS 39401 601.545.8110	Forrest County
Picayune School District Early Head Start	1620 Rosa Street Picayune, MS 39466 601.799.0682	Picayune, MS
Singing River Educational Association, Inc. Head Start	1170 Pleasant Hill Church Road Lucedale, MS 39452 601.947.8219	George County
Sunflower/Humphreys Counties Progress, Inc. Action Agency Head Start	P.O. Box 908 Indianola, MS 38751 662.887.1413	Sunflower County
United Community Action Head Start	P.O. Box 338 Ashland, MS 38603 662.224.8911	Benton County
Washington County Opportunities Head Start	716 Martin L. King Blvd. Greenville, MS 38702 662.335.3948	Washington County

Early Care and Education

Figure 3 compares Pre-K and Head Start enrollment for three-year-olds in Mississippi to the total U.S. population and two other Southern states, Alabama and Arkansas. Mississippi and Alabama have no Pre-K enrollment for three-year-olds compared to 6% for Arkansas and 4% for the total U.S. population. Mississippi leads in enrollment for Head Start (24%) compared to 12% for Arkansas, 10% for Alabama and 7% for the total U.S. population. Arkansas is on top for enrollment in special education (4%), followed by the U.S. population (3%) and Mississippi and Alabama with 1% each. The other/none category makes up the largest enrollment for the U.S. population and each comparison state. The data from these graphs are from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER, 2009).

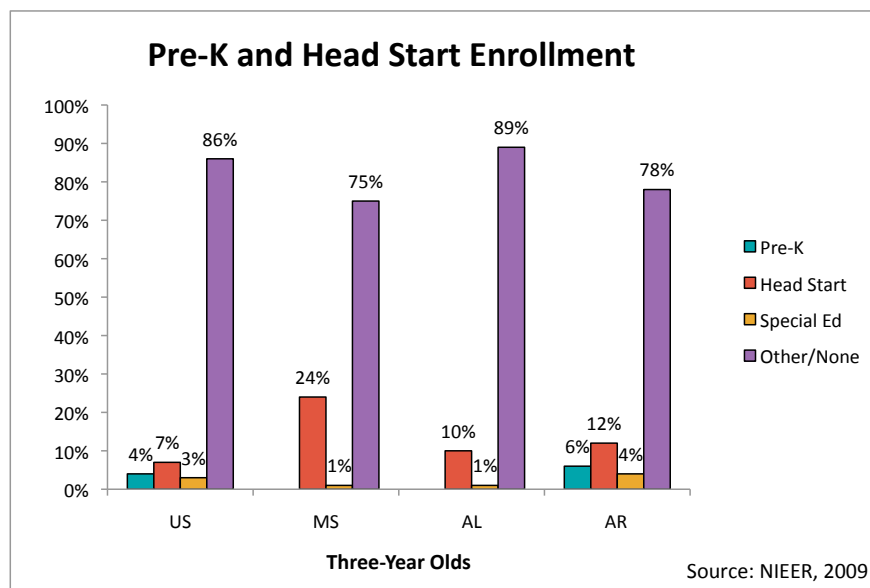


Figure 3

Figure 4 is a comparison of Pre-K and Head Start enrollment for four-year-olds. Comparisons are made between the total U.S. population, Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas. Mississippi does not have any Pre-K state supported, universal programs for four-year-olds. Arkansas' enrollment is as high as 44% compared to 25% for the total U.S. population and 6% for Alabama. Head Start enrollment for four-year-olds range from 35% (Mississippi) to 15% (Alabama). Arkansas tops the enrollment for special education with 6% compared to 3% for Mississippi and the U.S. population, and 2% for Alabama. Again, other/none makes up the larger category across all states and the U.S. population (NIEER, 2009).

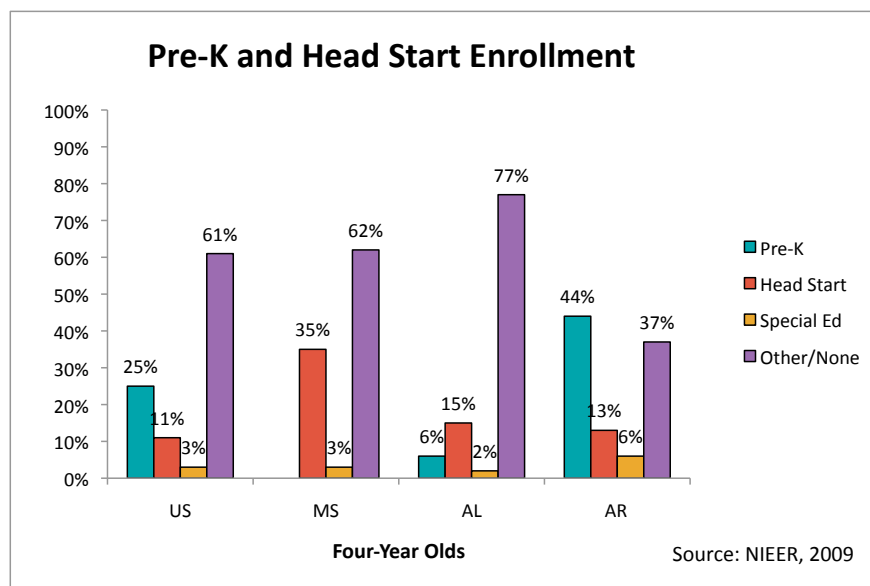


Figure 4

Early Care and Education

One third of Mississippi's school districts (**Figure 6**) currently provide pre-school educational programs, serving 3,584 Pre-K children. Mississippi does not have universal state-funded early care and education programs. The state has approximately 220, 813 children under the age of five (Mississippi Department of Education).

Pre-Kindergarten Programs by School District, 2009

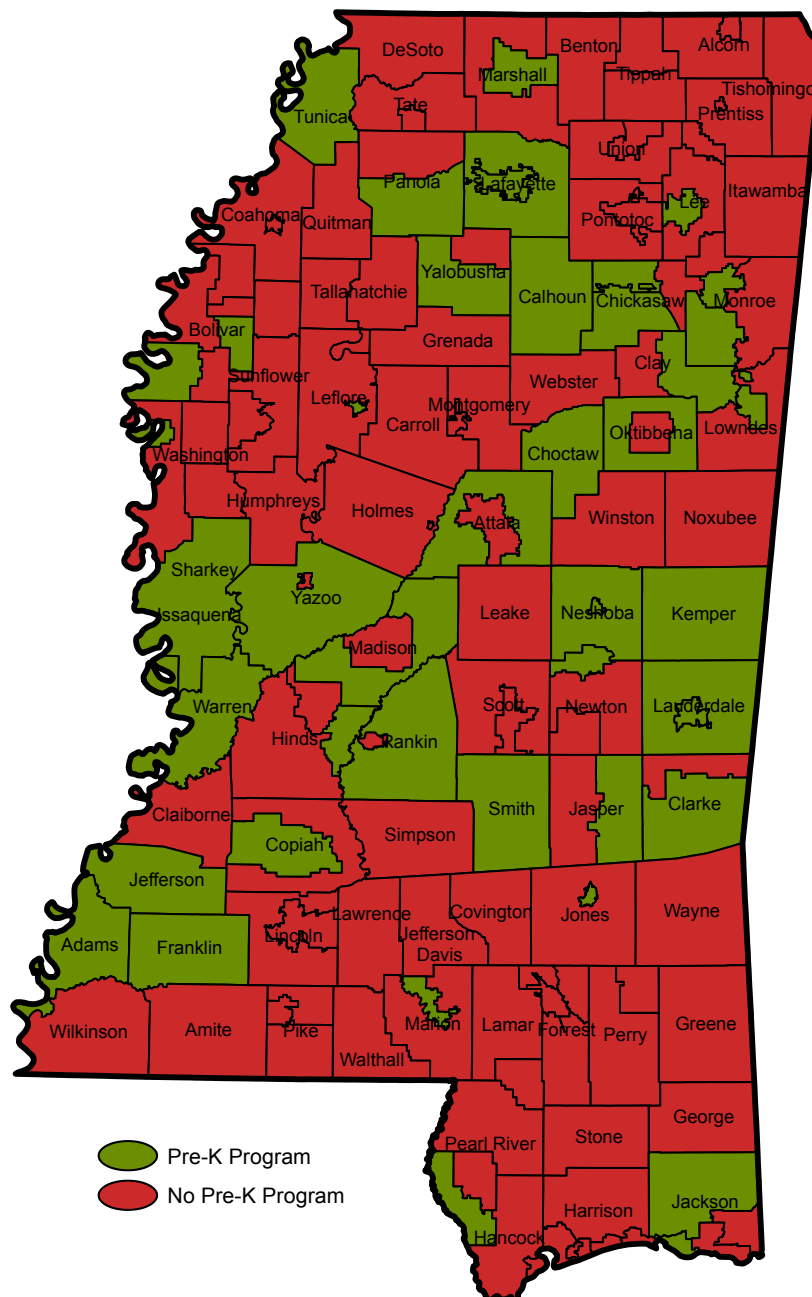


Figure 6

Source: MS Department of Education

Early Care and Education

Mississippi's Early Education Initiatives (2009-2010)

Mississippi communities all across the state have begun early childhood collaboratives. Many of these collaboratives are a result of Excel By 5, a community-based certification process that was developed to help improve children's overall well-being by age five. In just a short time span, early education initiatives have been launched in several communities in Mississippi. These initiatives have as their goal to improve early learning through collaborations, technical support and resource development (Excel by 5, Inc., 2010).

Mississippi's Early Education Initiatives, 2009-2010

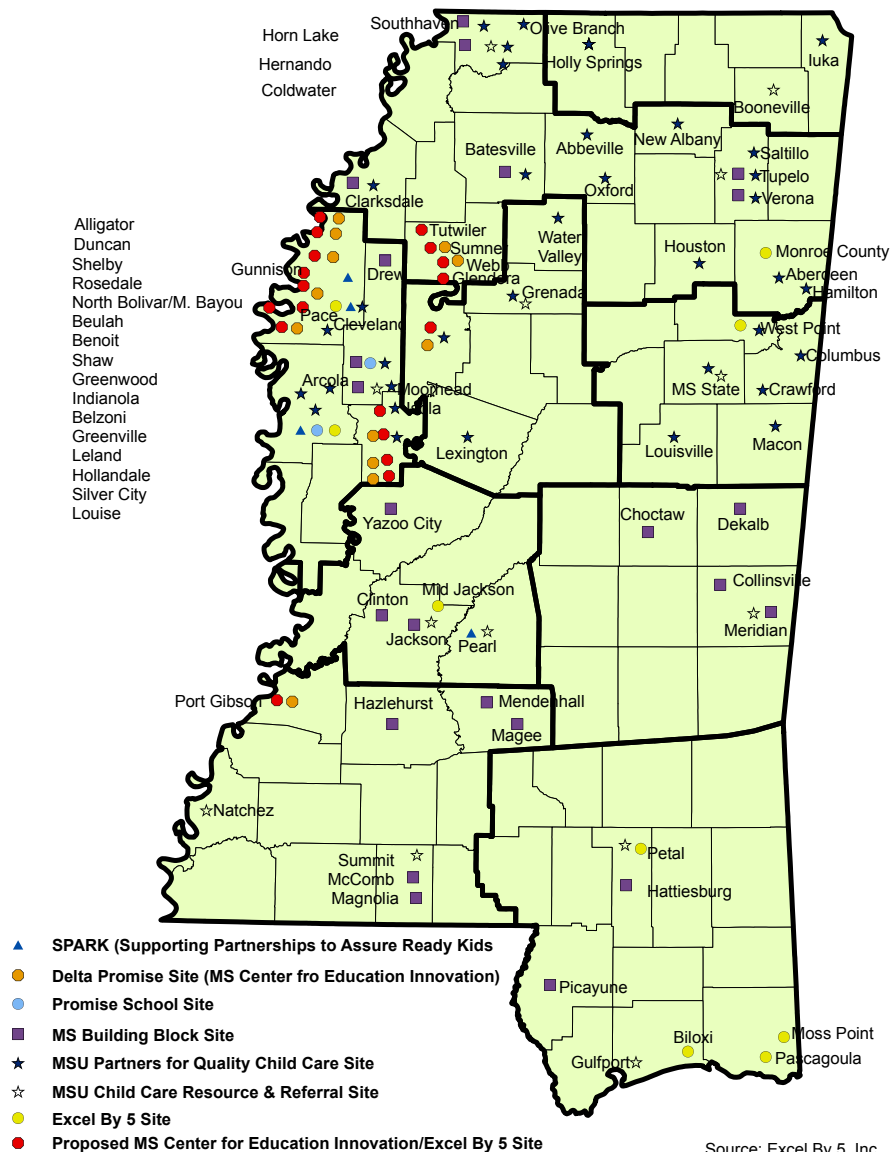


Figure 7

Source: Excel By 5, Inc.

Early Care and Education

The Mississippi Child Care Resources & Referral Network is offered through the Mississippi State University Extension Service. The state of Mississippi is divided into 13 non-overlapping child care networks. Stars indicate the region's main office, with many being housed on community college campuses and other community locations, libraries, and resource centers (See **Figure 9**). The network is designed to support early care and education professionals, parents, children and community members who are seeking reliable information about quality child care in the state.

The Network offers five major services as noted below (Coordinated Access to the Research and Extension System, 2010):

- Training and Technical Assistance to early care and education providers
- Resource Centers (located on community college campuses) loan or provide children's literature, educational media and curriculum materials
- Referral Process puts families in contact with licensed childcare centers in their area
- The Network provides training for Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials
- The Network also provides opportunities for community college coursework toward a Child Development Technology degree (AA)



Early Care and Education

Mississippi Child Care Resource and Referral Network

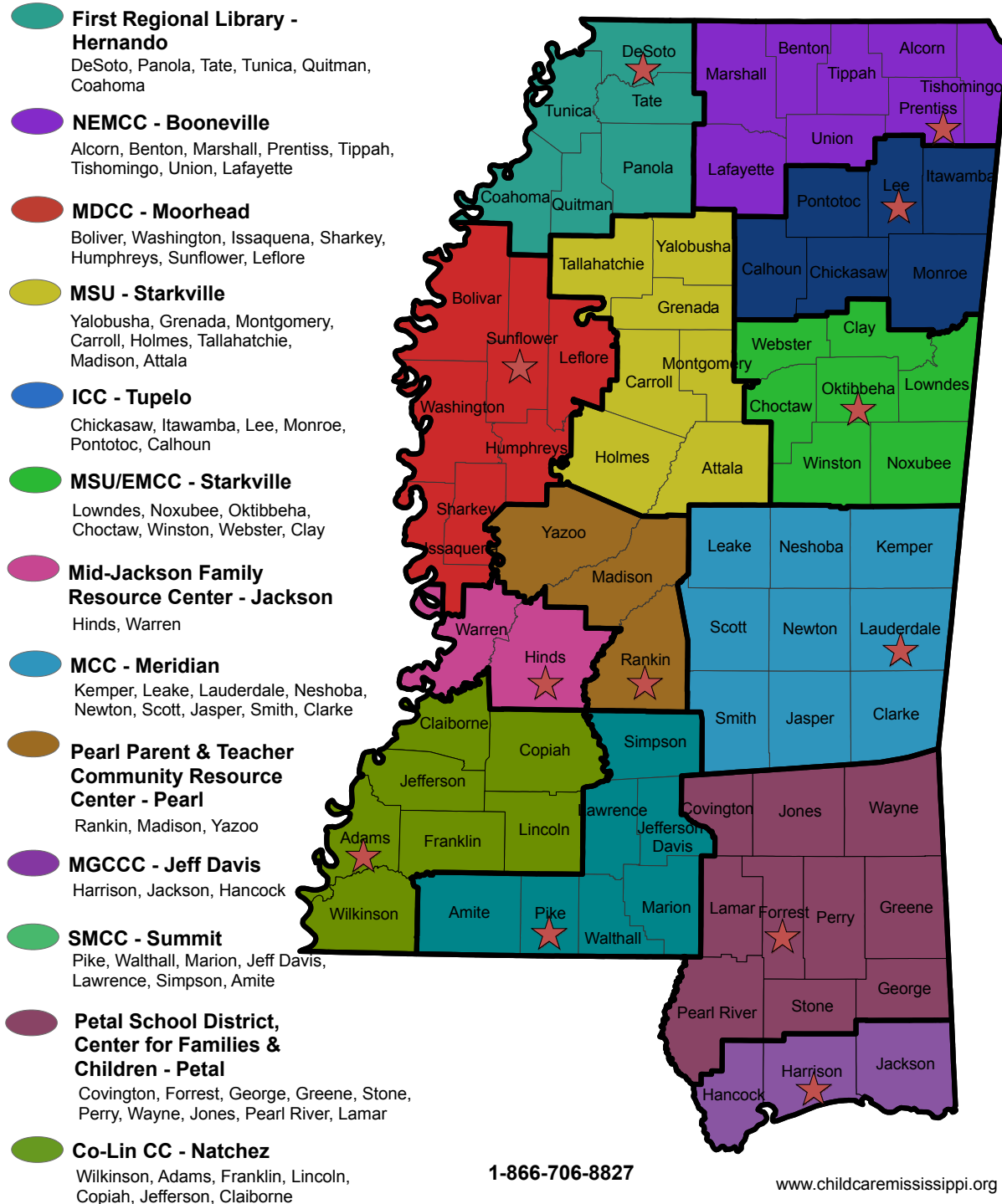


Figure 8

Early Care and Education

In 2008, 39% of children (ages 3-5) in the U.S. were not enrolled in nursery school, preschool or kindergarten. Out of 48 states reporting, Mississippi has 36% of children (ages 3-5) not in preschool, nursery school or kindergarten. Mississippi is equal to New Hampshire (36%), and close to the states of Maryland (37%), and Georgia (37%), but trailing Louisiana (33%). Both Alabama and Tennessee rank higher, with 43% and 42% respectively. The highest state in the nation is Nevada with 58% of children not enrolled, while New Jersey is the lowest state at 25% not enrolled. The data are derived from the American Community Survey. Survey samples were too small to be reported in Wyoming and Vermont (AECF, 2009).

Children Not Enrolled in Preschool, Nursery School or Kindergarten, 2008

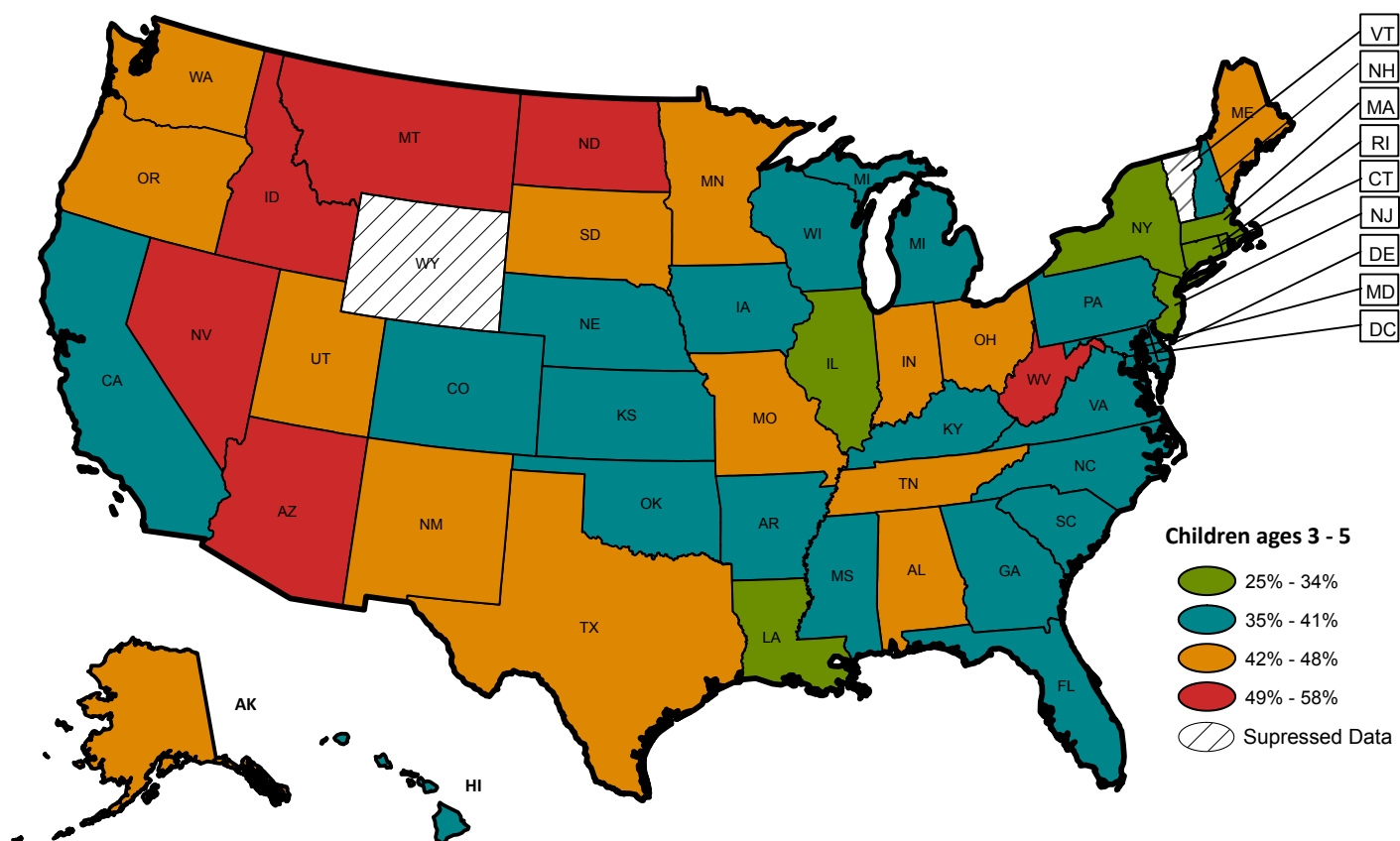


Figure 9

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Programs and Policy Considerations

Community-Based Programs

In addition to the state-wide legislation and programming, some communities and organizations are focusing their efforts on smaller-scale local programming, in an attempt to bridge some of the gaps left by the lack of statewide Pre-K and other forms of statewide support. Below is a listing of several examples of such efforts.

- Excel By 5 is a community based early childhood certification project, which has been tested in Pascagoula, Petal, West Point, and Cleveland, Mississippi as well as Monroe County, Mid-Jackson and, more recently, Moss Point and Biloxi. Excel By 5 focuses on communities that voluntarily direct and coordinate their local assets to provide children the resources they need to succeed in kindergarten (Excel by 5, n.d.).
- Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) Mississippi works to guarantee that vulnerable children aged three to eight are ready for school. The organization collaborates with other entities on the local level including parents, schools, childcare providers, child advocacy groups, Head Start providers, businesses, and state and local government agencies to ensure that all work together. SPARK currently works in the Cleveland, Hollandale, North Bolivar, Pearl, and Mound Bayou communities of Mississippi (SPARK Mississippi, n.d.) (See pp. 30-35 for more information).
- The Gilmore Foundation is a private non-profit grant making organization that currently works in Amory, Monroe County, and all of Northeast Mississippi to solicit, organize, and distribute grants to build and strengthen organizations dedicated primarily to health and education (Gilmore Foundation, n.d.).
- Mississippi Building Blocks has as its over arching goal to improve school readiness skills for young children entering kindergarten improving their educational and learning experiences in child care centers. Currently, there are 100 centers statewide involved in a research study to assess and improve the quality of the centers. See pp. 144-145 for additional information (Mississippi Building Blocks, n.d.).
- The Mississippi Learning Lab (MSLL) is sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation with the mission that "All Mississippi children have access to a high quality, affordable early childhood development and learning system so they can be successful in life, thereby contributing to the state's economic development" (R. Williams-Bishop, personal communication, Fall, 2010).



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- The Mississippi Learning Lab was created, as a means of effectively addressing the early education needs of Mississippi children from birth to age eight. The MSLL accomplishes this through the ongoing coordination and networking of key agency and individual stakeholders representing early education efforts statewide. This strategic plan is designed to provide a viable context for outlining current and future efforts that should result in the development of a “formal” early education infrastructure for Mississippi.
- Early education stakeholders serving on the MSLL have reached consensus on the following:
 - Researched various terms that best describes the education of young children in the state of Mississippi and also resonates with Mississippi’s citizenry, namely, “child development and early learning”
 - Promote the establishment of a central coordinating entity that would coordinate resources; establish standards, accountability, and authority
 - Create a policy platform that includes and addresses the following: additional funding for building a system, quality focus on child outcomes and achievement, community mobilization, promote a variety of learning environments i.e. (home-based, private, faith-based, Head Start, etc.), promote and support parent engagement, require transition and alignment with schools, support the development of child-care providers, increase professional development opportunities, and address the need for improved facilities (R. Williams-Bishop, personal communication, Fall, 2010)
- The Mississippi Center for Education Innovation, strives to meet three goals that are shared with the Mississippi State Department of Education: reduce the dropout rate to 13% by 2013; reach the national average on national assessment by 2013; and ensure that all students exit third grade reading on grade level by 2020. One of the strategies used to assist in meeting these goals is creating partnerships throughout Mississippi to inform and promote comprehensive, quality early care and education for Mississippi’s children (Mississippi Center for Education Innovation, n.d.).



Early Care and Education

It is clear that Mississippi is making some progress on the issue of early childhood education and has passed legislation to that effect. In addition, both community and philanthropic and business entities appear to be supportive of the efforts to promote collaborative, quality early care and education efforts in Mississippi. Still, there is much more to be done.

Lessons from Another State:

Oklahoma provides a model of improvement for early childhood services particularly in terms of funding, access, and quality. Oklahoma has funded its early childhood education and care program through a combination of general public revenue and private donations, most notably from the George Kaiser Family Foundation (DiLauro and Schumacher, n.d.). Programs can choose to accept funding under an “Expansion” or an “Enhancement” model. The Expansion model allows programs to use the funds to extend access to more children than they would otherwise be able to serve, whereas the Enhancement model allows programs to use the money to improve the quality of their services or to extend the day or year during which they operate.

Further, Oklahoma has vastly improved the quality of its early childhood services through the simple act of requiring that its early education teachers be certified. Lead teachers in three-year-old classrooms must have an early childhood certification or be working toward one within a year of employment. Oklahoma has a stringent set of requirements for Pre-K teachers as well (Stone, 2006). The imposition of these types of qualifications is credited with Oklahoma’s significant gains in early literacy, vocabulary, and math skills. It is important to note that states without such standards for teachers are less likely to get a similar return on their investments in early education.



Early Care and Education

Policy implications

The current state of early education in Mississippi is somewhat varied. It is clear that the state legislature, community groups and private organizations have each taken steps to improve the access to and quality of its early education and preschool programs in recent years. The task forces, collaborative efforts and other programs are unquestionably important structures for the success of early education. Despite this, however, more remains to be accomplished. The state does not fund universal Pre-K services, a crucial omission that puts Mississippi behind most other similarly situated states. The Mississippi Legislature does currently provide for limited support to improve the quality and size of existing public and private entities that may provide Pre-K; and while this support is necessary, it is not sufficient. This restricted support does not reach every community or center that needs it and does not provide the type of secure and comprehensive educational basis necessary to the children of Mississippi. Until Mississippi funds quality early education and early education programs, Mississippi will remain behind the vast majority of other states nationwide. This is problematic because, as noted above, dollars spent on early education are crucial to the future education and development of individuals in the state.

Of special note, two independent, scientific surveys conducted within the past four years, revealed that Mississippians are overwhelmingly supportive of paying a higher tax to fund early learning opportunities for Mississippi's children. In 2007, Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center conducted a random survey of over 1,000 Mississippi adults. When asked if they would support legislation to establish a statewide publicly funded Pre-K program, 83.4% answered affirmatively. Of these respondents (n=1,009), 73.6% stated that they would be willing to pay additional state taxes to fund Pre-K (MS KIDS COUNT 2008 Databook). In a more recent survey (2010), commissioned by the Mississippi Center for Education Innovation, conducted by the Godwin Group 71% of Mississippi's registered voters indicated a need for Mississippi to improve early learning opportunities. When asked if they would be willing to pay a higher tax to fund early learning opportunities, almost 60% responded affirmatively (Rhea Williams-Bishop, Personal Communication, October, 2010).

It is clear that providing comprehensive and widely-available education early in a child's life is crucial to the future success of the individual child, the community, the state, and the nation as a whole. Access to quality early education provides the type of solid foundation necessary to creating a successful, engaged, and productive citizen.



Early Care and Education

Policy Considerations for Mississippi:

- Implement the policy recommendations of Governor Haley Barbour's State Early Childhood Advisory Council
- Promote the establishment of a central coordinating entity that would coordinate resources, establish standards, accountability, and authority for early care and education in the state of Mississippi
- Provide state funding for the authorizing legislation that created the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2007
- Support annual data collection, analyses and dissemination of early care and education workforce information (e.g., educational attainment, benefits, number of children needing care compared to availability of work, turnover, quality ratings of child care, barriers to participation in quality ratings, etc)
- Assess the comprehensive health and well-being of children in early care and education settings (including vision, hearing, nutrition, behavioral, oral health and medical health needs)
- Create provider incentives to assess young children in early care and education settings, so that children can be linked to a health home

"Mississippi children are as bright and full of promise as the children in any other state. Every child deserves a high quality early childhood experience, an excellent teacher in every class, and a community that values education. When we become committed to those things, Mississippi will finally meet her full potential."

Nancy Loome, Executive Director, Mississippi Parents' Campaign

Early Care and Education

Success Story: Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

SPARK - Mississippi



"On your mark, get set, ready, go!" We hear these familiar words and instantly conjure up images of well toned runners anxiously awaiting the sound of the starting gun, their toes nervously marking their place in the sand while their eyes remain fixed on the finish line in the distance. They come to the starting line prepared and ready for the task ahead. Now picture a different type of "runner," children who like the athletes are anxiously awaiting the start of another race, one that begins in early childhood and ends at graduation. Will they be ready? Will they be prepared to start and finish their race? Are their parents, communities and teachers prepared to run alongside them?

The early care and education "family" in Mississippi is bound by a common belief that all children should be well prepared to enter kindergarten, but often child care providers, Head Start centers and even public schools prepare for the race on their own without any dialogue among each other. Recognizing the need for smoother transitions to school and an alignment for pre-school and elementary school settings, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2003 began working in seven states (Mississippi, Hawaii, Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, New Mexico) and the District of Columbia to align early childhood education with the K-12 system by using community involvement as the main driver or catalyst. "The only way to create a system was to bring everyone into the room at the same time and to have them equally engaged in developing an aligned system," says Oleta Fitzgerald, Director of the Children's Defense Fund Southern Regional Office located in Jackson, Mississippi. "We knew that collaboration had to be in the center of it to affect change."



From the initial discussions in the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Mississippi, SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) was conceived and began to link early learning advocates with elementary schools. In Mississippi, the Children's Defense Fund Southern Regional Office was selected to administer the state's five million dollar initiative. "SPARK is not an initiative to bring in a new program," says Ellen Collins, the Executive Director of SPARK-Mississippi, "SPARK is an initiative that brings together communities and stakeholders to look at what they already have—

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their strengths—and use their existing resources to work together to maximize those strengths and leverage additional resources.

“SPARK is an initiative that brings together communities and stakeholders to look at what they already have—their strengths—and use their existing resources to work together to maximize those strengths and leverage additional resources.”

Ellen Collins, Executive Director of SPARK-Mississippi

After a year of planning, the SPARK model was implemented in five Mississippi school district catchment areas: Pearl, Cleveland, Hollandale, North Bolivar, and Mound Bayou. At the core of every SPARK Mississippi site is the creation of a Local Children’s Partnership (LCP) which brings together child care providers, Head Start, public schools, mental health, health department, government and business leaders to the table to advocate for quality early childhood education. “They understand their community’s livelihood is based on the children being ready for kindergarten,” says Collins, “and they are working to address any gap or service need in their community and advocate for increased quality and access.” The LCP’s are overseen by a state-level steering committee.

“They understand their community’s livelihood is based on the children being ready for kindergarten, and they are working to address any gap or service need in their community and advocate for increased quality and access.”

Ellen Collins, Executive Director of SPARK-Mississippi



Ellen Collins, Executive Director of SPARK-Mississippi



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Barbara McKee, Pearl Learning Advocate

In addition to the Local Children's Partnerships which meet quarterly guided by the Local Coordinator, each site employs Learning Advocates who work with families and children on a one-to-one basis. This unique aspect of SPARK provides a parent training track from age three to grade three. "We are the in-between for the children and their families," says Patsy Clerk of Cleveland. The Learning Advocates serve as case managers, tutors, and friends and often set up referrals, identify resources, and make home visits. "One of the ways we help families is just being visible for them," says Barbara McKee a Learning Advocate for the Pearl site. "Being there to bridge the gap between schools and child care and Head Start is important. The most exciting thing I have witnessed is the day I saw Head Start, child care and the public school sitting down together."

Children who are selected to participate in SPARK are closely monitored from age three to grade three. The first cohort took the Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2) in Spring 2009, and the results are encouraging. Two hundred and nineteen SPARK-MS third graders' test scores and performance levels were compared to a selected elementary school located in Humphreys County. In Language Arts, 6.9% of SPARK-MS students scored in the Advanced level compared to 6.1% of the comparison group; 39% scored Proficient compared to 22.9% of the comparison group. At the other end of the spectrum, the SPARK-MS students scored 8.5% in the Minimal range while the comparison group more than doubled the ratio with 29.0%. In the mathematics portion of the MCT2, again SPARK-MS students outscored their counterparts in Humphreys County. Results reveal that a higher percentage of SPARK-MS (6.9%) students scored in the Advanced level than the comparison group (2.3%),



Satoya Payne and son Ricky

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and similar results in the Proficient category indicate that 48% of SPARK-MS students scored Proficient compared to 24.4% at the comparison school (Turner-Davis, 2010).

Statewide results indicate that SPARK-MS students scored comparable to state level scores on the third grade MCT2 Language Arts section, with a higher percentage of SPARK-MS students scoring in the Proficient and Basic levels. In Mathematics, test score percentages for SPARK-MS were higher in the Proficient and Basic levels (85% to 74.8%), and in the lowest testing category, analyses indicate that 13.2% of the state level students scored Minimum compared to only 8.1% of SPARK-MS students (Turner-Davis, 2010).

The children and their families who have been selected to participate in SPARK consider the Learning Advocates part of their own family unit. "She's like the preacher, the teacher, the mama, the counselor, the husband, the wife, all in one," says Tena McNair as she reflects on Pearl Learning Advocate Barbara McKee. "To me, she's everything." McNair's grandson Tamarius has been with SPARK since age three and is now a successful fifth grader. Raising her grandson alone, McNair is grateful for the assistance Mrs. McKee and other SPARK employees provide. "They are always just a phone call or a ride away. If it wasn't for them, I don't know what I would do sometimes."

"When he was in first grade, struggling with his speech, I didn't know what to do," says Satoya Payne whose son Ricky was one of the first SPARK participants in Pearl. "Then SPARK came in, and it was a big turn around." Learning Advocates petitioned the school district for Ricky to receive speech and language services and individualized tutoring and equipped his parents with behavior management tools. Today Ricky is a fifth grade honor roll student who wants to be a firefighter when he grows up. "Dr. Rancifer [a Pearl Learning Advocate] helps me to read books and helps me to know how to be respectful. She makes visits to my house and to my school and helps me with my flash cards."

With a proven track record and measurable results, SPARK-MS is now moving into another phase. "We know the model works; now we want to focus on improving the system," says Collins. "As we move forward, we're going to be looking more closely at the systems that work with the young children, not targeting specific children."



Tena McNair and grandson Tamarius

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"Your heart should be with your community, and your community is about its people—the welfare of its people, especially its children."

Jimmy Foster, Former Mayor of Pearl, Mississippi

One key to continued success is the non-traditional members of the "family"—those who first came to the table as guests and now occupy a permanent seat. In the past, business and local government leaders were not considered early care and education partners with the traditional advocates. SPARK believes that in order to have "ready" families, children, and schools, we must also have "ready" communities. Members of the LCP's create plans for improving the quality of early education and encourage others to realize the need for it. "We did not begin by pushing a policy agenda," says Fitzgerald. "We wanted them to learn about the value of early childhood education." Jimmy Foster, the former mayor of Pearl admits that there was initial skepticism over thoughts that SPARK would be just one more program whose chances of success were slim. He soon came on board and offered city facilities as the home of SPARK in Pearl. "Your heart should be with your community," he says, "and your community is about its people, the welfare of its people, especially its children. We were willing to help in any way that we could because they are the future mayors and business leaders."

Although SPARK was initially funded by Kellogg, those who work with the program feel that the success of the initiative is not because of money. According to Collins, "A lot of the changes that happened in SPARK districts were not because there was an infusion of a lot of money. We just had people look at resources they already had and encouraged them to use them better." With the dialogue now in place among child care centers, Head Start and school districts, collaborative opportunities are emerging. The three groups are creating professional development opportunities together, sharing resource materials and are even sharing staff. Patsy Clerk, a former Learning Advocate for SPARK in Cleveland is now employed by the local school district. Collins says that a main goal of SPARK is to institutionalize the model and "there is no better way to do that than to have SPARK staff become part of the school district." When school



Jimmy Foster, Former Mayor of Pearl, Mississippi



Oleta Fitzgerald, Director, Children's Defense Fund, Southern Regional Office

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districts and child care providers work together using existing resources, the outcome is a positive one. According to Fitzgerald, “resources must be spent differently, interventions have to be done differently, and when the system works together, our children will be successful.”

“Resources must be spent differently, interventions have to be done differently, and when the system works together, our children will be successful.”

Oleta Fitzgerald, Director, Children’s Defense Fund, Southern Regional Office

Five more SPARK sites will be added this year in the Clarksdale, Humphreys County, East Jasper, West Bolivar and West Tallahatchie school district catchment areas. SPARK advocates quickly point out that any community can employ the SPARK model once families, child care providers, school districts and community leaders recognize the need for linking the systems. According to Collins, “You get better outcomes for children, and you get better outcomes for communities and schools. In the end, the community has well supported schools and well supported families.” And when that happens, everyone involved is ready for the race ahead.



Introduction

More than any other single skill, the ability to read—and read well—allows a child to succeed in school, learn about the world, function in society, and someday have decent job options.

It is indisputable that having literate and well-educated children is crucial to the future of both Mississippi and the nation as a whole. The National Institute for Literacy defines literacy as “all the activities involved in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and appreciating both spoken and written language” (National Institute for Literacy, 2009, p. 14). It involves the ability of a person to interact with others, succeed in school, understand and solve problems presented to them, perform on the job and as a part of society, and achieve one’s goals for the future (Page Ahead Children’s Literacy Program, n.d.). Lack of basic literacy skills is associated with “academic failure, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency, unemployment, low productivity, and welfare dependence.” Literacy, therefore, encompasses a range of skills and abilities that highly impact one’s future, and accordingly these pre-literacy skills should be acquired beginning at the earliest age possible. Obtaining sufficiently high levels of literacy is a national concern. In a 2009 national study of the reading skills of American fourth graders, 68% of the students scored below proficient reading levels of literacy. The remaining 34% of America’s fourth graders read at levels so low that it would interfere with their ability to successfully complete their schoolwork (Shanahan et al., 2008). While of national concern, literacy must be of specific concern to the state of Mississippi. In Mississippi, 78% of fourth graders performed below proficient reading, resulting in a national ranking of 48 in 2009. Of these, 45% of Mississippi’s fourth graders performed below a basic level, with approximately one third (33%) achieving the basic reading level, with 18% scoring at a proficient level and 4% at an advanced level (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

While it should be acknowledged, and appreciated, that these scores constitute an improvement in the last decade and a half (in 1992, only 41% of Mississippi students were performing at or above basic level), much work remains as high levels of literacy are so crucial.

The “building blocks” of literacy begin developing in infancy, with the exposure of babies and toddlers to words, sounds, speech, and text (Literacy Information and Communication System, n.d.). As children grow, the literacy foundation



they have is crucial to their future reading, writing, and comprehension success. Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade are likely to remain behind their peers through at least the end of fourth grade. One study suggested that there was as much as an 88% probability that a child who is a poor reader at the end of first grade will remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade (Juel, 2006). The trend continues into high school, as 74% of third graders who perform poorly in reading will continue to do so into high school (Shanahan et al., 2008). It is apparent then, that attention must be paid to reading, writing, computation, phonetic, and other literary skills from the very beginning and throughout childhood.

Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade are likely to remain behind their peers through at least the end of fourth grade.

As mentioned above, the effects of lacking basic literacy skills are widespread and profound, affecting an individual's employment prospects, earning potential, civic engagement, social participation, and criminal record.

There is a clear and apparently cyclical relationship between household income levels and literacy success. According to one study, only 14% of children who receive reduced-lunch are proficient readers by the time they reach fourth grade, as compared to 42% of fourth graders who do not. In Mississippi, 58% of the students eligible for reduced-lunch scored below basic literacy levels, as compared to 49% nationwide (Parkinson and Rowan, 2008). This so-called "knowledge gap" has been explained by a lack of two different kinds of resources: material and emotional. Children from low-income families are less likely to have ready access to the physical materials important for developing early literacy, such as books, magazines, and newspapers. They are also less likely to have caregivers with the time and opportunity to read to them, and less exposure to new and varied vocabulary. Children who enter school without these experiences arrive with a disadvantage that they often carry with them through their education (Neuman, 2006). Again, demonstrating the importance of developing strong literacy skills early, it has been suggested that at the beginning of kindergarten, a few additional months of instruction would allow high-risk students to catch up to their low-risk peers, but by the end of third grade, almost a year's worth of extra instruction would be required (Parkinson and Rowan, 2008).

One study suggested that there was as much as an 88% probability that a child who is a poor reader at the end of first grade will remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade.

The development of strong and comprehensive literacy skills is crucial to a well-functioning, productive, and successful adult, and these skills are most fully and efficiently developed early in childhood. It is important that both the nation and Mississippi pay strong attention to the development of these reading, writing, and other associated skills in our children. This section provides an overview of the state of literacy and literacy programs in Mississippi, successful models from other states, and policy considerations for improving literacy in Mississippi among its youngest citizens.

Literacy

Current Programs in Mississippi Addressing Literacy

The Mississippi Department of Education has defined four state reading goals:

All children will exit kindergarten with appropriate readiness skills; all first through third grade students will demonstrate growth toward proficiency in reading to ensure they exit third grade as readers; all fourth through ninth-grade reading scores will improve; and Mississippi students will reach or exceed the national average in reading within the next decade (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

In pursuit of these statewide goals, the Department of Education, national non-profit organizations, and philanthropists have launched a range of literacy initiatives in Mississippi; initiatives that, while promising, do require continued attention and action.

State Initiatives

In 1998, the Mississippi legislature passed Senate Bill 2944, mandating that every Mississippi school implement a reading reform program. Each school district was to develop its own “Reading Sufficiency Program of Instruction” guided by the following requirements:

- (1) Sufficient additional in-school instructional time for the development of reading and comprehension skills of the student
- (2) Readiness intervention programs, such as kindergarten programs, extended school day or school year programs, and program initiatives to reduce class size
- (3) Utilization of research-based teaching methodologies or strategies for providing direct instruction in phonics, vocabulary and comprehension development, including systematic, intensive, explicit phonics, using decodable vocabulary-controlled texts (texts in which 95% of the words are decodable), as is determined appropriate by the State Board of Education
- (4) Professional development for assistant teachers, teachers and administrators to assist students in implementing the Reading Sufficiency Program



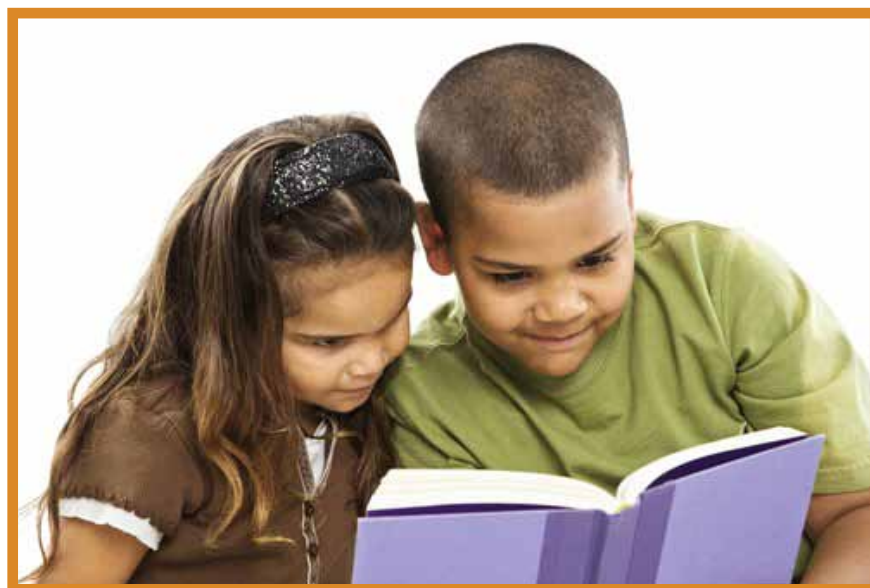
performing elementary schools during 2005-2007, using state funds. Encouragingly, assessments conducted in these schools revealed improvements in reading scores, but the small sample size speaks to the need for a more rigorous study (Bounds, 2007).

In a limited number of Mississippi school districts, federal Reading First funds have been allocated to apply research-based reading instructional and assessment tools in classrooms for kindergarten through third grade students. Since 2003, \$99 million in Reading First funds have been spent in Mississippi (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). Reading First funding is intended to support:

- (1) Reading curricula and materials that focus on five of the major components of reading (phoneme awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and reading comprehension)
- (2) Professional development and coaching of teachers in the use of scientifically-based reading practices in both typical classroom and remedial settings
- (3) Identification and prevention of early reading difficulties through student screening, intervention for struggling readers, and ongoing monitoring of students' progress (Reading First Federal Advisory Committee, 2008)

Data from the Reading First 2004-2007 third grade Fluency Assessment indicates modest improvement, while the Comprehension Assessment results show no significant change (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Despite these initiatives promoting literacy for children through the third grade, Mississippi ranks 48th nationwide in fourth grade reading assessments according to the National Assessment of Education Progress data from 2009 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).



Literacy

Promising Programs

There are already several promising programs within portions of Mississippi. Since 1999, the Barksdale Reading Institute (BRI) has used private funding to administer a wide range of reading interventions for Mississippi children in the third grade and younger in Forrest, Harrison, Holmes, Jackson, Panola, and Quitman counties. The Barksdale reading model is a modified version of the Mississippi Reading Reform Model, with an increased emphasis on non-linear in-class reading instruction through incorporation of the Reading Universe guide to reading instruction. The classroom cornerstone of the program in all 18 BRI schools across the state of Mississippi features a “three-hour literacy block that includes whole-class and small-group instruction, interventions (provided by both teachers and by BRI and school-provided intervention specialists), independent work centers, Accelerated Reader, and the accompanying strategies that allow the teachers to work with homogeneously-grouped students.” For Pre-K children, the Barksdale Reading Institute works with 33 private childcare centers to improve pre-literacy skills. The Institute implemented a Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Exam in 2009 for grades K-2 and found strong growth in measured reading skills across all grades (Barksdale Reading Institute, n.d.).



In 2007, Mississippi Public Broadcasting and private sponsors launched a joint initiative designed to improve literacy outcomes for Pre-K children by introducing the PBS KIDS *Between the Lions* (BTL) reading curriculum into Mississippi public libraries in 17 counties across the state (Mississippi Public Broadcasting, 2007). This curriculum combines videos, books, poems, songs, and activities in order to increase early word recognition and comprehension for three and four-year-olds in a fun environment (Mississippi Public Broadcasting, n.d.). Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication conducted an assessment of Mississippi’s BTL reading initiative using the Early Literacy and Language Classroom Observation Tool (ELLCO), a comprehensive metric that measures language and literacy improvements as well as the quality of the literacy materials and the frequency of positive literacy behaviors. The study found that children ages three years, eight months to four years, nine months who had been exposed to the BTL program in Mississippi outperformed their peers on nearly all ELLCO dimensions and suggested this program as a model for transforming the literacy trajectories for at-risk children (Linebarger, 2009).

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which has been implemented in hundreds of communities across the nation, was just recently launched in the Mississippi Delta Counties with the assistance of the Delta Health Alliance and Excel by 5 (Delta Health Alliance, n.d.; Excel by 5, n.d.). The Imagination Library was started by Dolly Parton in 1996, and it works with local communities to bring new, age appropriate books to children under the age of five. In the program, a community commits to making the program accessible to all preschool children in their area, to paying for the books and mailing, to registering the children, to recording all information on the database and to promoting the program. The Imagination Library then manages the system to deliver the books to the children in their homes (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, n.d.). The program sends a new book to children every month, beginning with birth and continuing to their fifth birthday, such that by the time the child turns five, they will have received 60 books (Gray, 2010).

Programs such as the Barksdale Reading Institute, *Between the Lions*, and the Imagination Library are promising steps forward in the literacy effort in Mississippi. It is critical to the future of Mississippi's children that the state promotes a broad, comprehensive effort to promote literacy to every child and their families in Mississippi.

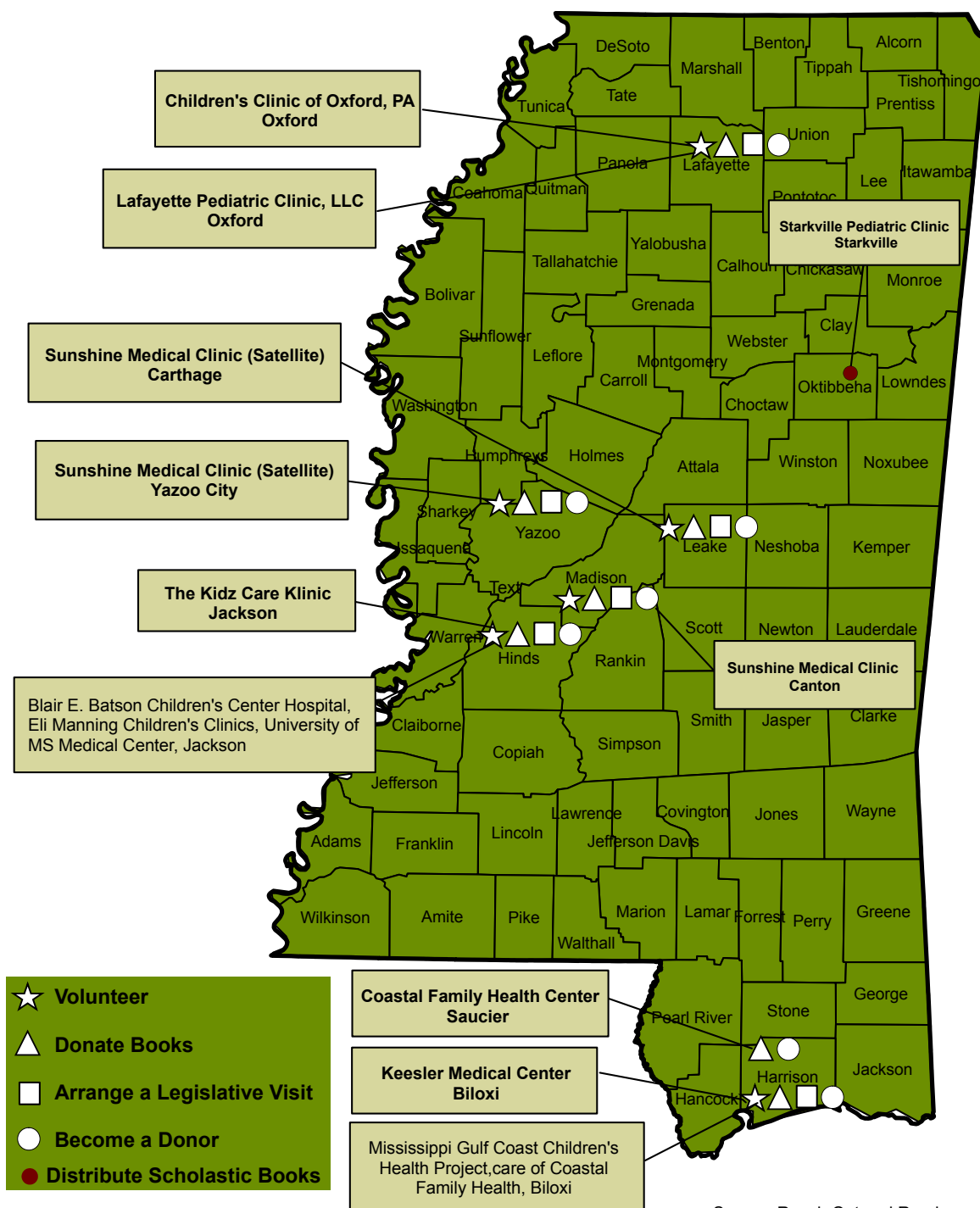
Reach Out and Read

On a national level, the Reach Out and Read non-profit organization reaches 3.9 million families a year by providing literacy services to children six months to five-years-old, particularly children from low-income families, when they visit their pediatricians. At these visits, volunteers read out loud to children and parents in the waiting room, and give free books to children to promote school-readiness. Pediatricians and nurses counsel parents on how to support their children by reading to them aloud every day and offer guidance and encouragement to families in the program. This type of approach to improving child literacy by broadening the scope of literacy programs to places where children and families in need receive other forms of support has been credited with higher school readiness assessments and parents who are up to four times more likely to read aloud to their children than non-participants (Reach Out and Read, n.d.).



This type of approach to improving child literacy by broadening the scope of literacy programs to places where children and families in need receive other forms of support has been credited with higher school readiness assessments and parents who are up to four times more likely to read aloud to their children than non-participants.

Reach Out and Read Program



Source: Reach Out and Read

Figure 1

Currently, there are 11 sites that provide the Reach Out and Read program in Mississippi:

1. Keesler Medical Center, Biloxi, Mississippi
2. Mississippi Gulf Coast Children's Health Project, care of Coastal Family Health, Biloxi, Mississippi
3. Sunshine Medical Clinic, Canton, Mississippi
4. Sunshine Medical Clinic (Satellite), Carthage, Mississippi
5. Blair E. Batson Children's Hospital, Eli Manning Children's Clinics, University of Mississippi Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi
6. The Kidz Care Clinic, Jackson, Mississippi
7. Children's Clinic of Oxford, PA, Oxford, Mississippi
8. Lafayette Pediatric Clinic, LLC, Oxford Mississippi
9. Coastal Family Health Center, Saucier, Mississippi
10. Starkville Pediatric Clinic, Starkville, Mississippi
11. Sunshine Medical Clinic (Satellite), Yazoo City, Mississippi

Other States' Efforts to Combat Child Illiteracy

When looking for successful policy approaches to addressing the problem of low levels of child literacy, policy makers in Mississippi might consider the success of child literacy programs in other states. The following section presents key strategies learned from various literacy programs which can serve as models in the effort to improve literacy rates for Mississippi's children and their families.

Entire Family and Home-Based Programs

Other states have sought to address the problem of low child literacy rates by working with national programs that build reading skills and begin school readiness in the child's own home. The Parent-Child Home Program (n.d.) has operated since 1965 in 15 U.S. states—including South Carolina, Texas, and Florida—and three international sites. Visits are made to family homes with two and three-year-old children twice a week. These home visitors bring new books or educational toys to the child's home during each session. This approach has the benefit of helping children find value in read-



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ing in the home environment, in the hopes that when participating children begin school, they will be motivated to continue reading outside of class. Research on the effectiveness of this home-based approach to improving child literacy shows that the Parent-Child Home Program participants are 20% more likely to graduate from high school than non-participating students from low-income families. An examination of the program's impact in Long Island, New York revealed that by the time program participants started kindergarten, children who had participated in this initiative were indistinguishable in terms of early literacy and social competence than a control group of more advantaged children from the same communities and classrooms whose parents were better educated and had more working hours (Parent-Child Home Program, n.d.).



Similarly, the Arizona State Board of Education developed the Arizona Family Literacy Program, which has been implemented in more than 65 sites throughout the state, concentrated in areas of economic and educational disadvantage. The goal of the program is to improve literacy rates for the state's most impoverished and marginalized residents, particularly families in American Indian and Alaskan native communities. In exchange for receiving literacy services, families are required to engage with a community or faith-based program and fully participate in all aspects of the program, such as the home literacy instruction component. The program combines its programming for children and for adults so that families build their literacy skills together. For instance, interactive learning is utilized such that children build their reading skills as they play at home with their parents, and home visits

ensure that reading skills are practiced throughout the family. The Arizona Family Literacy Program approach provides further support for parents by offering services like career readiness advice, basic adult education skills, GED preparation, and citizenship education and general parenting education (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.).

Initiatives like the Parent-Child Home Program and the Arizona Family Literacy Program bring reading into the child's home and build the literacy skills of the entire family while regularizing reading and learning together into the child's home life. Programs like this offer a valuable model for policy makers in Mississippi and across the country.



Providing Literacy Training in Other Social Service Contexts

Some states have designed programs that partner with local community organizations to bring child literacy services to places where disadvantaged children and their families are already receiving support. For example in Nevada, a university partnered with state media, the county libraries and school districts to implement a literacy program throughout the state targeting families with both limited English language skills and limited access to books for children. The Nevada Family Storyteller Literacy Program consists of weekly meetings held in libraries, childcare centers, mobile classrooms, and elementary schools statewide in which families attend reading sessions hosted by local community service providers like domestic violence shelters and programs for native Spanish-speaking adults (University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, n.d.). Since the program began in 1997, the Family Storyteller Literacy Program has worked with more than 11,550 families in Nevada to improve child and parent literacy. Their program curricula is being used in 29 other U.S. states (Weigel, Behal, and Martin, 2001).

National Funding Sources

Many states seek to address the low rates of child and parent literacy by appealing to national funding sources for child and family literacy programming. The federal Even Start program offers grants for family literacy programs with a particular focus on low-income populations, such as migrant workers and incarcerated women. Even Start is designed to address the literacy rates of low-income families comprehensively, by providing financial support for early childhood education, adult literacy, child and parent literacy, and parenting education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). While the majority of Even Start funds are allocated to states using a formula, state and local education agencies may also apply for the program's competitive sub-grants in order to further support local projects; and those projects that target in-need families are a particular funding priority (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Families that are recipients of the Even Start Program receive services in the areas of early childhood education, adult literacy education, parent education and literacy activities. There are five Even Start sites in Mississippi. These include Montgomery County Even Start Family Literacy Program (Kilmichael), Good Shepherd Even Start Family Literacy Program (Vicksburg), Starkville Even Start Program (Starkville), Noxubee County Even Start Program (Macon), and McComb Even Start Program (McComb) (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).



White Fourth graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading Level, 2009

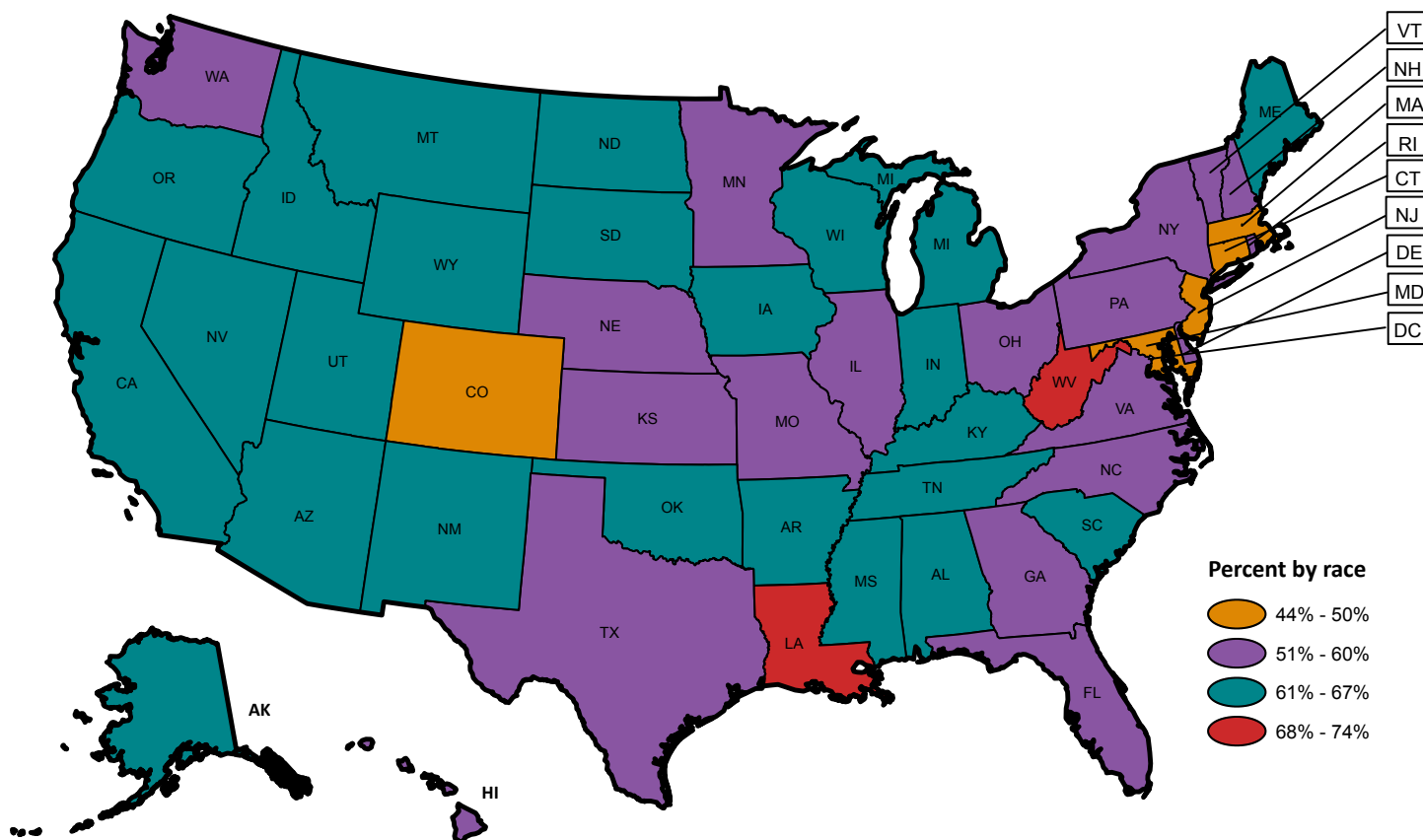


Figure 2

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Data Section

Below Proficient Reading by Race: White

Each year, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures the academic achievements of the nation's fourth graders. In 2009, among White Mississippi fourth graders, 65% had reading scores that were below proficient. There are three achievement levels: basic, proficient, and advanced. Nationally, the average among White fourth graders is 59%. West Virginia had the highest percentage in the nation at 74%, Louisiana had the second highest at 72% while Massachusetts had the lowest percentage at 44%. Regionally, the percentages are as follows: Tennessee (66%), Arkansas (65%), Alabama (64%), and Georgia (60%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.; NAEP, 2009).

Black Fourth graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading Level, 2009

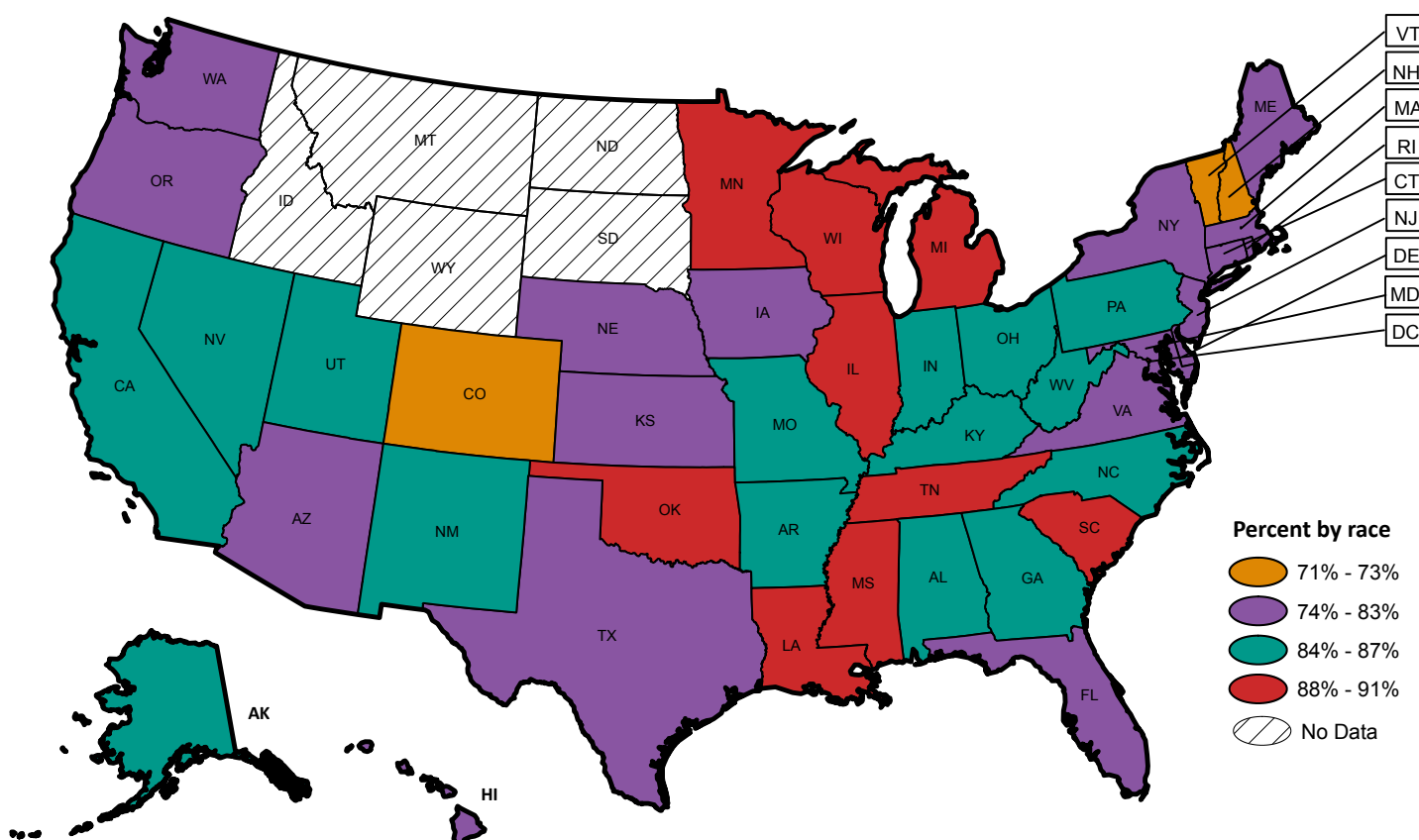


Figure 3

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Below Proficient Reading by Race: Black

Among Black Mississippi fourth graders, 90% had reading scores that were below proficient in 2009. Nationally, the average is 85%. Louisiana, Wisconsin and Michigan had the highest percentage in the nation at 91%, while Vermont had the lowest percentage at 71%. In the South, states had the following percentages: Tennessee (88%), Alabama (87%), Arkansas (86%), and Georgia (85%). Five states did not report reading scores for Black students due to the small number of Black students enrolled in fourth grade. The non-reporting states were North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.; NAEP).

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Understanding the levels of achievement for the reading scores is crucial in recognizing where our students are excelling and where they need improvement. The *Basic* level reflects a simple comprehension and interpretation of text (e.g. knowledge of the plot of a story, for instance, or the inferences in a poem or plot). Students in Mississippi have gained ground given that fewer students in 2009 were *Below the Basic* reading proficiency (55% in 2002 to 45% in 2009). Though this progress is notable, the U.S. average in 2009 for *Below Basic* was 34% (AECF, n.d.).

Mississippi's fourth grade student scores have steadily increased as shown in **Figure 5** scoring 45% in 2002. Each year improvements were made, finishing at **55% in 2009**. The trend among these Southern states and the U.S. (2002-2009), as noted in **Figure 5**, reflects an increase among the states of Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Both Arkansas and Louisiana dropped slightly in 2009. Although Mississippi has increased in the *At or Above Basic* level, the state was still well below the **national average in 2009 (66%)** (AECF, n.d.).

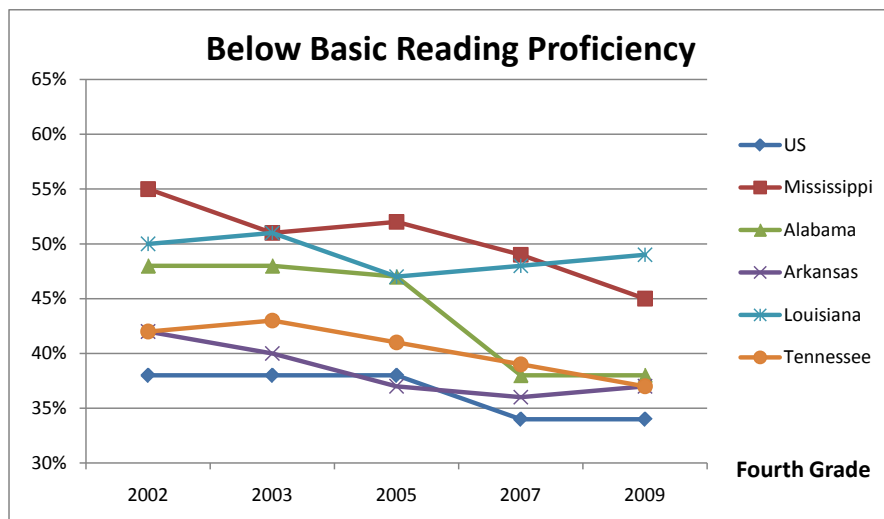


Figure 4

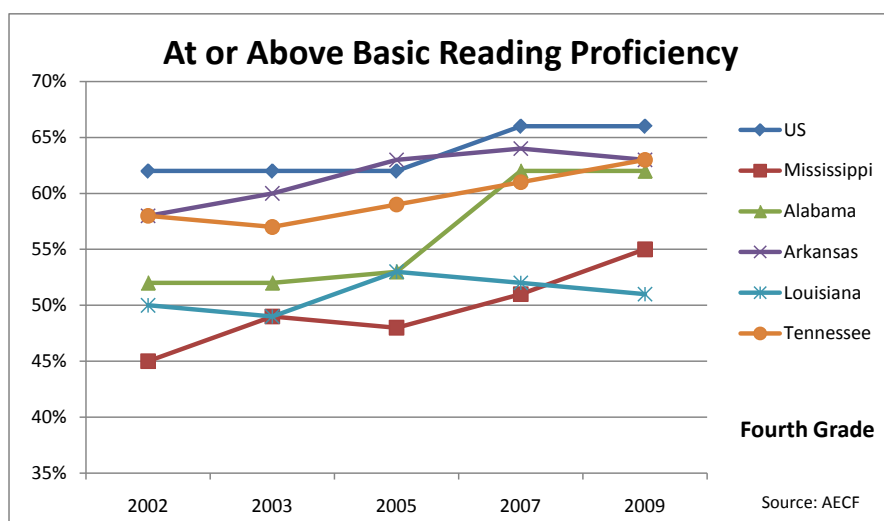


Figure 5

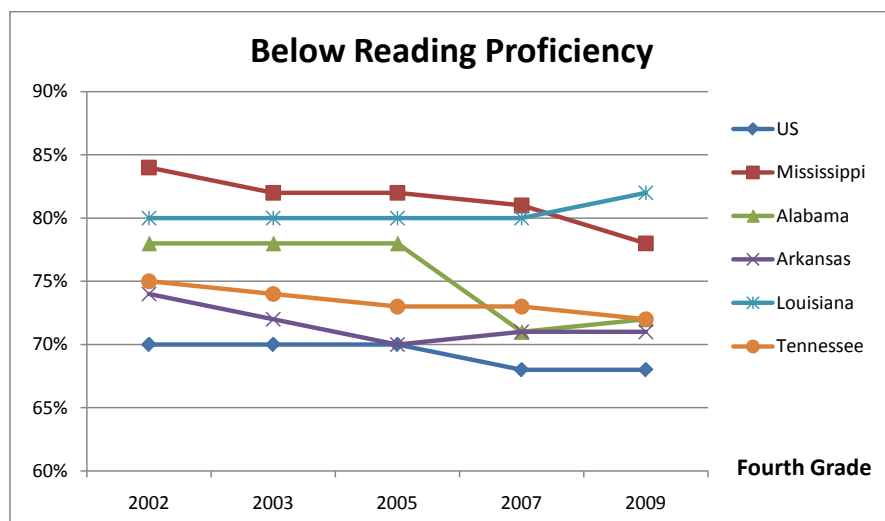


Figure 6

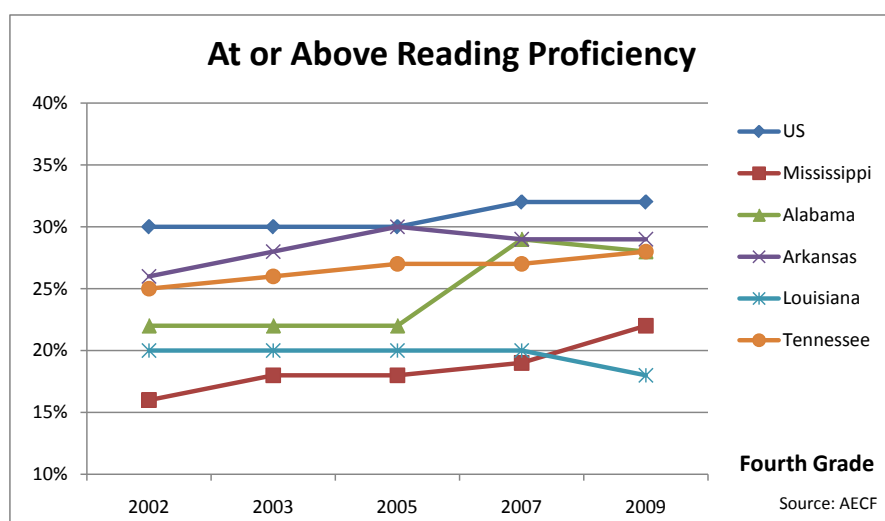


Figure 7

Similarly, the *Proficient* level indicates the successful integration and interpretation of text. Students at this level use their understanding to make evaluations and draw conclusions about the material in both literary and informational texts. The categories noted are *Below Reading Proficiency* and *At or Above Reading Proficiency*.

The percentage of Mississippi students who scored *Below Reading Proficiency* decreased from 84% in 2002 to 78% in 2009. The U.S. average also dropped to 68% in 2009.

The *At or Above Reading Proficiency* Scores of Mississippi's fourth grade students have gradually increased from 2002 to 2009 showing 16% to 22% respectively. The U.S. average was 32% in 2009.

Literacy

Children Ages 1 - 5 Whose Family Members Read to Them Less Than Three Days Per week, 2007

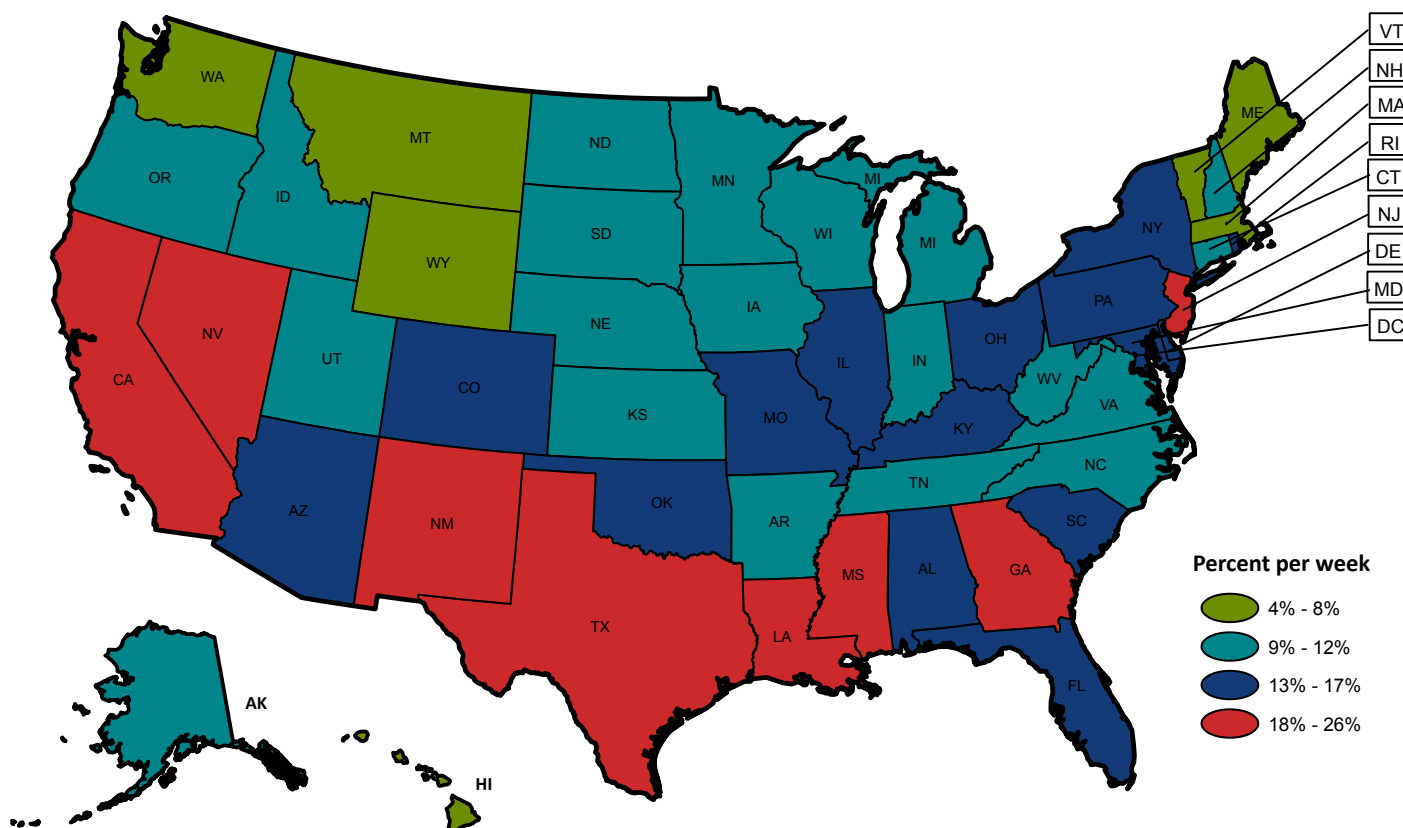


Figure 8

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Read to Less Than Three Days Per Week

Almost one in four (23%) of Mississippi's children ages one through five were read to by family members less than three days a week in 2007. Nationally, the average is 16%. Texas had the highest percentage in the nation at 26%, slightly higher than Mississippi, while Maine had the lowest percentage at 4%, and Vermont was second lowest at 5%. Regionally, states had the following percentages: Georgia (22%), Louisiana (20%), Alabama (15%), Arkansas (12%), and Tennessee (11%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

Families' Language and Use Differ Across Income Groups

Families' Language and Use Differ Across Income Groups						
Measures and Scores	13 Professional Parent		23 Working-class		6 Welfare	
	Parent	Child	Parent	Child	Parent	Child
Pretest score(a)	41		31		14	
Recorded vocabulary size	2,176	1,116	1,498	749	974	525
Average utterances per hour	487	310	301	223	176	168
Average different words per hour(b)	382	297	251	216	167	149

Source: Hart & Risley, 1995

Figure 9

Differences Among Families' Language Usage by Income

Interaction levels and vocabulary size between parents and children are positively correlated as shown in this seminal study by Hart and Risley (1995). The authors studied 42 children (34-36 months) and their parents regarding time spent with each other, the amount of hours each parent worked, and the educational level of the parents. The results show the children's vocabulary consisted almost entirely of words found in their parents' vocabulary (86% to 98%). Furthermore, the study found that children from working class or on welfare added words to their vocabulary at a slower rate than those of the professional parents (Hart and Risley, 1995).

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Adults With a Bachelor's Degree (age 25 and older), 2009

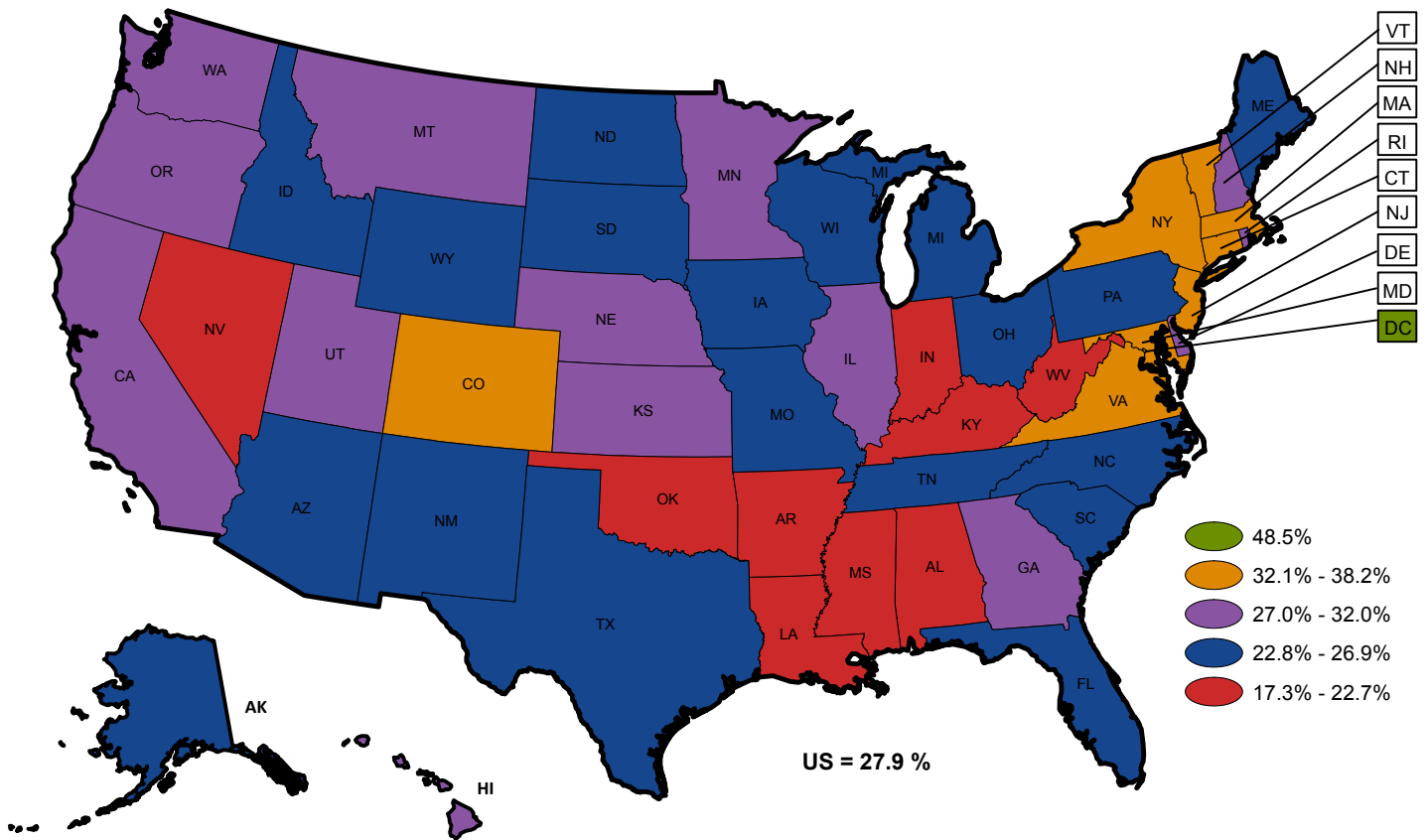


Figure 10

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Bachelor's Degree

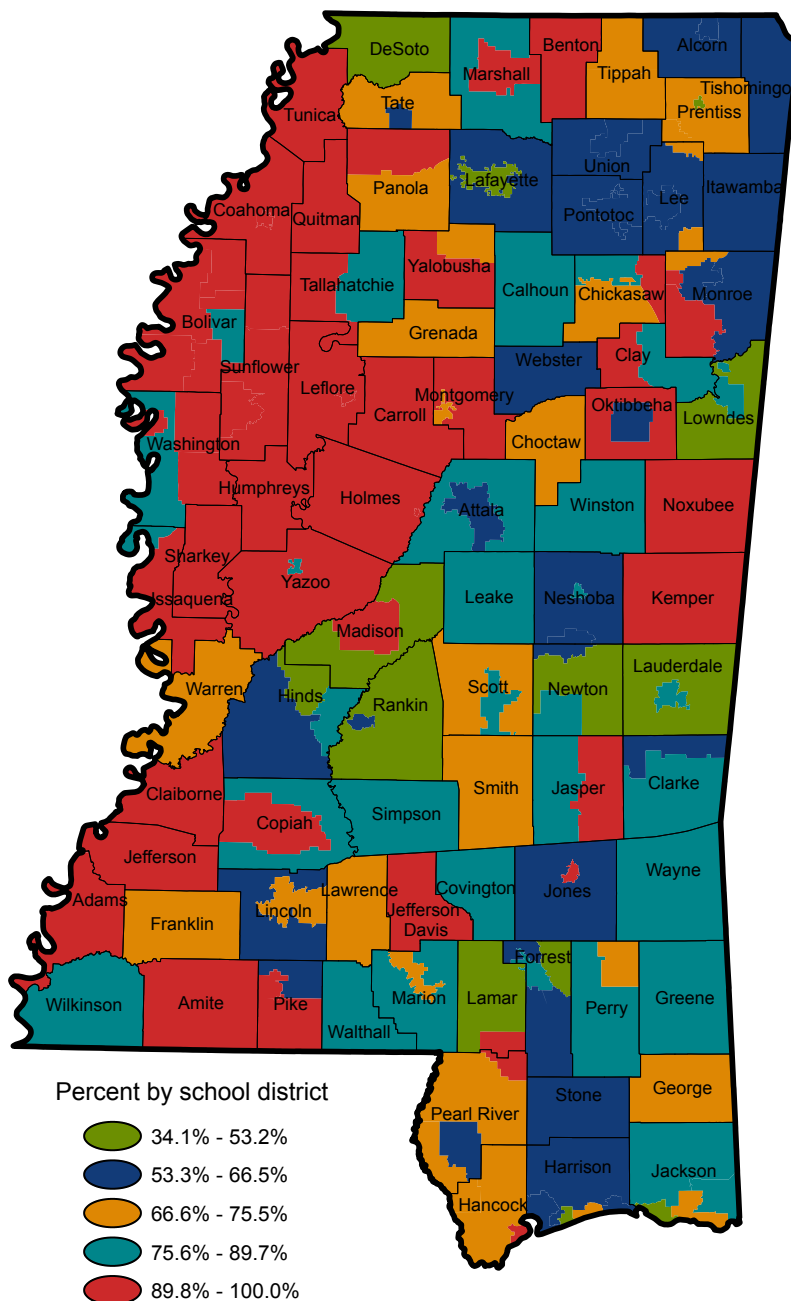
Mississippi has the third lowest percentage of adults in the U.S. (age 25 years and older) with a bachelor's degree. Only 19.6% of adults living in Mississippi have obtained a bachelor's degree followed closely by West Virginia (17.3%) and Arkansas (18.9%). Less than one quarter of high school graduates go on to obtain a bachelor's degree in Mississippi (24.4%). This is significantly below the national average of 32.7%. Nationally, 27.9% of adults age 25 years and older have earned a bachelor's degree. The District of Columbia had the highest percentage of bachelor's degrees in the nation at 48.5%, trailed by Massachusetts with 38.2%. In the South, states had the following percentages: Georgia 27.5%, Tennessee 23%, Alabama 22.1%, and Louisiana, 21.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Free and Reduced Lunch

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 31 million children in the United States each school day. Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the federally-set poverty level are eligible for free meals, and those children from families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federally-set poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals.

Of all school lunches provided in the Mississippi K-12 school system, 29% of the total meals were free in the 2009/2010 school year. Almost three quarters (71%) of all students in the Mississippi public school system qualify for a free or reduced-price meal based on their family's income. In more than one third (36%) of Mississippi's school districts, more than 90% of children qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

Free and Reduced Lunch, 2009-2010



Source: MS Department of Education

Figure 11

Literacy

Fourth graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading Level by School Income, 2009

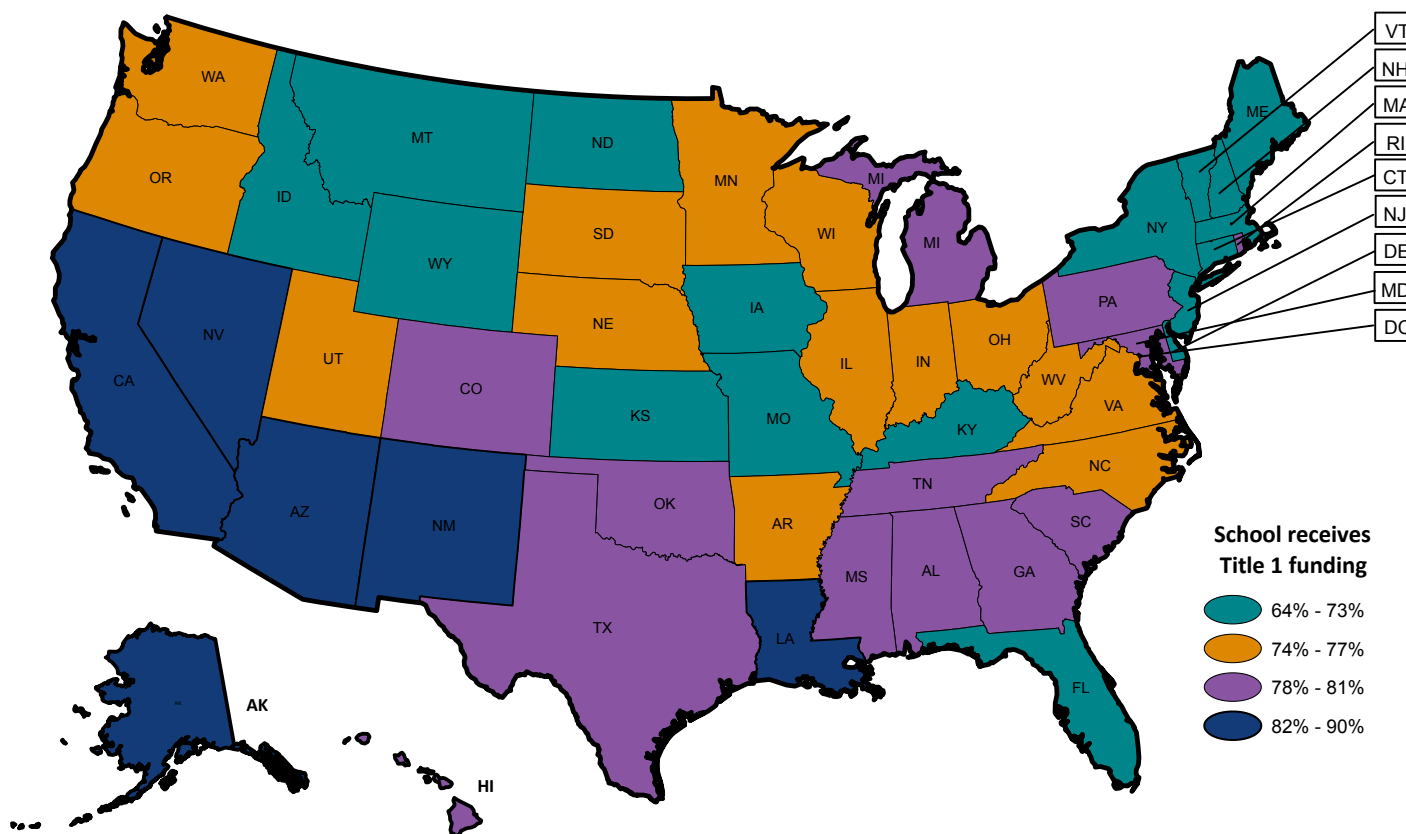


Figure 12

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Below Proficient Reading by School Income

Title I funds are used to support school-wide programs at schools with a high percentage of low-income children. Of Mississippi fourth graders attending schools receiving Title I funding, 81% had reading scores that were below proficient in 2009. Nationally, the average was 79% in 2009. California had the highest percentage in the nation at 88%, while Vermont had the lowest percentage at 64%. Among Southern states the percentages were: Louisiana (84%), Tennessee and Alabama (79%), followed closely by Georgia (78%), and Arkansas (75%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

Fourth graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading Level by Family Income, 2009

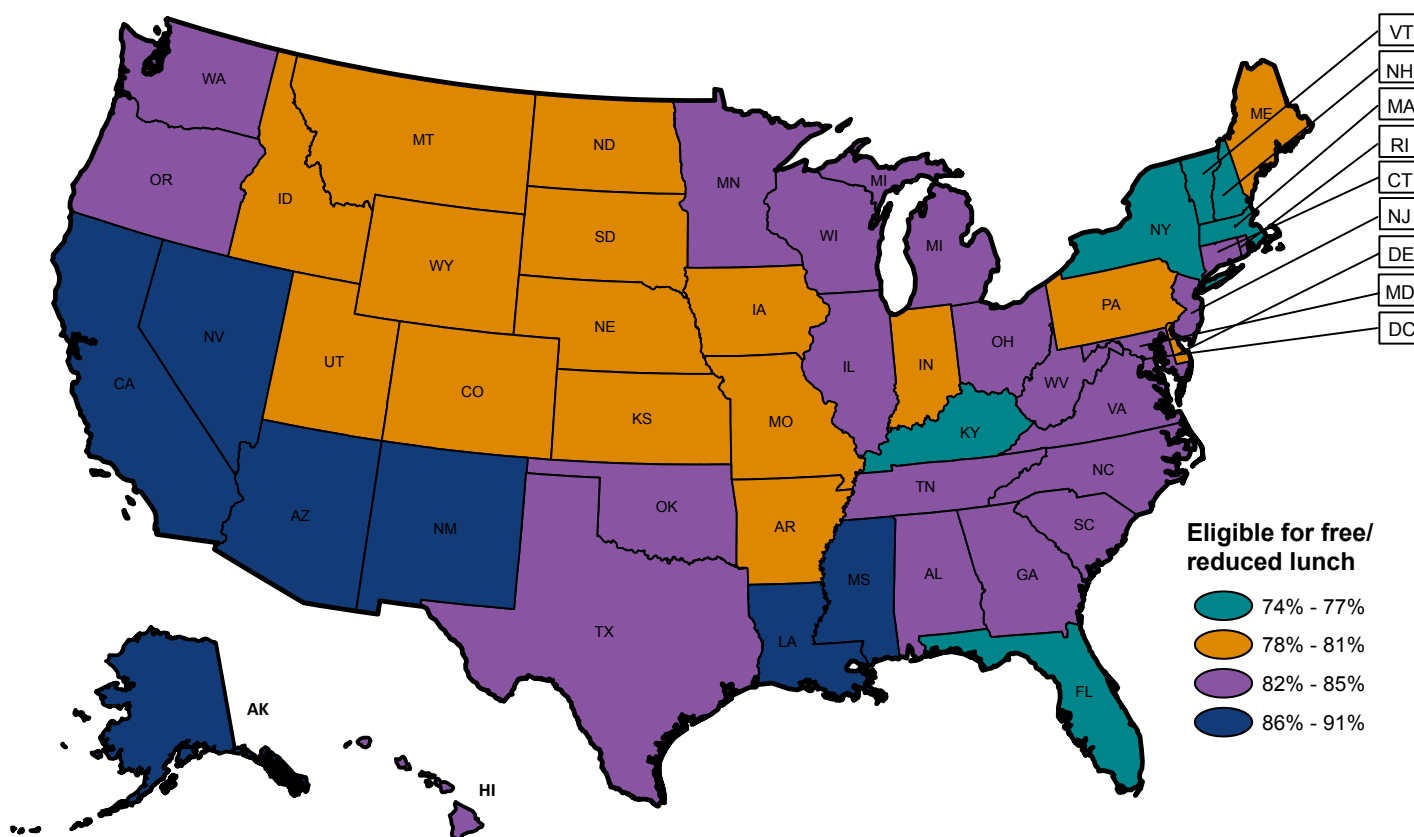


Figure 13

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Below Proficient Reading by Family Income

Among Mississippi's fourth grade students, 81% who were eligible for a free or reduced price school lunch had reading scores that were below proficient in 2009. Nationally, the average was 83% in 2009. California had the highest percentage in the nation at 88%, while Vermont had the lowest percentage at 74%. Among Southern states the percentages were: Louisiana (84%), Alabama (79%), Tennessee (79%), Georgia (78%), and Arkansas (75%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

Policy Considerations

The 2010 Annie E. Casey Foundation's Special Report entitled, Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters, issued the following recommendations:

- *Develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns, integrates, and coordinates what happens from birth through third grade so children are ready to take on the learning tasks associated with fourth grade and beyond*
- *Encourage and enable parents, families, and caregivers to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of good outcomes for their children*
- *Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments in which all children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged and educated to high standards*
- *Find, develop, and deploy practical and scalable solutions to two of the most significant contributors to the under-achievement of children from low-income families—chronic absence from school and summer learning loss*

In addition to the aforementioned recommendations by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the following policy considerations are also offered, specific to Mississippi:

- Expand current literacy programs in Mississippi, with increased private-public partnerships
- Conduct research, documenting the specific reasons for children's absences by school district

"We know from experience and research that strong parental engagement with schools produces positive benefits for students, including higher student achievement. Schools should welcome parents as full partners and offer them a seat at the table."

Anne Foster, Executive Director, Parents for Public Schools

Success Story: The Between the Lions Preschool Literacy Initiative

Mississippi Public Broadcasting

How can a family of furry, friendly lions change the face of literacy in the state of Mississippi and beyond? Father Theo, mother Cleo, and children Lionel and Leona, whose habitat is the local library, have been making strides since January 2005 through an effort to bring a centers-based curriculum providing early word recognition and comprehension activities for three and four-year-olds in 95 child care center classrooms across the state. The lion family is featured on *Between the Lions*, an Emmy award winning production of Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB), WGBH Boston and Sirius Thinking, Ltd. New York. Filmed at MPB's Jackson studios, *Between the Lions* has been broadcast daily since 2000 on PBS stations across the nation and is designed to encourage children to "get wild about reading."

The *Between the Lions* (BTL) Preschool Literacy Initiative is funded in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Education's Ready to Learn grant, and the Barksdale Reading Institute. The Initiative targets child care centers in the Jackson area (Hinds, Madison, and Rankin Counties) serving children primarily from low-income households. Currently, 1771 children in 73 early childhood centers have participated in the program, allowing children to view episodes in class and engage in before and after viewing activities designed to improve language and social skills, as well as math and science. "Active" viewing is more than just watching the featured episode. Children rotate between hands-on learning centers designed to instruct in creative ways, and they sing songs, learn poems and read books all based on the week's theme.



Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy, MPB and Shelia Brown Robinson, MPB Early Childhood Specialist

Literacy



Bobbie Courtney, Director of Visions Academy, Brandon, Mississippi

"It works because they learn through play. They are not just watching TV; they are engaged in what is being said."

Bobbie Courtney, Director of Visions Academy, Brandon, Mississippi



Elana Tate, Director of New Jerusalem School and Jeannie Smith, Preschool teacher

"Teachers welcome television into the classroom not as a babysitter but as an educational tool," says Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy at MPB. "When it's strategically designed to educate, inform and instruct, then it can be very useful in the classroom." Classrooms become livelier, and interaction among teacher and classmates is encouraged. "You want them to learn by having fun and being energetic," says Shelia Brown Robinson, one of three MPB Early Childhood Specialists who serve as mentors to classroom teachers. "*Between the Lions* has brought that excitement into the classroom. Our children are now running to practice writing their name."

The *Between the Lions* curriculum is comprised of three components. The actual viewing of the *Between the Lions* episodes in the classroom allows children to interact with each other and the teacher. Supplemental materials such as songs, poem charts, and books reinforce the message presented during the featured episode, and the mentoring component provides support for classroom teachers.

Bobbie Courtney, the Director of Visions Academy in Brandon, has seen the positive benefits of using the *BTL* curriculum. "It works because they learn through play. They are not just watching TV; they are engaged in what is being said." Courtney was a classroom teacher in another participating child care center and brought the curriculum to Visions Academy when she became the director there. She says the key to its success comes from the hands-on learning centers. "If they [the students] don't get it in one center, it's used in another way. So, one of these areas will be attractive to them if not all."

Gone are the days when children sit quietly on the carpet waiting for the teacher to instruct them. A

Between the Lions classroom is active, and creativity and independence are encouraged. Elana Tate, Director of New Jerusalem School in South Jackson says using the hands-on learning center approach has made all the difference. "We were doing things as a whole group, and some kids were left out. It just really touched my heart to see the change. Once we went to centers, it was just unbelievable." Jeannie Smith, a preschool teacher at New Jerusalem, thinks this approach also boosts a child's confidence by increasing independence. "Kids get to do their own work, and they want to do it. If they pour a lot of glue on the paper, that's fine. It's their work."

A participating *BTL* classroom teacher receives training in implementing the curriculum, a TV/DVD player for the classroom, 61 children's books, teacher handbooks with accompanying DVDs, and materials to be used in the classroom; but it is the mentoring component that means the most to the teachers. The MPB Early Childhood Mentors visit classrooms regularly and assist the teachers in daily activities. Mentors spend 96 classroom hours per year and are on call for support. "What we give them [the teachers] is us," says Robinson. "I might be the mentor, but you're the teacher. You learn from me, and I'll learn from you. The kids are just going to get a double dose," adds Robinson. "Teachers used to give the children a crayon and a piece of paper and say 'Hey, have fun, but be quiet.' Now you walk in the room and hear children reciting poems and creating pictures in unique ways. The whole outlook has changed from when we first began." According to Stevenson, the mentors are important reasons why the classroom climate is changing. "They [the mentors] are not just saying, 'Here's the curriculum—here you go,' but they are assisting teachers throughout the year."

"I might be the mentor, but you're the teacher. You learn from me, and I'll learn from you, and the kids are just going to get a double dose."

Shelia Brown Robinson, MPB Early Childhood Specialist

Although the MPB Early Childhood Mentors have only been available to 95 child care classrooms in the Jackson area, the *Between the Lions* literacy program itself is spreading across the state thanks to Rotary Clubs who are bringing the *BTL* curriculum to child care centers in central Mississippi. It all started three years ago when Jack Forbus, then Rotary District 6820 Governor, and other Rotarians began to explore avenues to address literacy and high dropout rates in the state. Forbus, a State Farm insurance agent in Starkville, had heard about the



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Between the Lions Preschool Literacy Initiative and was curious to hear more. A meeting in Jackson between MPB staff and Rotary leaders ended in a partnership between the two. "They had the program; we had the desire, so we married up," says Forbus.

Participating Rotary Clubs adopt child care centers and agree to provide \$1500 to implement the *BTL* program. Each center receives a TV/DVD player, curriculum, teaching materials and books to aid them. Teachers are trained by MPB staff, and Mississippi State University's Child Care Resource and Referral Network staff provide technical assistance. Rotarians volunteer their time weekly reading to the children and spending time with them. Following the initial start-up year, Rotarians provide \$300 to each adopted classroom annually for additional classroom materials.

Forbus likes to say that the Rotarians are "the boots on the ground," and believes that finding ways to form unique partnerships such as theirs with MPB is key in improving outcomes for Mississippi's children especially during tough economic times. In recalling the initial meeting with MPB, Forbus remembers, "We thought to ourselves, they [MPB]



Jack Forbus, Literacy Chair, Rotary District 6820

"They had the program; we had the desire, so we married up."

Jack Forbus, Literacy Chair, Rotary District 6820



Visions Academy preschoolers enjoying lunch with Rankin County Rotary members

have what we want, and we've got what they want, so we voted right there to work together." In three years, the *BTL* Rotary Club Preschool Literacy Initiative has grown from 11 to 26 child care centers.

Child care directors recognize the work that the Rotary Clubs are doing. In Brandon, the Rankin County Rotary Club sponsors Visions Academy. "They sponsor us financially, but they are really involved with us on a much bigger scale," says Bobbie Courtney. She adds that Rotarians representing various careers read to the children regularly and tell them the importance of cultivating a love for reading. "Because of their sponsorship, new doors have been opened for our children to be exposed to things. I am really grateful."



The *BTL* Preschool Literacy Initiative does not stop with the Jackson Metro Project or even the Rotary Initiative. It has spread even farther to public libraries across the state. Because the "lions" live in the local library, there is now a real interest among young viewers in using the local library and finding out what a library can provide. As a third component, MPB established the *BTL* Preschool Literacy Library Project which provided educational resources in 17 Mississippi libraries.



Brandon Cooley



LaTonya Thomas

Literacy

In addition to the enthusiasm garnered by classroom teachers and community volunteers, parents are excited about what the *Between the Lions* curriculum is bringing to the classroom and to the home environment. LaTonya Thomas, whose four-year-old son Brandon Cooley attends New Jerusalem School, appreciates the diverse ways the curriculum is taught. "Brandon has to be active. He's not the average child who will sit down and look at a book." Thomas adds that Brandon's interest in music has been encouraged by incorporating music into the curriculum. Additionally, the program provides support for parents through newsletters which outline practical ways for parents to get involved. "It pushes me," says Thomas. "Family time is important to Brandon versus just sitting and watching TV. He's always reminding me, 'Mama, we have a project to do.'"



Ketina and Kelsey Moore

Kelsey Moore, a first grader at St. Therese School in Jackson, says her love for reading came from her pre-school involvement in *Between the Lions*. Noting that Kelsey has won school reading awards, mother Ketina says the curriculum is a "literacy booster" as well as a vocabulary builder. "It gives them the love and enjoyment of reading. Every night she wants to read before bedtime." She too says that parents look for-



ward to the weekly newsletters for parents. Kelsey's exemplary performance in the classroom is one concrete example that the *Between the Lions* curriculum is working. She's been reading chapter books for two years now and currently reads on a third grade level.

"There are literacy opportunities at every moment."

Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy, MPB

Evaluations of the program indicate that it is a valuable teaching tool. A study by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication found that using the *BTL* curriculum does make a significant impact in reading skills among centers that use it (Piotrowski, Linebarger, and Jennings, 2009). "Our research clearly indicates that the *Between the Lions* Preschool Literacy Initiative curriculum positively impacts vocabulary development, teacher behavior, and literacy environments," said Deborah L. Linebarger, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Communication and Lead Investigator of the study. "We found substantial evidence that children who may be at-risk for reading failure due to economic disadvantages are acquiring necessary early literacy skills." Children were divided into three groups: an experimental group, which was exposed to the *Between the Lions* curriculum; a maintenance group, which had used the curriculum the previous year; and a control group, which was not provided with any *Between the Lions* materials.

The results revealed that children whose teachers utilized the *BTL* curriculum outperformed their peers in the control group on upper case letter identification by 75%, lower case letter identification by nearly 113%, and picture naming skills by 20%. Children's letter sound scores also improved by nearly 300% (Piotrowski, Linebarger, and Jennings, 2009).

Recognizing that Mississippi's literacy "gaps" are often based on income level, the *BTL* initiatives sought from the beginning to fill that gap by providing resources and assistance to child care centers serving children from economically disadvantaged households with the hope that it would spread to individual households. According to MPB's Stevenson, "If children don't get a foundation between the ages of three and four, then they will be behind when they start grade school. Some of these are the same children who will not finish high school because



Kelsey Moore

Literacy

they will be behind all their lives.” Stevenson believes that the *Between the Lions* curriculum not only improves the literacy skills of the children enrolled in the child care centers, but also the entire family. “Normally you would say that the parents should be driving literacy within the home environment. However, for some of these children who come from homes where the parents may not have a high school diploma or may not understand how to read aloud to their children, now because of *Between the Lions*, the children are driving the literacy in their home environments. The children are going in the classroom, learning, and then getting their parents excited about it at home.”

The home to school connection is critical in the efforts to improve reading skills in the state. Making parents aware of the importance of reading to their children, as well as interacting with them, are simple ways that the *Between the Lions* initiative can be replicated. Children who are watching *BTL* in class are coming home at night and encouraging their parents to read and build their vocabulary skills. “There are literacy opportunities at every moment,” says Stevenson who says children can learn anywhere anytime if parents are willing to get creative. Identifying letters of the alphabet while doing grocery shopping is just one suggestion. Stevenson believes that the foundations built in *Between the Lions* can be extended in many ways in homes and communities across the state.

“The secret is not just the show. It’s not just a television series, not just a curriculum that has been developed, but it’s a combination of all these things to make an impact on teaching services and also child outcomes,” says Stevenson. “Why should we wait until they are ten? We have to do it now. We cannot afford to wait.”



*“Why should we wait til they’re ten?
We’ve got to do it now. We can’t afford to wait.”*

Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy, MPB

Between the Lions Preschool Literacy Library Project

Participating Pilot Libraries:

Alcorn Co., Corinth Library
 Benton Co., Hickory Flat Public Library
 Claiborne Co., Harriette Person Memorial Library
 Coahoma Co., Carnegie Public Library
 Covington Co., Seminary Public Library
 DeSoto Co., M.R. Davis Library
 Forrest Co., Hattiesburg Library
 Hinds Co., Eudora Welty Library
 Jackson Co., Pascagoula Public Library
 Lee Co., Lee County Library
 Lowndes Co., Columbus Public Library
 Pearl River Co., Margaret Reed Crosby Memorial Library
 Pontotoc Co., Pontotoc County Library
 Rankin Co., G.Chastaine Flynt Memorial Library
 Sharkey Co., Sharkey-Issaquena County Library
 Sunflower Co., Henry Seymour Library
 Wayne Co., Wayne County Library

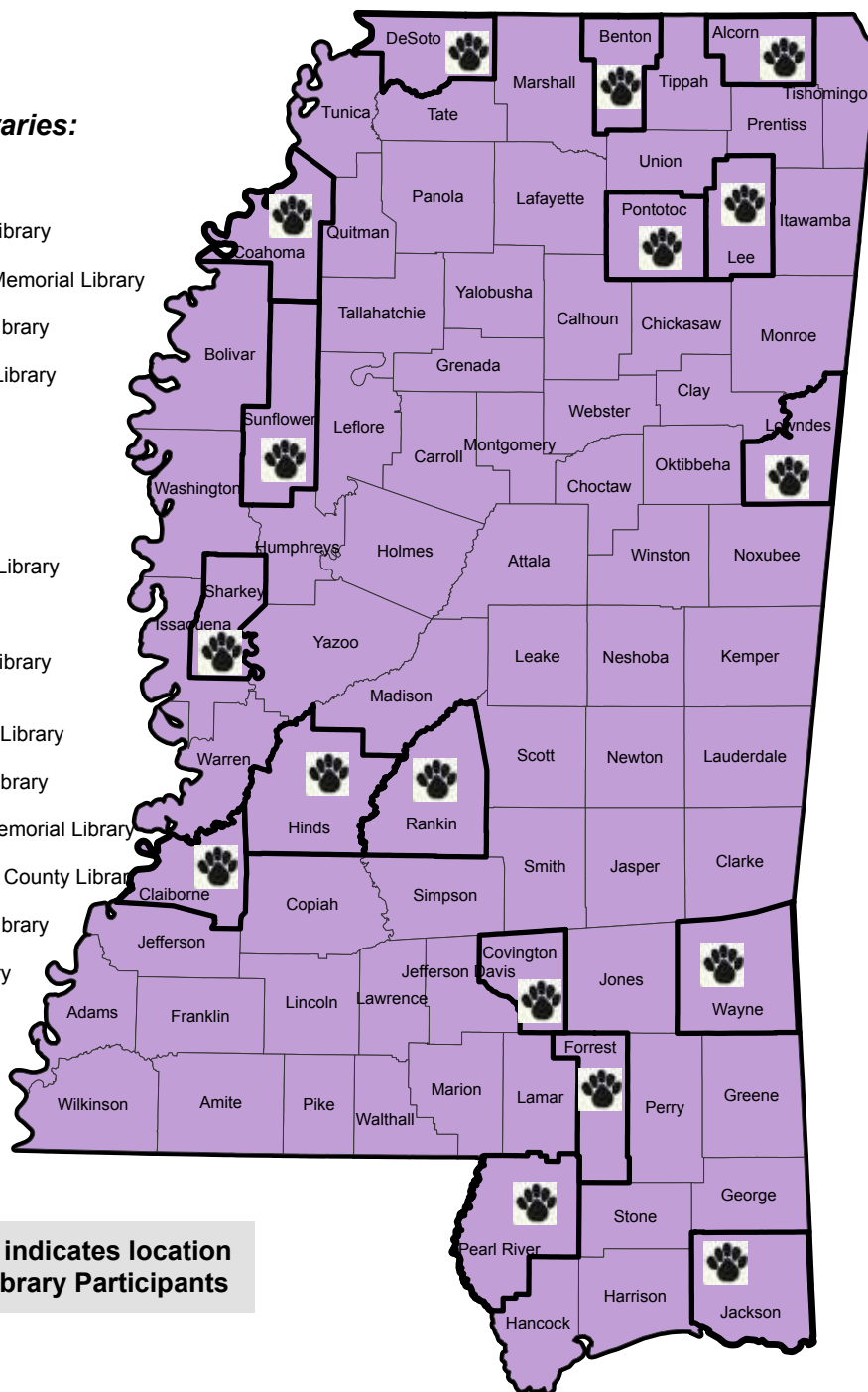


Figure 14

Source: Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB), 2010

Between the Lions Preschool Literacy - Jackson Metro Project

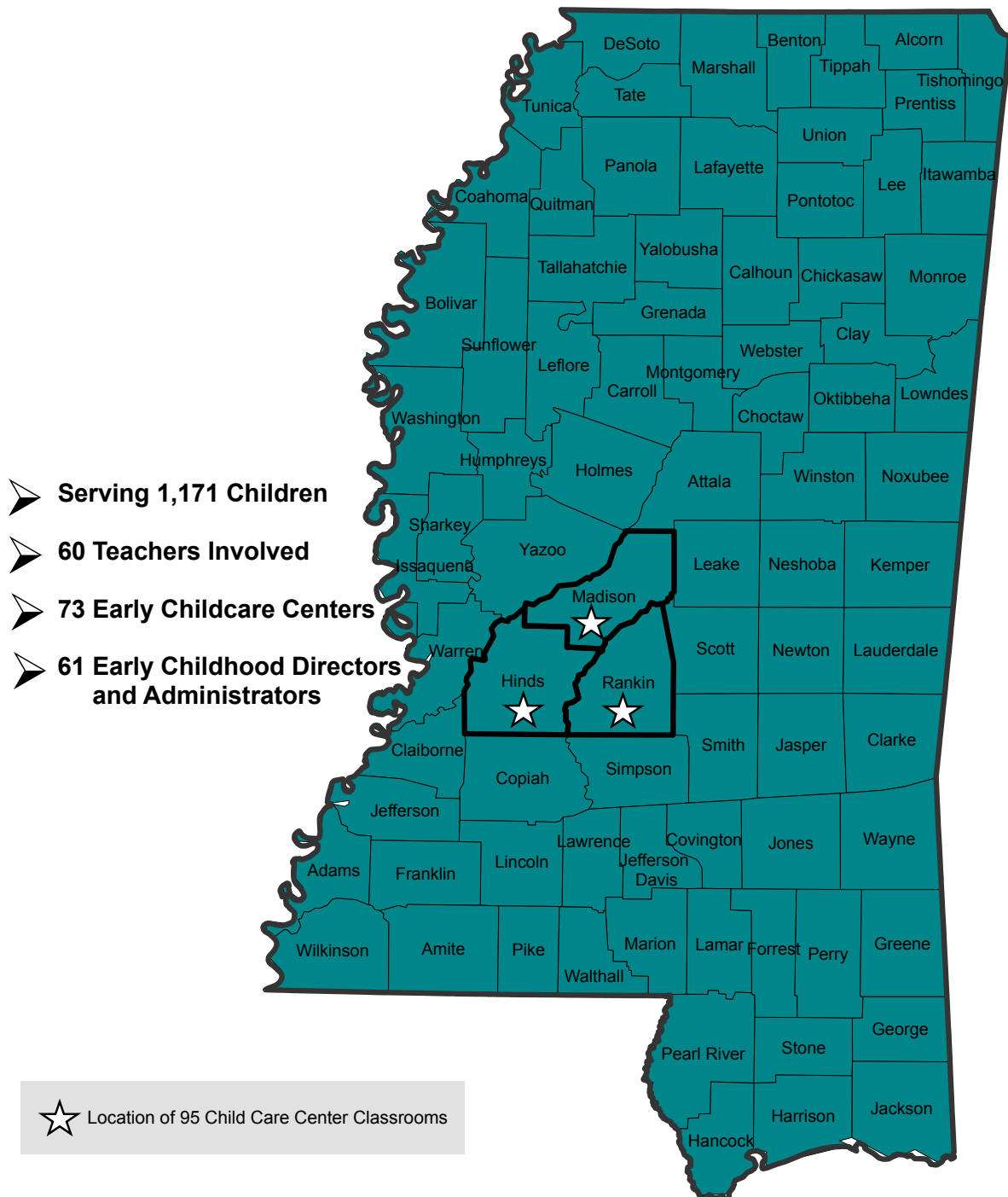


Figure 15

Source: Between the Lions® Preschool Literacy Initiative, 2010

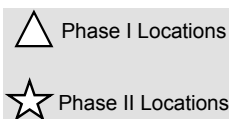
Between the Lions/Rotary Clubs Preschool Literacy Initiative

Phase I Participating Rotary Clubs

Forest Rotary Club
North Jackson Rotary Club
Meridian Rotary Club
Leland Rotary Club
Greenwood Rotary Club
Starkville Rotary Club
Rankin Co. Rotary Club
Vicksburg Rotary Club
Waynesboro Rotary Club

Phase II Participating Rotary Clubs

Canton Rotary Club
Eupora Rotary Club
Greenville Rotary Club
Hattiesburg Rotary Club
Jackson Rotary Club
Lexington Rotary Club
Louisville Rotary Club
Madison-Ridgeland Rotary Club
Natchez Rotary Club
South Rankin Rotary Club
Starkville Rotary Club
Winona Rotary Club
Yazoo City Rotary Club



➤ 26 Childcare Centers Adopted
by Rotary Clubs

➤ 26 Teachers

➤ Serving 349 Children

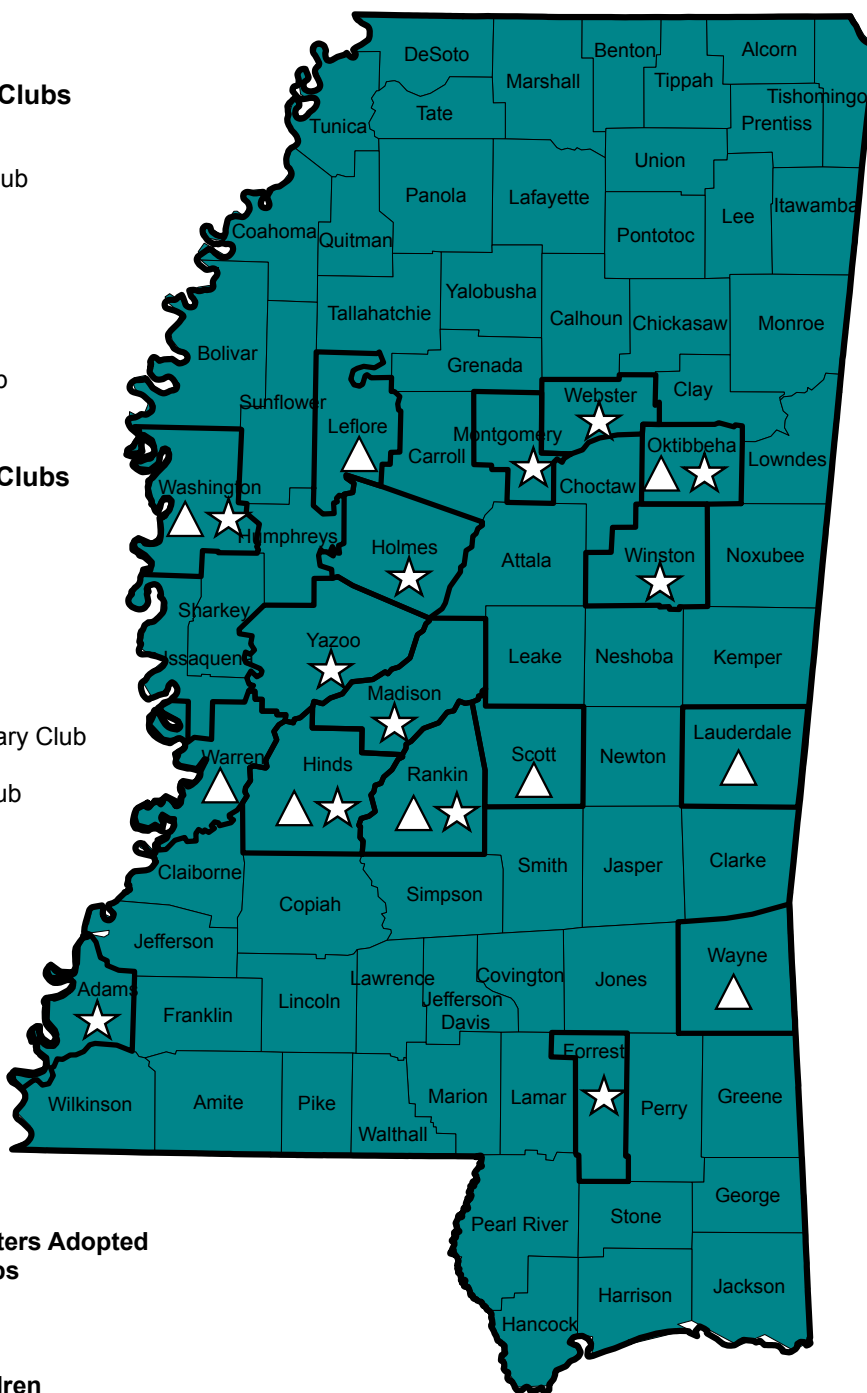


Figure 16

Source: Between the Lions® Preschool Literacy Initiative, 2010

Healthy Schools

Introduction

Schools play an incredibly influential role in children's lives. In addition to being the primary places where children are educated, schools influence children's health and well-being by providing opportunities for physical activity, meals, and health services. Children spend more than one-third of their waking hours at school – and depending upon the age of the child, often between six and seven hours per weekday (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In rural states, such as Mississippi, including transportation to and from school, many students may spend as much as eight to ten hours away from home each weekday. Students get much of their physical activity through physical education, recess, and athletics programs. Many students eat up to two meals and snacks each day at school, with some students also attending after-school activities and/or child care.

Non-classroom aspects of school have very real implications for children's well-being. Children benefit from physical activity by building and maintaining healthy bones and muscles, reducing the risk of obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, reducing feelings of depression and anxiety, and promoting psychological well-being (Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee, 2008). Additionally, physical activity programs help children develop social skills, reduce risk-taking behaviors, and provide short-term cognitive benefits (Howard, 2005). More recent studies have noted positive associations between children's physical fitness and academic performance (Kolbo, Alvarez, Blom, and Zhang, 2010; American Heart Association, 2010). The food served at school also influences children's health (American Heart Association,



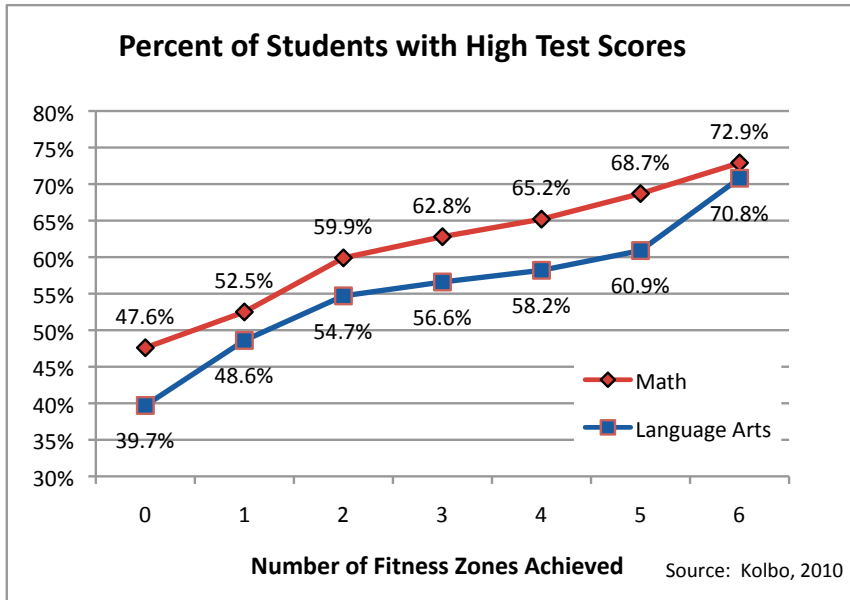


Figure 1

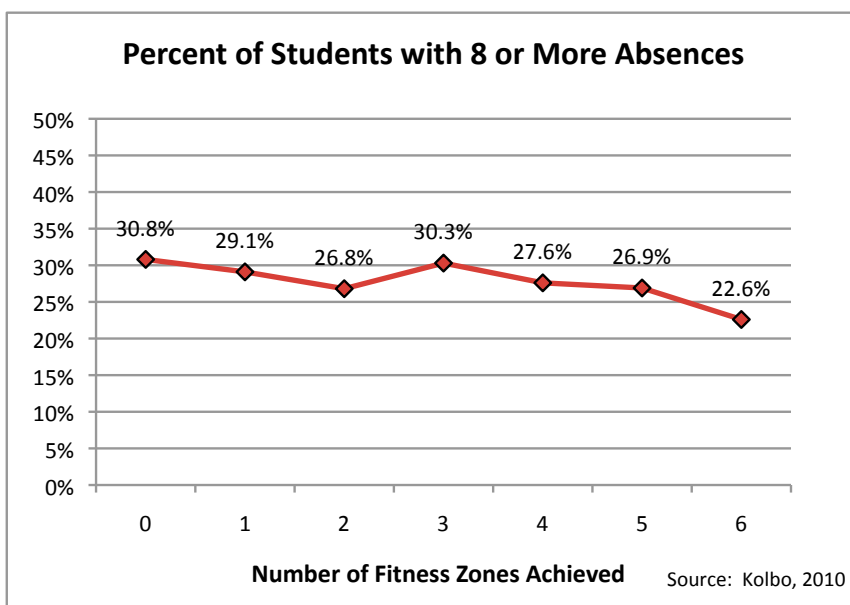


Figure 2

2010). Consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (Ogden, Flegal, Carroll, and Johnson, 2002) and snack foods (Ebbeling, Feldman, Osganian, Chomitz, Ellenbogen, and Ludwig, 2006), sometimes served in school cafeterias and vending machines, may predict weight gain in children. Many health consequences are associated with childhood obesity: obese children are more likely to become obese adults (Guo, Chumlea, and Roche, 2002) and they are at higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease (Must, Jacques, Dallal, Bajema, and Dietz, 1992), certain cancers (Shoff and Newcomb, 1998), diabetes (Mahler and Adler, 1999), and asthma (Kwon et al., 2006).

Teachers often refer children to school nurses and counselors, when available, to address issues that may interfere with classroom learning. When children are ill, having more nurses at school means students are more likely to receive services and follow-up for chronic diseases, depression, unintended pregnancy, vision problems, and school-related injuries (Guttu, Engelke, and Swanson, 2004). School health education programs also play an essential role in building healthy children. These programs can reduce risky behaviors such as tobacco use, poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, drug and alcohol use, and violence (The American Cancer Society, n.d.).

The nation as a whole has tuned in to the growing problem of poor childhood health. Recently, much has been made of the role schools can play in mitigating the

Healthy Schools

childhood obesity epidemic. First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign to end childhood obesity aims to improve the Child Nutrition Act by encouraging healthier food in schools and increasing kids' physical activity (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). In Mrs. Obama's visit to Mississippi March, 2010 she also acknowledged previous and on-going work of First Lady Marsha Barbour and the "Let's Go Walking, Mississippi" campaign sponsored by Blue Cross & Blue Shield Foundation of Mississippi, as well as many efforts already in place in Mississippi (Pettus, 2010).

Many states have used legislative approaches to address these issues by increasing public schools' focus on students' health. Among Mississippi's children, 44.4 % are overweight or obese. The State of Mississippi is making strong efforts to confront this issue through recent legislation. The Healthy Students Act of 2007 requires schools to take specific actions to make environments healthier for students and the state has begun to make great strides in creating healthier school environments since the Act's passage (Southward et al., 2009). Each community and the state of Mississippi have a responsibility that our schools provide a school environment in which children can thrive both intellectually and physically. Mississippi's investments in promoting healthy school environments for its children and adolescents will help yield returns of children growing into healthy and productive adults. This section will provide an overview of the Mississippi Healthy Students Act of 2007 and the Year One and Year Two results of a Robert Wood Johnson funded study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the legislation in promoting healthy school environments. Policy considerations for maintaining and increasing healthy school environments are also noted. Finally, a success story featuring New Albany School District is spotlighted to showcase results that can easily be replicated throughout school districts across Mississippi.

Healthy Schools In Mississippi

The Mississippi Healthy Students Act of 2007

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 42.4% of Mississippi school children today are heavier than their recommended weight, and 23.9% are considered obese. This makes Mississippi one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the country (Southward et al., 2009). To combat this problem, the CDC recommends better health education, more physical education and physical activity programs, and healthier school environments (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Mississippi legislators responded to the obesity problem by passing the Healthy Students



Healthy Schools

Act of 2007, which promotes all three of these CDC recommendations. The Act requires public schools to provide increased amounts of physical activity and health education instruction for K-12 students. It mandates 45 minutes per week of health education instruction and 150 minutes per week of activity based instruction in grades K-8. In grades 9-12, there is a ½ Carnegie Unit, meaning 60 hours of study per year, in health education required for graduation and ½ Carnegie Unit in physical education required for graduation (S.B. 2369, Mississippi 2007, enacted).

In 2010, Mississippi passed legislation to assist and incentivize school districts to comply with the Healthy Students Act. Section 37-11-8 of the Mississippi Code requires the Office of Healthy Schools within the Department of Education to develop and implement the USDA's HealthierUS School Initiative to facilitate healthier choices and practices by local school districts through the promotion of healthier school environments. The Office of Healthy Schools provides technical assistance to schools that participate in the challenge and financial incentives to schools receiving recognition in the challenge (H.B. 1078, Mississippi 2010, enacted). See following map and table for a breakdown of the schools in Mississippi that have earned gold, silver or bronze medals for this program.



Healthy Schools

USDA HealthierUS School Challenge Schools

School District	Award	Schools	School District	Award	Schools
Coahoma County		Jonestown Elementary	Lamar County		Oak Grove Primary
		Friars Point Elementary			Purvis Lower Elementary
Corinth		West Corinth Elementary			Purvis Upper Elementary
		East Corinth Elementary			Purvis Middle
		South Elementary			Purvis High
George County		Rock Creek Elementary			Baxterville City
Grenada		Grenada Upper Elementary			Sumrall Elem/Middle
Hinds County		Byram Middle			Oak Grove Upper Elementary
Hollandale		Sanders Elementary			Oak Grove Lower Elementary
Jackson County		St. Martin East Elementary			Oak Grove Elem/Middle
		St. Martin North Elementary	Lauderdale County		Northeast Elementary
		Vanceleave Lower Elementary	Moss Point		Magnolia Junior High
		Vanceleave Upper Elementary	New Albany		New Albany Elementary
		East Central Lower Elementary	Petal		Petal Upper Elementary
		East Central Upper Elementary	Pontotoc County		North Pontotoc Elementary
		St. Martin High	South Panola		Pope Elementary
		East Central High			Pope Junior High
		Vanceleave High	South Pike		Magnolia Elementary
		St. Martin Upper	Starkville		Sudduth Elementary
		East Central Middle	Sunflower County		Ruleville Central Elementary
		Vanceleave Middle	West Bolivar		West Bolivar Elementary
		St. Martin Middle	Yazoo City		Webster Street Elementary

Figure 3

The HealthierUS School Challenge was established in 2004 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is a voluntary program in which participating schools are recognized for creating a healthier school environment through the promotion of nutrition and physical activity. In February 2010, as part of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" Initiative, the HealthierUS School Challenge added monetary incentive awards to participate in the program and document progress toward health, nutrition and physical activity goals in the school (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). To date, 19 school districts have or are currently participating in the program. The most active school district in the state is Jackson County with 13 participating schools. Lamar County school district is second most active with 10 schools participating.

USDA HealthierUS School Challenge Schools

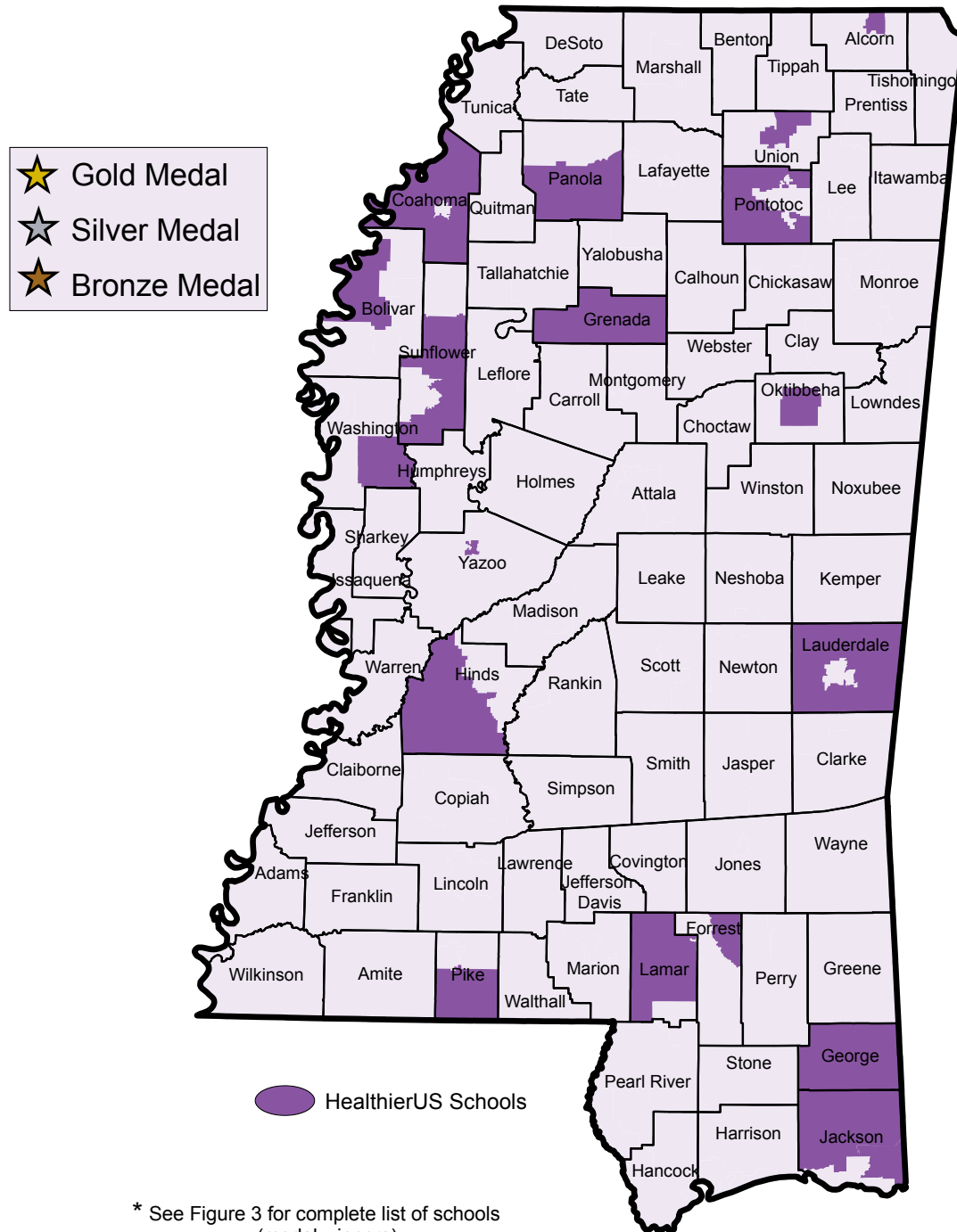


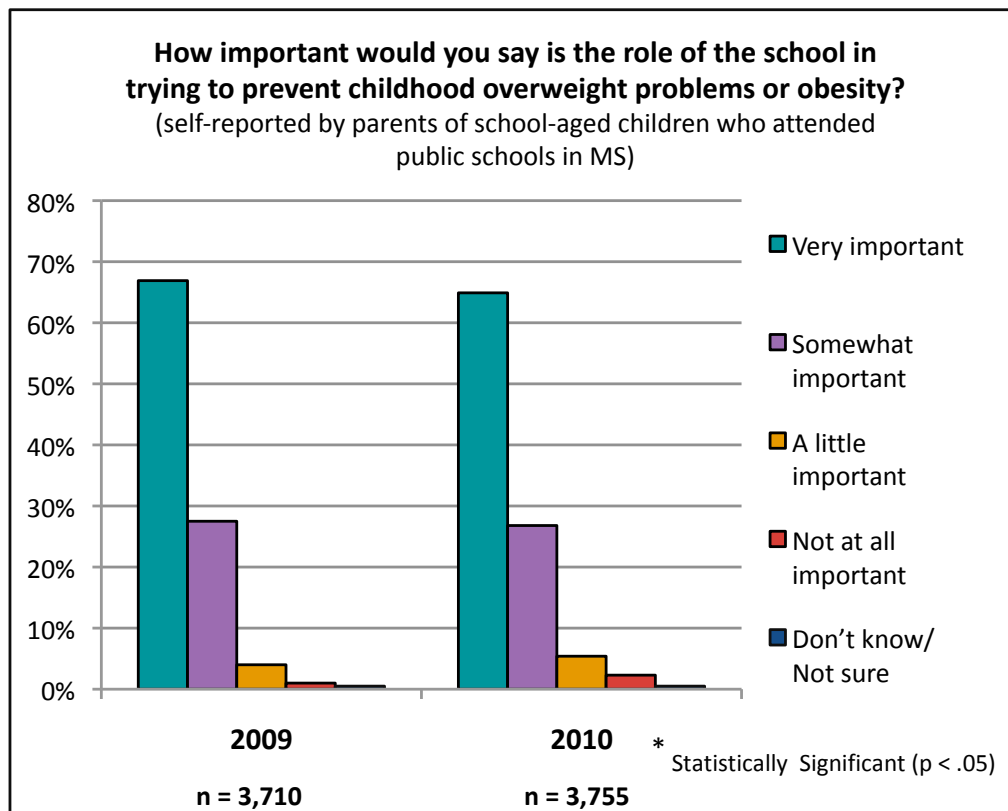
Figure 4

Source: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Healthy Schools

In 2008, the Center for Mississippi Health Policy collaborated with the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), Mississippi State University (MSU), and the University of Mississippi (UM) to evaluate the impact of the Mississippi Healthy Students Act on childhood obesity. The evaluators conducted surveys of local and state policy makers, surveys of parents and adolescents, and on-site assessments of school nutrition environments. The Center lists in its Year One Report the following key findings:

- Most schools reported having implemented local school wellness committees and established school health councils; however, more emphasis must be placed on the work of the councils, particularly in ensuring that councils report to school boards as required
- Middle schools have demonstrated the most progress toward full implementation of local school wellness policies, followed by high schools, then elementary schools
- While parents express strong support in general for school policies that require physical education and healthy eating, they are not widely aware of specific policies being implemented in their children's schools (Center for Mississippi Health Policy, 2010)



Source: Excerpt from The Robert Wood Johnson Year Two Report 2010

Figure 5

Healthy Schools

In 2010, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded a year two follow up study of the impact of the Mississippi Healthy Students Act. When asked about the role of schools in preventing overweight and obesity among students, the majority of parents reported that they believed the school's role is very important in both Year One (66.9%) and Year Two (64.9), with most of the remaining parents reporting that the school's role is somewhat important (27.5% and 26.8%, respectively) (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).



Healthy Schools

Factors Affecting Healthy Schools

Recess and Physical Activity Outside of Physical Education

Across the country since 2001, schools have been scheduling recess before lunch, which appears to have a positive impact not only because it provides an opportunity for physical activity but also because it affects students' food choices. In 2003, the National Food Service Management Institute at the University of Mississippi researched national recess programs and found that "when students go to recess before lunch they do not rush through lunch and tend to eat a more well-balanced meal including more foods containing vitamins, such as milk, vegetables, and fruits" (Hamilton County Coordinated School Health Committee , n.d.).

School Nutrition and Food Choices

In addition to regulating physical education, the Healthy Students Act requires the State Board of Education to adopt regulations that address food choices, preparation, and marketing. Specifically, the Board must "adopt regulations that address healthy food and beverage choices, marketing of healthy food choices to students and staff, healthy food preparation, food preparation ingredients and products, minimum and maximum time allotments for lunch and breakfast periods, the availability of food items during lunch and breakfast periods, and methods to increase participation in the child nutrition school breakfast and lunch programs" (S.B. 2369, Mississippi 2007, enacted).

In 2009, nutritionists from the University of Mississippi conducted nutritionist visits to over 100 Mississippi schools to examine the nutrition environments and see how those environments may have changed since the enactment of the Healthy Students Act. Ninety to 100% of Mississippi schools have complied with numerous nutritional standards set by the Act. Nevertheless, the Center reports that there are still twelve nutrition standards with less than 50% compliance with stated goals. The standards with low compliance include serving fresh vegetables at all observed lunches, having at least



one product labeled "0" grams trans fat in both lunch and breakfast menus, eliminating fryers from kitchen operations, and serving recommended dark green and/or orange vegetables or fruits three times per week (Center for Mississippi Health Policy, 2010).

The Healthy Students Act also includes regulations for vending machines, snack bars and student stores that were phased in over two years beginning with the 2007-2008 school year. Under the regulations, only bottled water, low-fat or non-fat milk, and 100% fruit juices can be sold to Mississippi students during the school day. Zero calorie or low calorie beverages and light juices/sports drinks can be sold only in high schools. Full-calorie, sugared carbonated soft drinks cannot be sold to students in Mississippi schools during the school day. Standards for snack items vary by the type of snack product, and the Department of Education maintains a list of products meeting state standards (S.B. 2369, Mississippi 2007, enacted).

Results from the Center for Mississippi Health Policy's Year One Report show that school administrators work with the vending industry to ensure compliance with the Healthy Students Act, and this relationship has kept vending products in Mississippi schools in compliance. However, the report found a few instances where vending machine contents were found to be out of compliance. School administrators reported that noncompliance was, in most cases, due to misinterpretation of specifications in relation to beverage flavorings and variable portion sizes of acceptable items (Center for Mississippi Health Policy, 2010).

Health Education

The Mississippi Board of Education policy requires 45 minutes per week of health education for grades K-8 and ½ Carnegie Unit (60 hours of study) per year for grades 9-12 (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010). The Mississippi Comprehensive Health Framework serves as a guideline for Health teachers. The framework provides minimum content standards to ensure that all students gain the information and skills necessary to make quality age appropriate health decisions (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).



Healthy Schools

The Healthy Students Act mandated that minimum requirements for health education be defined (S.B. 2369, Mississippi 2007, enacted). As a result, much higher percentages of students now receive health education, from classroom teachers, nurses, PE teachers, and certified staff than before the Act's passage. The Year One Report listed two significant improvements in 2008: 1) percentage of schools with 75 to 100% of students receiving health education (75.9% in 2008 vs. 38.4% in 2006) and 2) percentage of schools with 75 to 100% of health education taught by classroom teachers (61.1% in 2008 vs. 38.2% in 2006) (Center for Mississippi Health Policy, 2010).

School Health Services

Another measure of a school's healthiness is the types of services it offers its students. The CDC and the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) agree that a school nurse should be responsible for no more than 750 students' medical needs. The NASN study showed a 1:750 or better student-to-nurse ratio was related to decreased absenteeism and increased graduation rates. In 2010, Mississippi's State Department of Education noted improvement over the 2008 school year with the number of school nurses increasing from 419 to 482, with only two school districts not employing any school nurses. Mississippi's student-to-nurse ratio is one nurse for 1040 students falls short of the optimal ratio of one nurse for every 750 students. This is particularly important, given that the majority of Mississippi counties do not have a pediatrician. The good news is that the State Department of Education data shows that, where Mississippi schools have nurses, they are effective in enabling children to stay in school. According to a study by the State Department of Education, 85% of children and 86% of school staff seeking care from a school nurse are able to return to the classroom the same day (Center for Mississippi Health Policy, 2009).

"The ultimate solutions to improved childhood health and subsequent health of the nation and the world will occur when true and real primary prevention, fully utilizing comprehensive, sequential, coordinated school health education becomes the norm rather than the exception and when meaningful parental involvement in schools increases exponentially and when we as a nation are willing to make the long-term investment in health promotion and disease prevention as an equivalent part of the overall education experience of all children."

Edward Hill, M.D., Program Director of Family Medicine Residency Center, North Mississippi Medical Center

Nurse/Student Ratio per School District, 2009

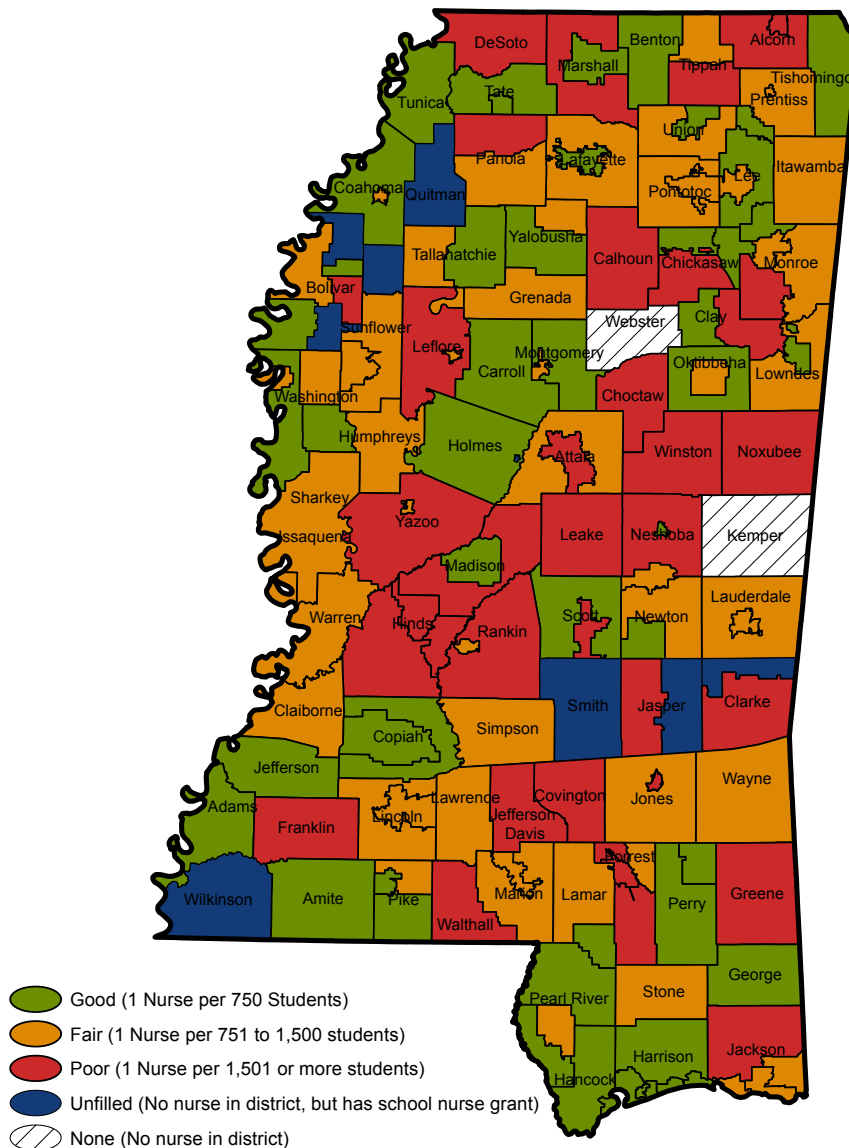


Figure 6

Source: MS State Department of Health; The Bower Foundation

In Mississippi, 482 nurses were employed by the public school system during the 2009-2010 school year. Thus the average across all school districts was 3.2 school nurses per district and a nurse to student ratio of one nurse for every 1,040 students. Fifty one of Mississippi's school districts are in the "good" category (one nurse per 750 students), while 52 are in the "fair" category (one nurse per 751 – 1,500 students) and 38 school districts are in the "poor" category (one nurse per 1,501 or more students). Two school districts, Kemper County and Webster County, have no school nurses. A total of eight school districts had unfilled school nurse positions in 2009 (Mississippi State Department of Health, 2010).

Pediatricians, 2010

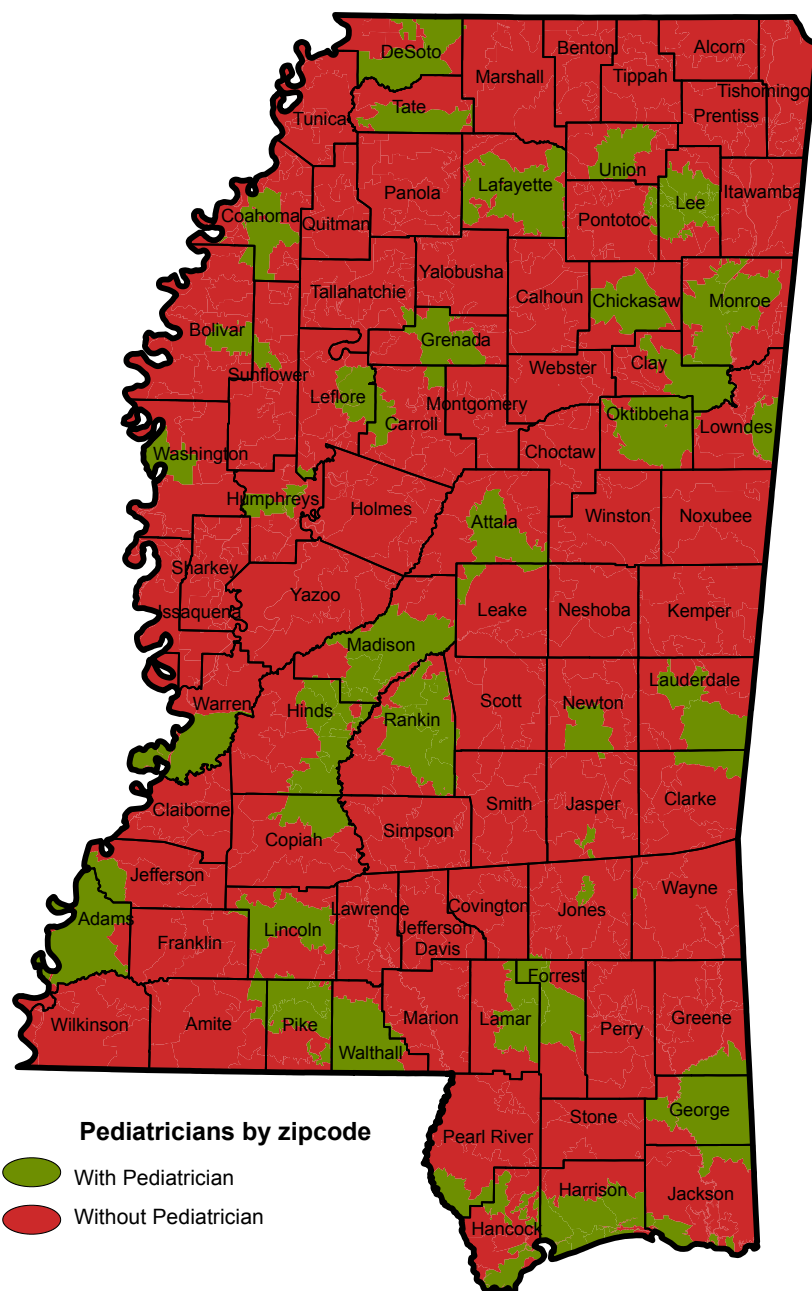


Figure 7

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, Healthy Children

Almost three quarters (71.2%) of Mississippi's communities did not have a pediatrician in 2010 (per zip code area). (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.).

Physical Activity Outside of Physical Education

States can ensure that students participate in physical activity in a number of ways: through physical education and physical activity periods, recess, programs that encourage walking and biking to school and organized after-school sports. The Healthy Students Act created a statewide policy for Mississippi schools' physical education programs, but the state lacks any comprehensive policies on these less formal types of physical activity (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.).



Physical Activity Periods

The United States Department of Health and Human Services provides basic guidelines concerning the amount and type of physical activity that best promote child and adolescent health. According to the HHS guidelines, children and adolescents should:

- Participate in one hour or more of physical activity per day, most of which should be moderate or vigorous aerobic physical activity
- Participate in vigorous physical activity at least three days a week
- Participate in muscle-strengthening activities three days a week (examples include push-ups, sit-ups, and tug-of-war)
- Participate in bone-strengthening activities at least three days a week (examples include jumping rope, hopping, and running) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)

Healthy Schools

States often ensure that students are receiving adequate physical activity by mandating physical activity periods in addition to physical education. In Louisiana, schools are statutorily required to provide each student in Kindergarten through eighth grade with a minimum of 30 minutes per day of moderate to rigorous physical activity in addition to 150 minutes per week of mandatory physical education (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010). Similarly, Oklahoma requires public elementary schools to provide 60 minutes each week of physical activity above and beyond an average of 60 minutes per week of physical education. Schools can meet this requirement through extra physical education, exercise programs, fitness breaks, or recess, among other options (S.B. 1168, Oklahoma 2008, enacted).

Mississippi schools have resources beyond legislative intervention. One low-cost way to provide extra physical activity for students during school hours is to have teachers incorporate physical activity into classroom lessons. Note: Mississippi KIDS COUNT offers the following only as examples of additional resources for Mississippi's schools, but encourages schools to coordinate their efforts with Mississippi's Office of Healthy Schools for additional resources.

Several resources are available for teachers and administrators interested in trying this strategy:

- The Michigan Department of Education's physical activity idea book for elementary school teachers, **Brain Breaks** (<http://www.emc.cmich.edu/brainbreaks/>) is available for free online and includes activities that advance learning in math, science, social studies, and language arts (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.).
- An organization called **Active Academics** © (<http://www.activeacademics.org/about.asp>) also provides a website for teachers with activity-based classroom lessons and ideas for short "classroom energizers" for use in between longer lessons (Active Academics, n.d.).
- Action for Healthy Kids created the **ReCharge! Energizing After-School** (<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/recharge/>) in collaboration with the National Football League as an after-school program, but teachers can also implement the free-of-charge program during the school day. Geared toward elementary school students, The ReCharge! Kit includes teamwork-based lesson plans that focus on nutrition, physical activity, and goal setting, as well as equipment for those lessons and educational information for families (Recharge!, n.d.).

Walking and Biking to School

Mississippi receives federal funding for a **Safe Routes to School** program to encourage students to walk or bike to school, turning their daily commute into an opportunity for exercise. In addition to challenging students to walk or bike, school districts that receive SRTS funding generally audit the safety of streets around schools, improve the condition of sidewalks near schools, and use devices to calm traffic and prioritize pedestrians (Mississippi Department of Transportation, n.d.). Mississippi's Department of Transportation administers the funds for this program.

School Nutrition and Food Choices

Schools can implement various policies and programs to improve their food environments and promote healthy food choices among students. By requiring food sold and served at school to meet nutritional standards, or by implementing a farm-to-school program, schools help students learn about healthy food options and guide them toward making healthy decisions.

School Food Sales

Many states create healthy food environments by ensuring that the food sold on campus, including in vending machines, is nutritious. These policies include specifying what, when, and where food can be sold. The National Association of State Boards of Education considers Mississippi's current policy on school food sales exemplary (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.).

Farm to School Programs

Farm-to-School programs, a partnership between schools and local farms, provide students with fresh produce while creating a unique educational opportunity for students to learn about the source of their food. Research shows that children choose more servings of fruits and vegetables when offered farm fresh options (University of California, n.d.). They are also more likely to eat fruits and vegetables, "especially unfamiliar items, if they participate in fun educational activities featuring these foods" (Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, n.d.). Farm-to-School programs have the added benefit of supporting the local agricultural economy and do not necessarily add to a school's food budget. Schools can purchase local produce with federal reimbursement money when the produce is served in a federally-funded school meals program. Schools can additionally apply for a number of private grants to help fund the program



Healthy Schools

(Farm to School, n.d.). Farm-to-school programs may also include activities that provide students with hands-on learning opportunities, such as farm visits, cooking demonstrations, and school gardening and composting programs” (National Association of State Boards of Education , n.d.).

Although Mississippi has a farm-to-school program, it is not one of the 33 states that have passed legislation regarding the programs (Farm to School, n.d.). Farm-to-school legislation comes in a variety of forms: it can detail project implementation, create a task force or council, create an official state fund or detail budget appropriations, allocate grant money, or simply encourage farm to school programs, among other options.



Beyond legislation, Mississippi schools have access to several helpful resources with information on succeeding with farm-to-school programs. The **National Farm-to-School Program** (<http://www.farmtoschool.org/>), a collaborative project of the Center for Food and Justice, Occidental College, and the Community Food Security Coalition, provides support for farm-to-school programs through fundraising and providing technical assistance in creating and sustaining a farm to school program (Joshi, Kalb, and Beery, 2006).

The **Growing Minds** website (<http://growing-minds.org/>), created by the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, offers resources for planning and implementing school gardening programs, farm field trips, and nutrition education as well as tips for a successful farm-to-school program (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, n.d.).

Other Nutrition-Based Programs

In addition to programs mentioned above that promote healthy food options in schools, there are also many programs that help educators and school administrators promote healthy activities and increase knowledge about health and nutrition among students.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service’s **Team Nutrition** (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/grants/tnt00.html>) supports Child Nutrition Programs through “training and technical assistance for food service, nutrition education for children and their caregivers, and school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity” (Team Nutrition, n.d.).

Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge (<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/school-programs/our-programs/game-on/>) is a free elementary school program created by Action for Healthy Kids that aims to make health “a part of the day-to-day culture” of the school, home, and community environments. The program involves a series of fun challenges, chosen by and tailored to each individual school, designed to encourage students and their families to “eat better” and “move more.” The goal of this program is to create lasting, positive behavior changes (Game On!, n.d.).



Health Education

Forty-seven states require that students receive health education through legislation that varies in specificity. Mississippi is one of 44 states that mandate health education for primary school students. Mississippi is also among the 31 states that require high school students to complete some health education in order to graduate (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.). The most successful health education policies are those that specify the amount of instruction time required. Mississippi currently requires 45 minutes per week of health education instruction in elementary and middle schools.

Counseling and Mental Health

Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards require each high school to provide student support services by a licensed guidance counselor working at a minimum of half-time. The Accountability Standards require each elementary school to provide services by qualified school personnel such as a guidance counselor, social worker, nurse, psychologist, psychometrist, etc. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2006). Section 37-9-79 of the Mississippi Code lists the counseling services guidance counselors are required to provide (Mississippi Code Ann. § 37-9-79, 2010). They include academic and personal/social counseling, career and educational counseling, crisis intervention and preventive counseling, and conflict resolution (S.B. 2441, Mississippi 2002, enacted).

Many states mandate that schools, including Mississippi, provide counseling and mental health services. Such programs may include the identification of students with mental or emotional disorders, substance abuse counseling, and suicide prevention (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.). Personnel at schools with such programs are often granted immunity from any civil liability that could result from providing mental health services. Mississippi has a policy regarding the provision of mental health counseling, but, as noted in **Figures 8 and 9**, rates of suicide and depression are high in the state so there may be more services or public awareness campaigns that the school counselors and communities can provide.

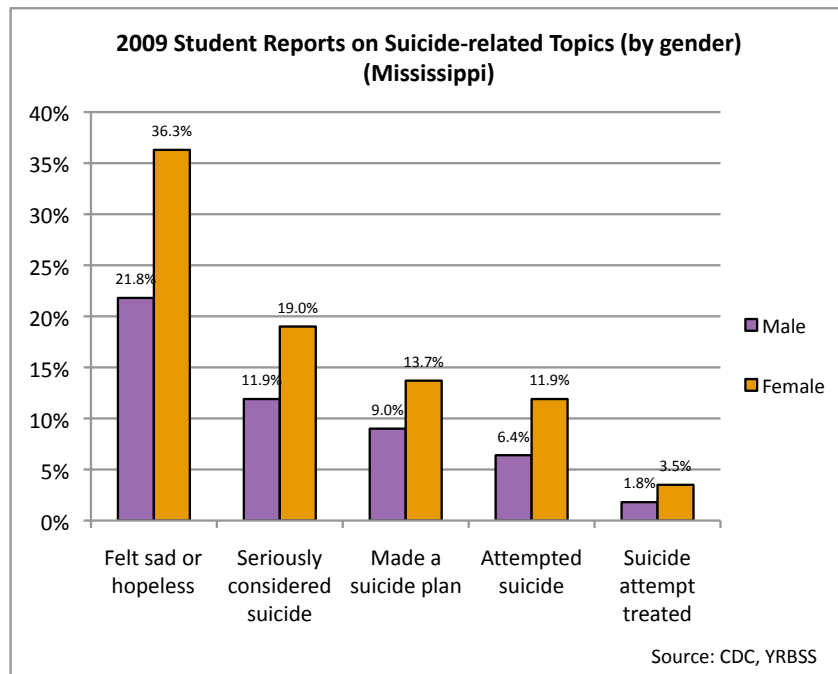


Figure 8

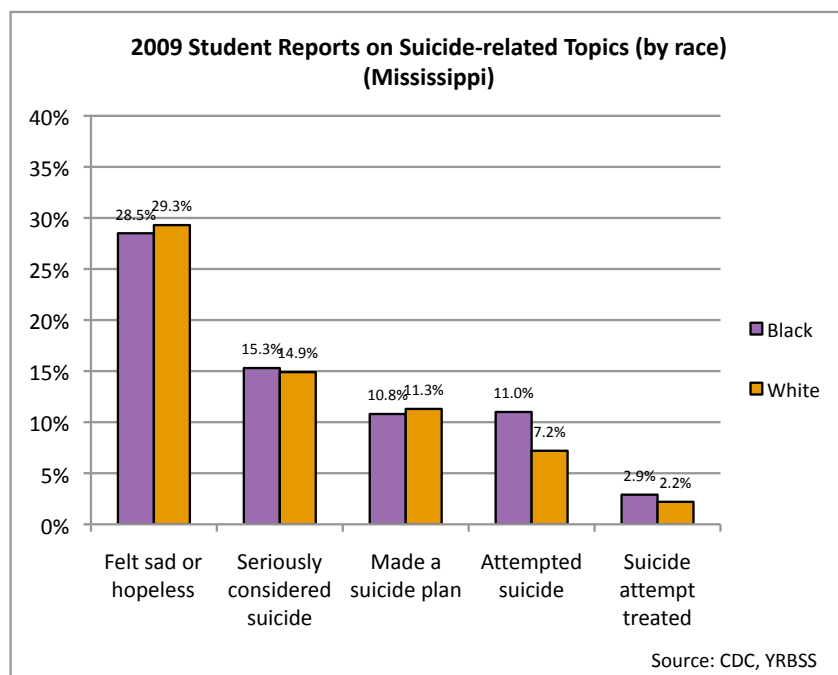


Figure 9

Schools in Arkansas, for example, are required to provide consultation and counseling to parents, students and school personnel, and “school counselors must spend 75% of their work time each week providing direct counseling related to students” (Arkansas CODE 6 18 1005, 2005). Schools also must provide social work services for students with attendance, behavior, and learning issues, including identification and evaluation of those issues (Arkansas CODE 6 18 1005, 2005). The Code also requires that schools implement suicide prevention public awareness programs, and grants school personnel immunity from any civil liability that might arise from providing good faith assistance to suicidal students (Arkansas CODE 6-17-107(b), 1991).

In Louisiana, schools are statutorily required to screen each child for “the existence of impediments to a successful school experience at least once in grades K-3” unless his or her parent objects (Louisiana Rev. Stat. 17:392.1, 1999). Furthermore, if a public or private primary or secondary school identifies any student as having a substance abuse issue, that student must enter a drug counseling program (Louisiana Rev. Stat. 17:404, 1994). Schools also offer suicide prevention services which may include individual, family, and group counseling, referral, crisis intervention, and training for school personnel (Louisiana Rev. Stat. 17:282, 2001).

Public and Private Support in Addressing Mississippi's Obesity Challenges

It should be noted that the state of Mississippi, through the Healthy Students Act of 2007, as well as the support and leadership of groups such as, but certainly not limited to the following: The Bower Foundation, the Blue Cross & Blue Shield Foundation of Mississippi, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, and the work of the Office of Healthy Schools, and the Mississippi Department of Education have made tremendous strides during the past several years to improve the health environments of schools within Mississippi. In addition, work across the state, through many efforts at both the district and community levels (both private and public entities) are beginning to see returns on investments. Also noteworthy is the 11 minute video, **Leading by Example: Mississippi Lawmakers Get Fit**. Produced by The Center for Mississippi Health Policy, the video highlights members of the Mississippi legislature, staff members from the Legislature and Governor's office who participated in a 12 week fitness program. Highlights from the video include the following from several Mississippi legislators:

“There’s no doubt the better physical condition you’re in, the better mental condition you’re in. But we normally don’t think of it in those terms, till it started happening.” Senator Videt Carmichael

“There is no greater problem really in the state of Mississippi than obesity. We’re just not a state that has a culture of wellness, and we decided that we were going to show the state of Mississippi that we as your leaders can do it, and it has been spreading like wildfire.” Representative Steve Holland

“It’s not just about losing weight, it’s about setting an example for your children, it’s about lifestyle changes, it’s about bringing people to the dinner table again instead of eating fast food on the way to the next soccer game.” Senator Terry C. Burton

Healthy Schools

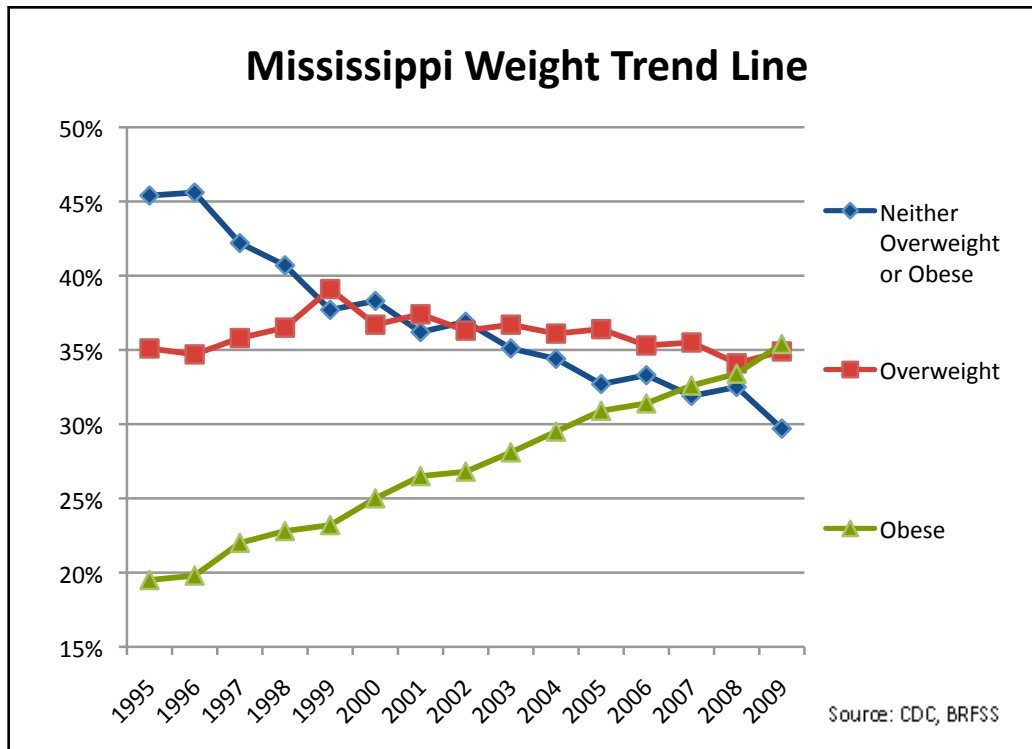


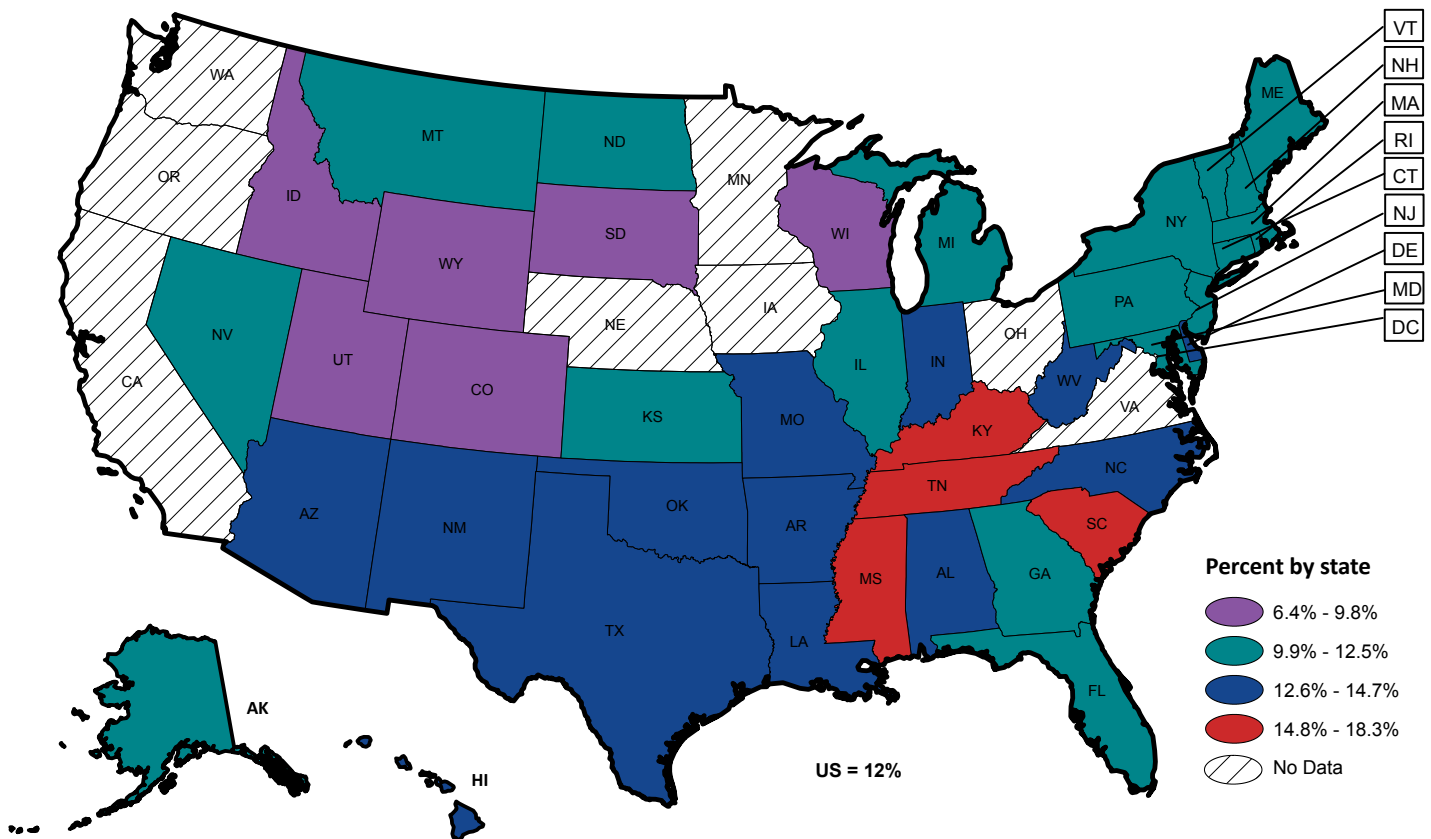
Figure 10

Data Section

The Mississippi Healthy Students Act of 2007 was enacted to address childhood obesity through school policies on physical activity, nutrition, and health education. In 2009 (Year One) and 2010 (Year Two), The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded studies by the Childhood Obesity Research Team at the Social Science Research Center of Mississippi State University to assess the implementation of this legislation. The studies are surveying students, parents, and local, district, and state policy makers and compared those findings across years to track changes related to the legislation (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

In 1995, 19.5% of Mississippi adults self-reported as being obese. By 2009 that percentage had increased to 35.4% (Note: In the BRFSS telephone survey adults are asked to provide their height and weight and the BMI is calculated). Correspondingly, while almost half of Mississippi adults were neither overweight nor obese in 1995, by the year 2009 that percentage had dropped to less than a third (29.7%). **Mississippi adults were overweight or obese (70.3%) in 2009** (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, n.d.).

Prevalence of Teen Obesity (grades 9-12), 2009



* Data is self-reported

Source: CDC, Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance System (YRBSS)

Figure 11

Teenage obesity is more prevalent in the southeastern United States. Among U.S. teenagers (grades 9-12), 12% are obese. The state of Mississippi continues to lead the nation, with almost one fifth (18.3%) of students in grades 9-12 being obese (defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as having a body mass index in the 95th percentile or greater). The percentages for other southeastern states are: Kentucky (17.6%), South Carolina (16.7%), Tennessee (15.8%), Louisiana (14.7%), and Arkansas (14.4%). The lowest ranked states were: Utah with 6.4%, Colorado with 7.1%, and Idaho with 8.8% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Healthy Schools

Percentage of Parents Who Were Obese (self-report data), 2010

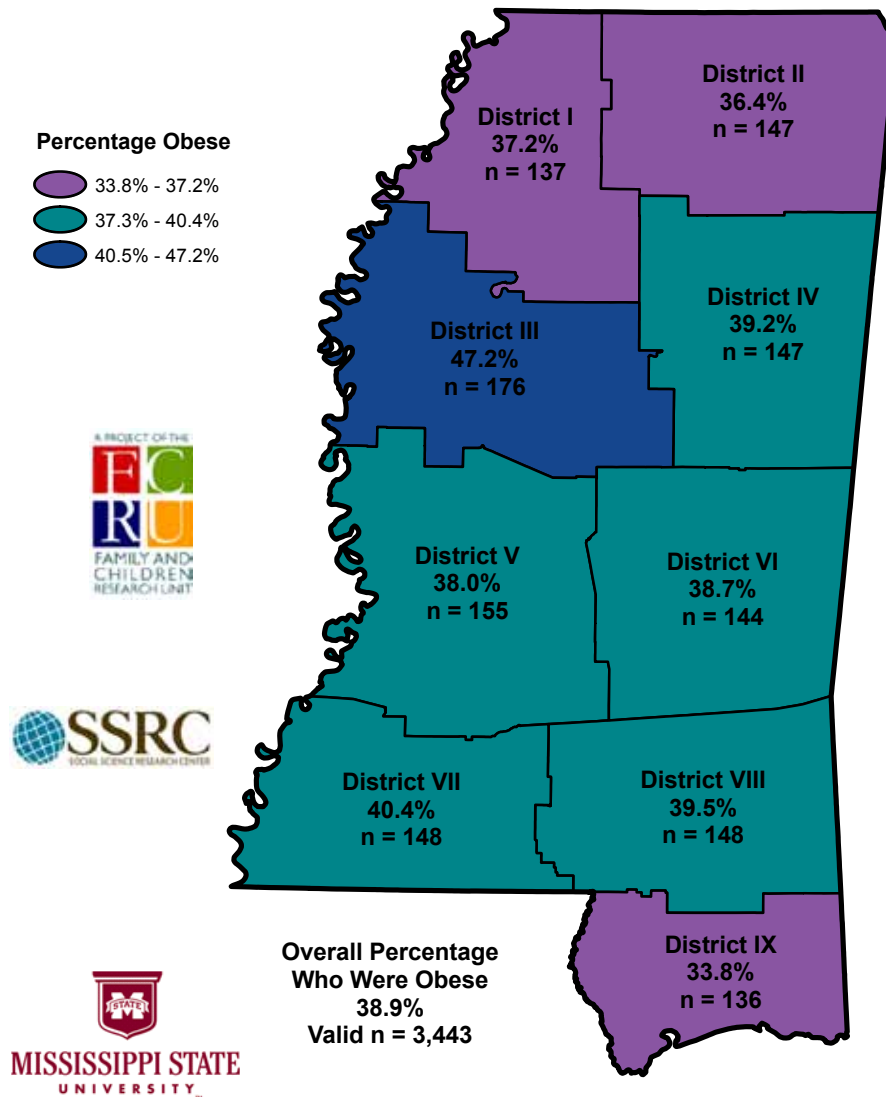


Figure 12

Source: Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010

The following maps/graphs (Figures 12-18) are from Year 2 of the Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010. All parents were asked to report their height and weight during the survey. Obesity status was determined by calculating Body Mass Index (BMI) from this data, which is the indicator that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses for determining obesity. Results from the Year Two study showed that the average BMI for parents in seven out of the nine Mississippi health districts fell within the overweight range, and in two of those districts (Districts III and VII) the average BMI was within the obese range. Comparisons from Year One to Year Two indicated a statistically significant increase in the average BMI of parents (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

Percentage of School-aged Children (kindergarten - 12th graders) Who Were Overweight or Obese (self-reported by parents), 2010

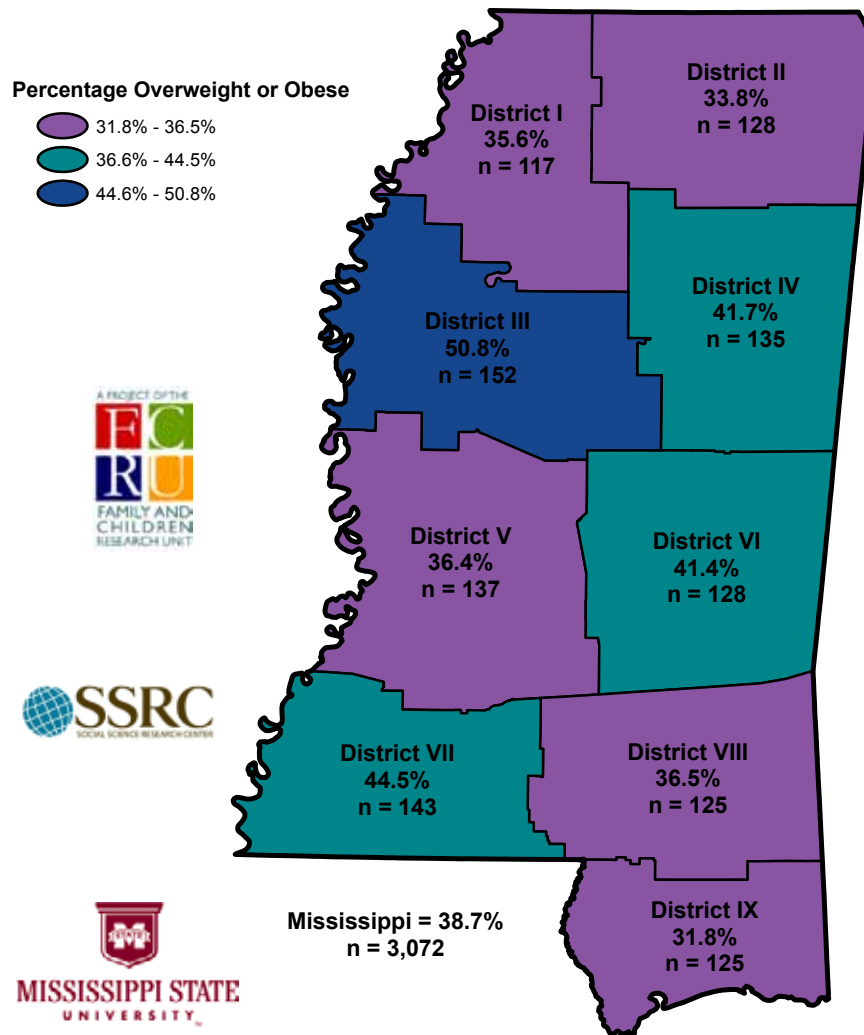


Figure 13

Source: Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010

All parents were asked to report their child's height and weight during the survey. Obesity status was determined by calculating Body Mass Index (BMI) from this data, which is the indicator that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses for determining obesity. Results from the Year Two study indicated that 5-6 year olds were more likely to be reported by their parents as obese or overweight (60%) than older children, based on BMI calculations. Further, the study found that children whose BMI fell within normal weight range were more likely to earn grades of mostly A's and B's (58%) compared to obese children (20%), according to parent reports (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

Healthy Schools

Some Schools Collect Information on Children's Height and Weight and Give Parents a Report. Are You in Favor of This? (self-report data), 2010

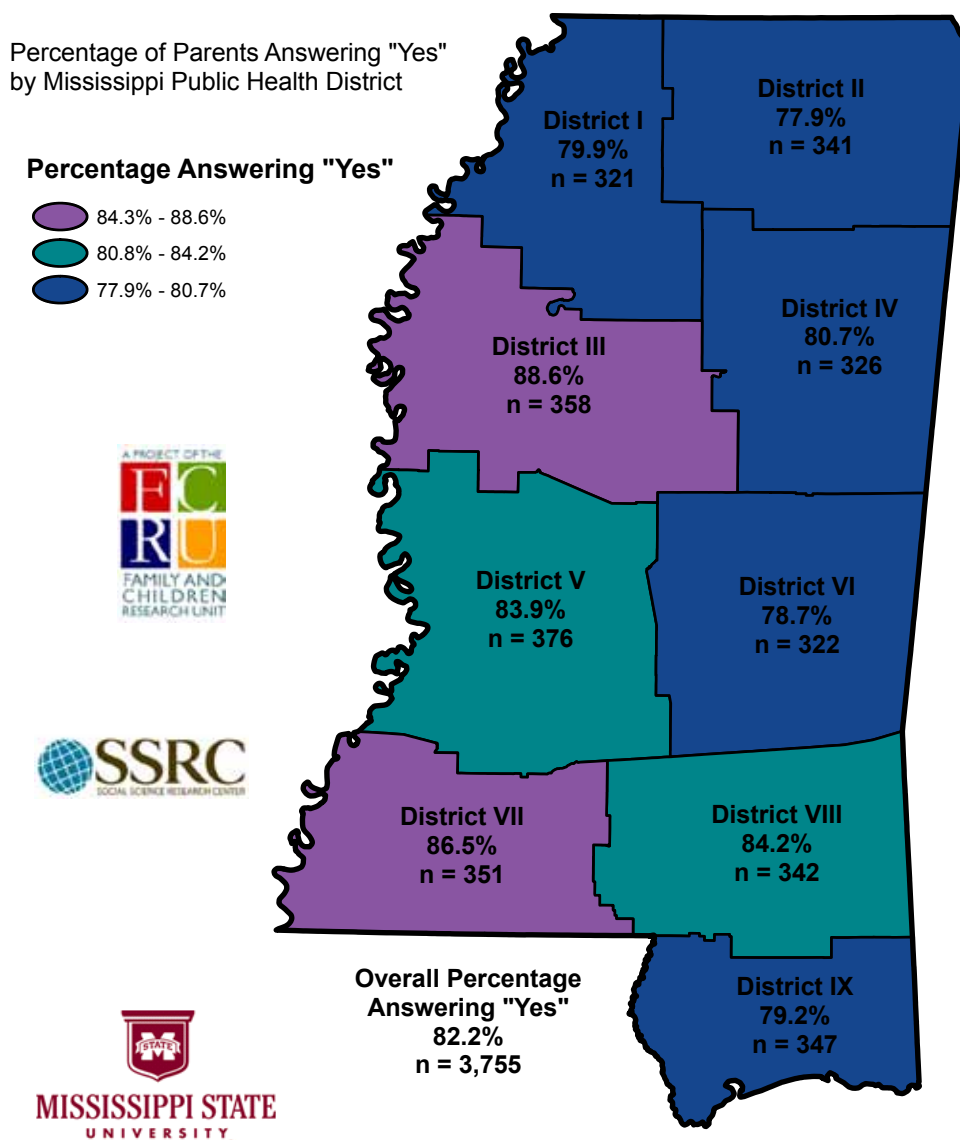


Figure 14

Source: Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010

All parents were asked to report whether they were in favor of schools collecting information on children's height and weight (BMI data) and reporting that information to parents. Overall, the vast majority of parents in the Year Two study reported being in favor of this, with the highest support being 88.6% (District III) and the lowest being 78.7% (District VI). Statewide support in Year Two was similar to that in Year One (82.2% and 85.3%, respectively; Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

In the Past Year, Have You Increased His/Her Exercise or Physical Activity? (self-report data),
2010

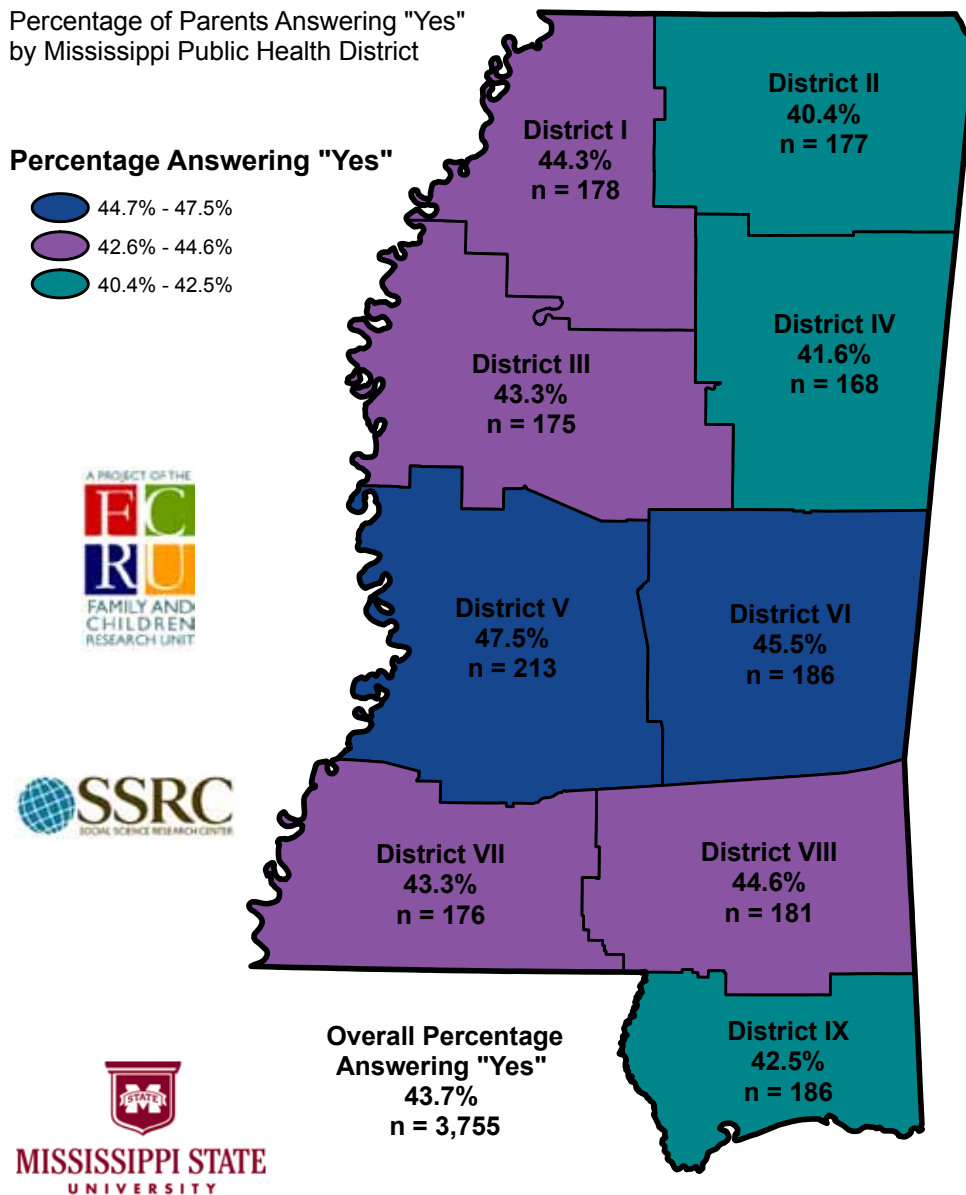


Figure 15

Source: Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010

All parents were asked to report whether they increased their child's exercise or physical activity in the last year. In the Year Two study, 43.7% of parents reported that they had increased exercise or physical activity for their children, a decrease from 52% in the Year One study. Across districts, this number ranged from 40.4% to 47.5% in Year Two (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

Healthy Schools

Are you aware of any changes in vending machines, school lunch choices, or physical exercise requirements at his/her school?

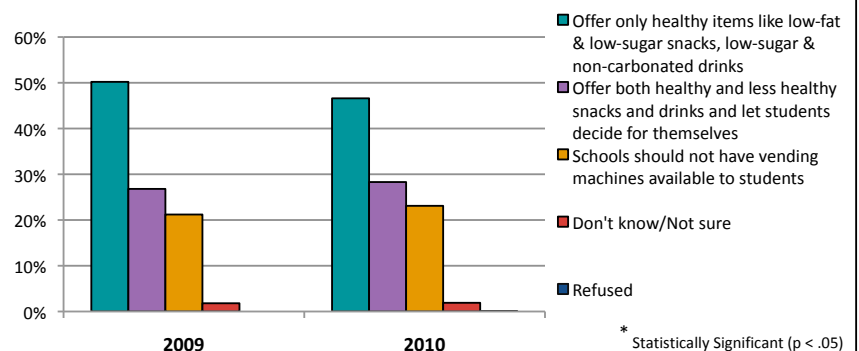
RESPONSE	2009	%	2010	%	Percent Change
Yes	1,634	44.0	1385	36.9	-7.1
No	1,959	52.8	2329	62.0	9.2
Not sure	114	3.1	41	1.0	-2.1
Refused	3	0.1	0	0.0	-0.1
Total	128	100	217	100	

Parent survey question: Are you aware of any changes in vending machines, school lunch choices, or physical exercise requirements at his/her school?

Figure 16

When asked about changes in school vending machines, lunches, or physical exercise requirements, 36.9% of parents in Year Two reported that they were aware of such changes in their child's school, a decrease from 44% in Year One (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

Which of the following BEST expresses your belief about the foods and beverages that should be offered to students in vending machines at school?



Would you be in favor of sending the children's fitness testing information to their parents?

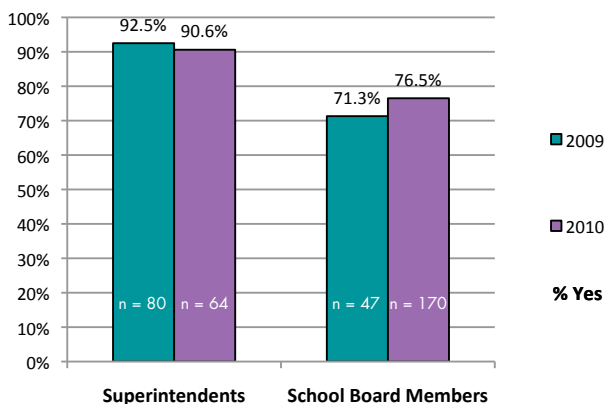


Figure 17

When asked about reporting fitness testing information (BMI data) taken by the schools to parents, the majority of both school board members (76.5% in Year Two and 71.3% in Year One) and school board superintendents (90.6% in Year Two and 92.5% in Year One, respectively) indicated that they would be in favor of this practice (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

Figure 18

The Child and Youth Prevalance of Obesity Survey (CAYPOS) was begun in 2003 and has been repeated in 2005, 2007, and 2009 by researchers at the University of Southern Mississippi. Results are based upon actual physical measurements (height and weight) of school-aged children, as opposed to self-report. One of the study's primary findings was that among public school students, the overall obesity rate in 2009 was 23.9%. This was slightly higher than 23.5% in 2007, but lower than 25.5% when measured in 2005. Obesity is defined as having a Body Mass Index (BMI) at or greater than the 95th percentile for students' age and gender (Molaison et al., 2010).

Obesity Rates by Grade Level (CAYPOS Study)

In the above chart, the blue line denotes elementary age students (K-5th grade), with 24.1% being obese in 2009, a decrease from 2007 (25.3%) and 2005 (25%). The red line represents middle school students (grades 6-8), reflecting 25.4% obese, an increase from 2007 (22.8%), but much lower than the 2005 measure of 29%. For high school students (grades 9-12), 22.3% were obese in 2009, an increase from 2007 (20.8%), but still less than the 2005 measure of 23.1% (Molaison et al., 2010).

Obesity Rates by Race (CAYPOS Study)

In 2009, among White students in all grades (K-12), 19.5% were found to be obese compared to 27.4% of Nonwhite students. The difference of 7.9% between the two groups is statistically significant (Molaison et al., 2010).

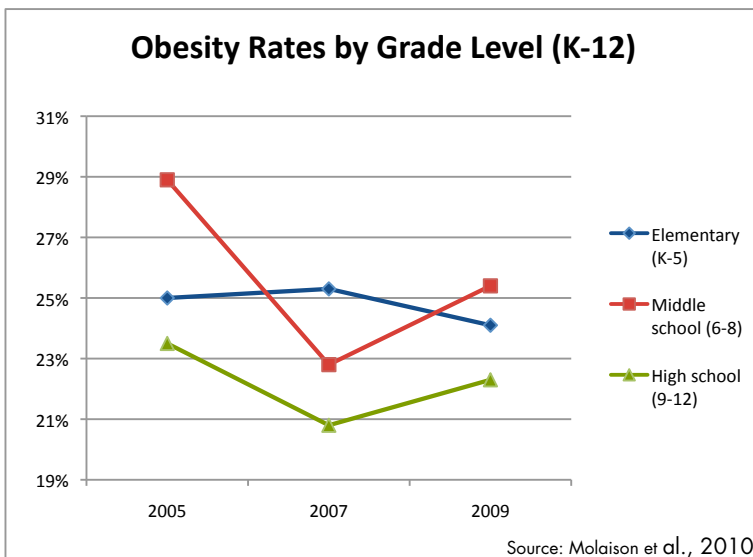


Figure 19

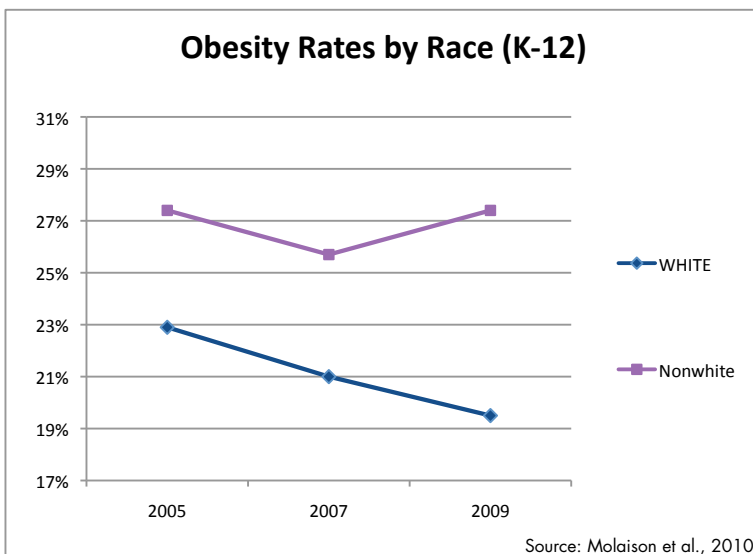


Figure 20

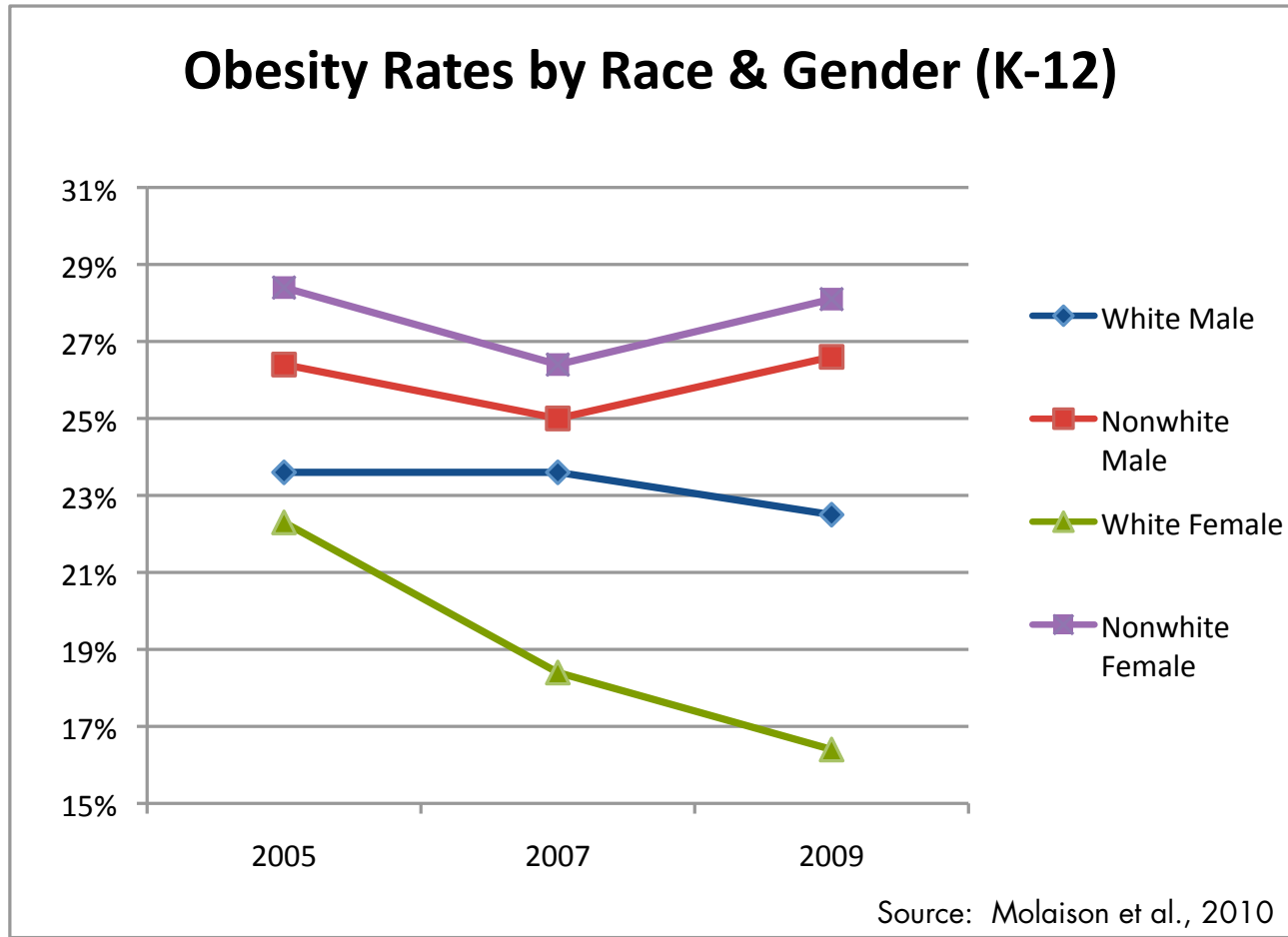


Figure 21

Obesity Rate by Race and Gender (CAYPOS Study)

Among Nonwhite females in Mississippi (K-12), 28.1% were obese in 2009. Among Nonwhite males (K-12), 26.6% were obese. Among White students (K-12), 22.5% of males and 16.4% of females were obese in 2009. The difference between Nonwhite females and Nonwhite males compared to White females was statistically different.

(Note: Nonwhite is considered a close measure for African American because 93% of Nonwhite students were African American, obese is defined as having a Body Mass Index (BMI) at or greater than the 95th percentile for their age and sex) (Molaison et al., 2010).

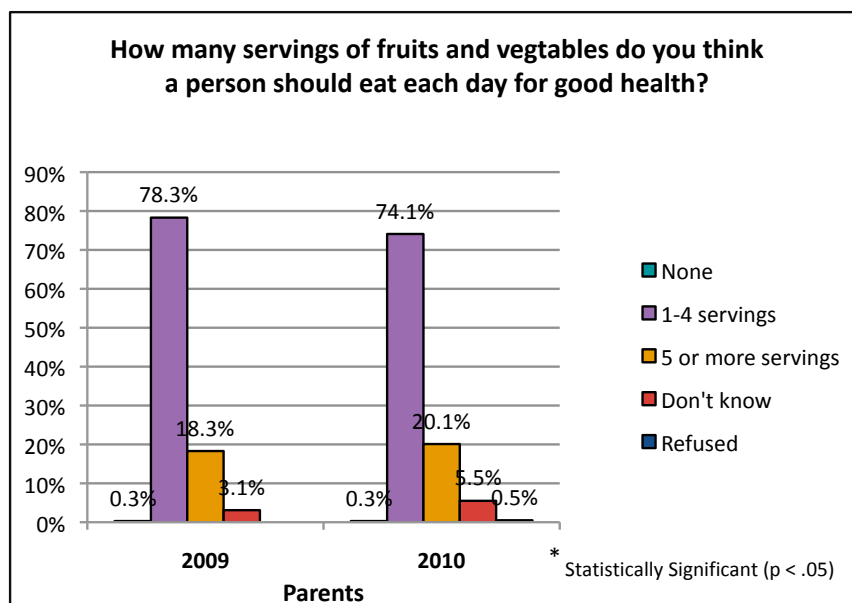


Figure 22: 2009 $n = 3,710$, 2010 $n = 3,755$

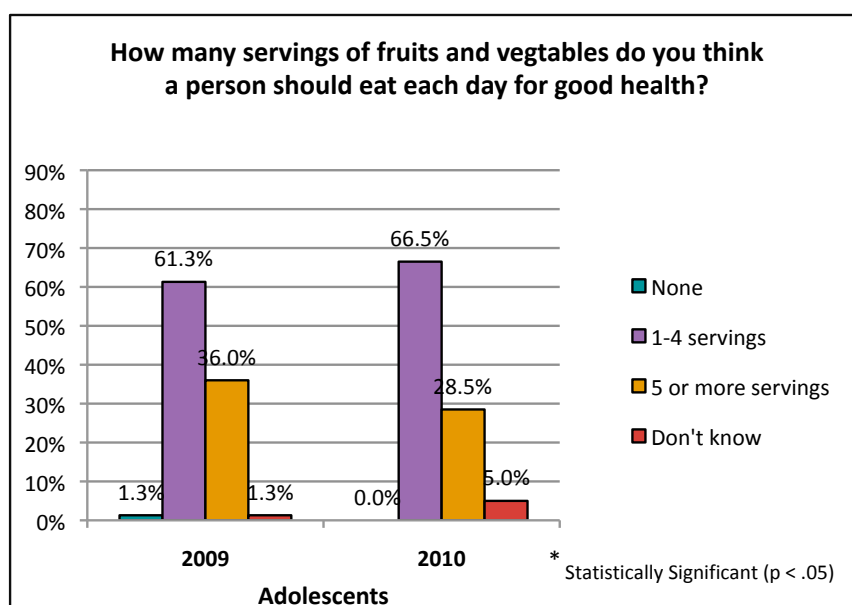


Figure 23: 2009 $n = 150$, 2010 $n = 260$

When asked how many servings of fruits and vegetables they believed an individual should eat each day, the vast majority of parents (74.1%) and youth (66.5%) reported 1-4 servings (Healthy Students Act of 2007 Policy Evaluation, 2010).

Healthy Schools

Combination Ovens, 2010

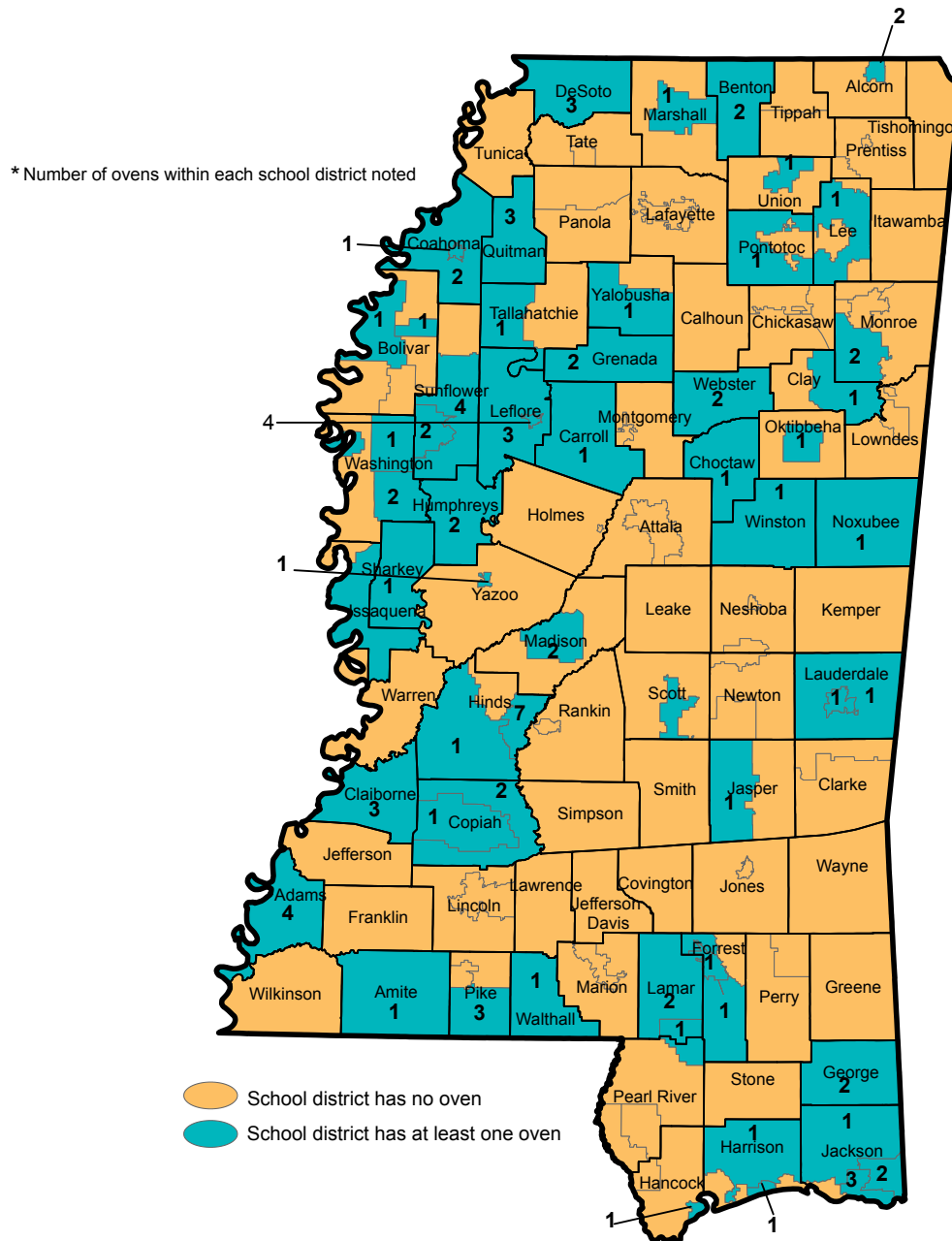


Figure 24

Source: P. Ammerman, Mississippi Office of Healthy Schools Purchasing and Food Distribution Division Director, personal communication, November 16, 2010

As an element of its Coordinated School Health Program, The Bower Foundation, the National School Lunch Program, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act have funded the replacement of deep fat fryers with combination ovens-steamers in the Mississippi School system. To date, the placement of 98 ovens in 58 different school districts has been funded “(P. Ammerman, Mississippi Office of Healthy Schools Purchasing and Food Distribution Division Director, personal communication, November 16, 2010).

Project Fit Equipment Locations, 2010

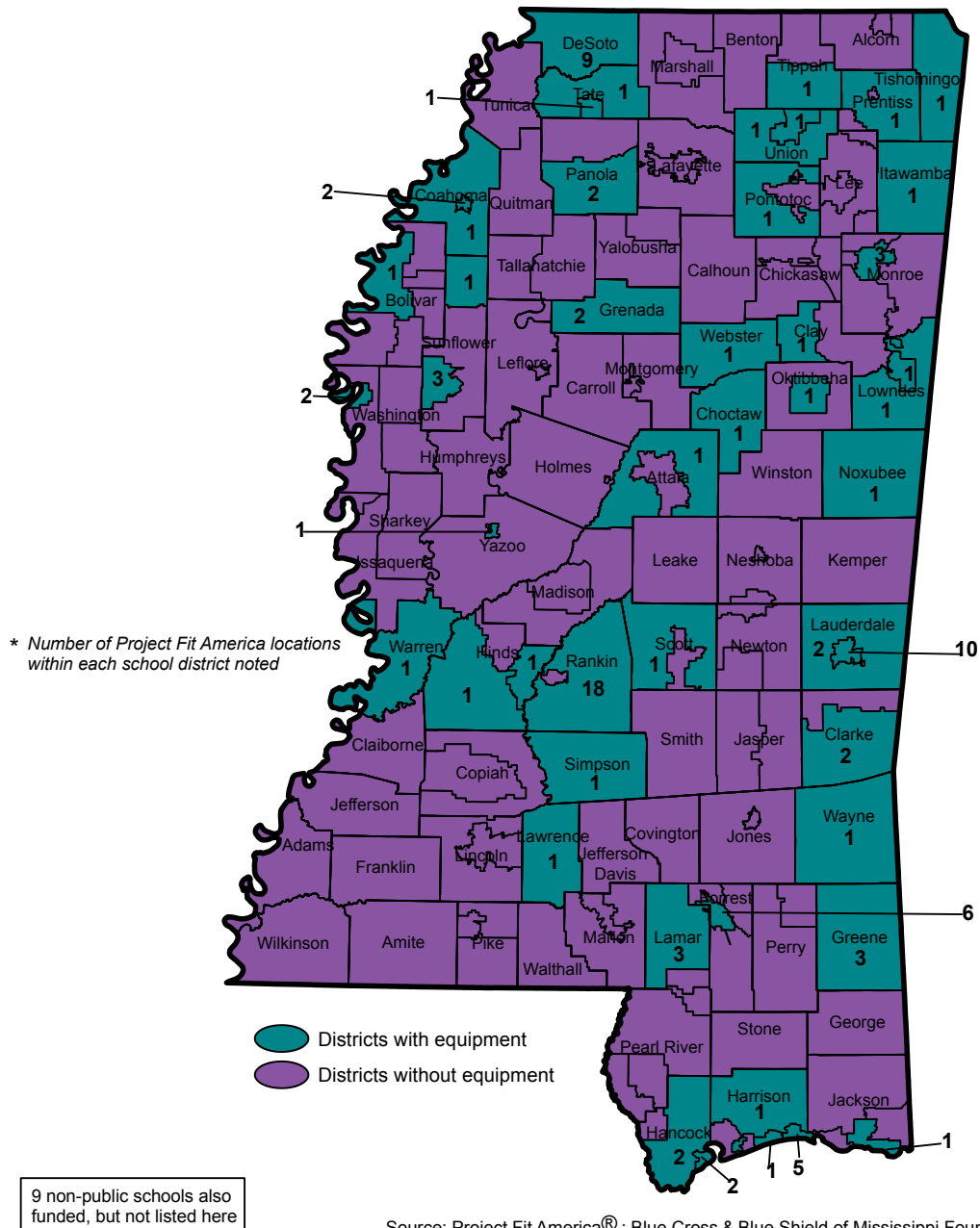
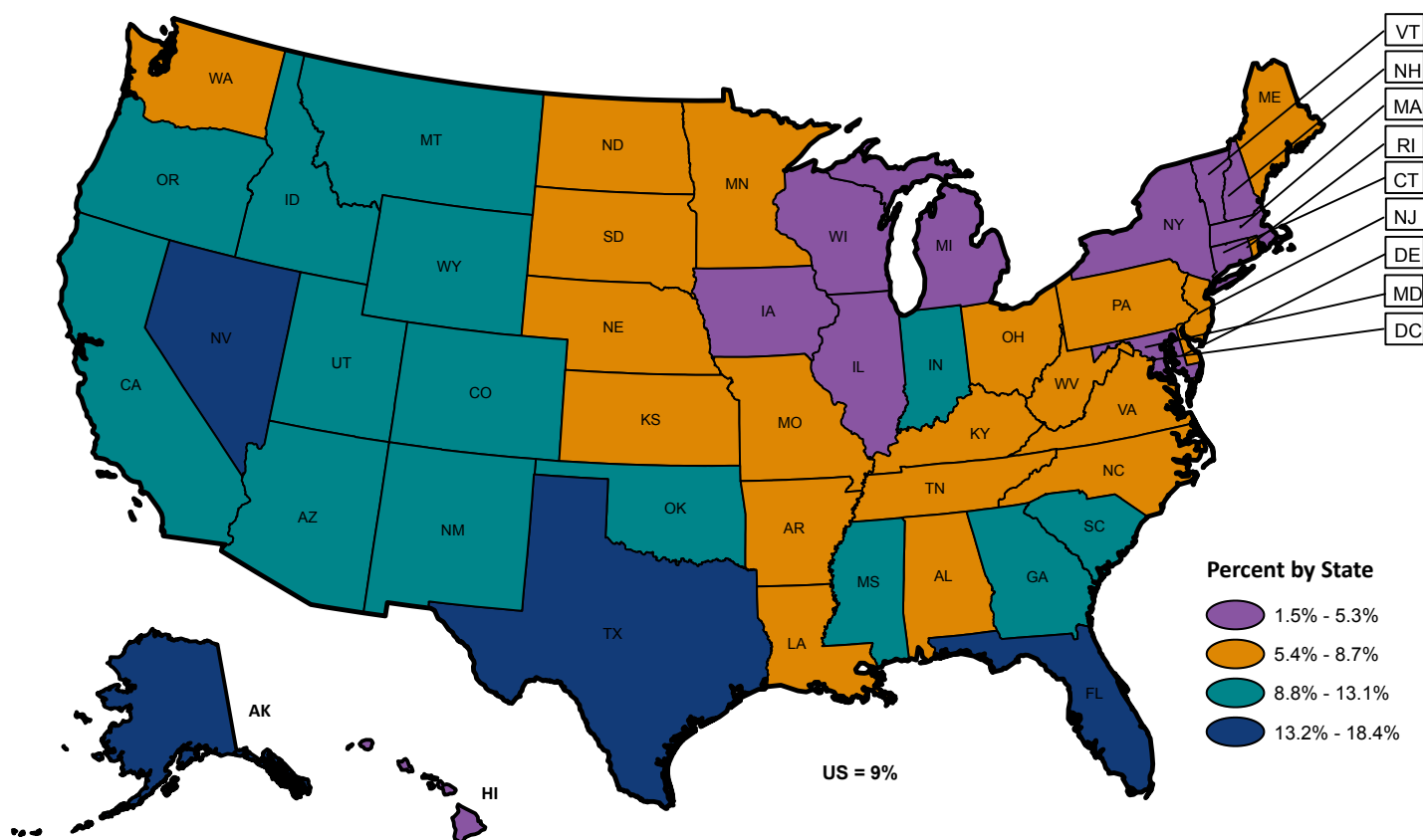


Figure 25

The Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation, in cooperation with Project Fit America (“a national non-profit charity dedicated to getting kids fit”), has donated 108 pieces of exercise equipment to 53 school districts in the state. Schools are the recipients of outdoor above-ground fitness equipment, indoor fitness equipment, curriculum, teacher training, lesson plan support materials and testing and evaluation (Project Fit America, n.d.).

Healthy Schools

Children (Under age 19) Without Health Insurance, 2009



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Figure 26

Nationally, 9% of children (under the age of 19) are not covered by any health insurance. Mississippi ranked 11th in the nation with 10.9% of children uninsured, just behind Georgia (11.6%). Percentages among Southern states are as follows: Florida was the highest (15.3%), followed by Louisiana (7.2%), Arkansas (7%), Tennessee (6.4%), and Alabama (6.2%). Nevada had the nation's highest percentage of uninsured children (18.4%), while Massachusetts had the lowest percentage (1.5%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Healthy Schools

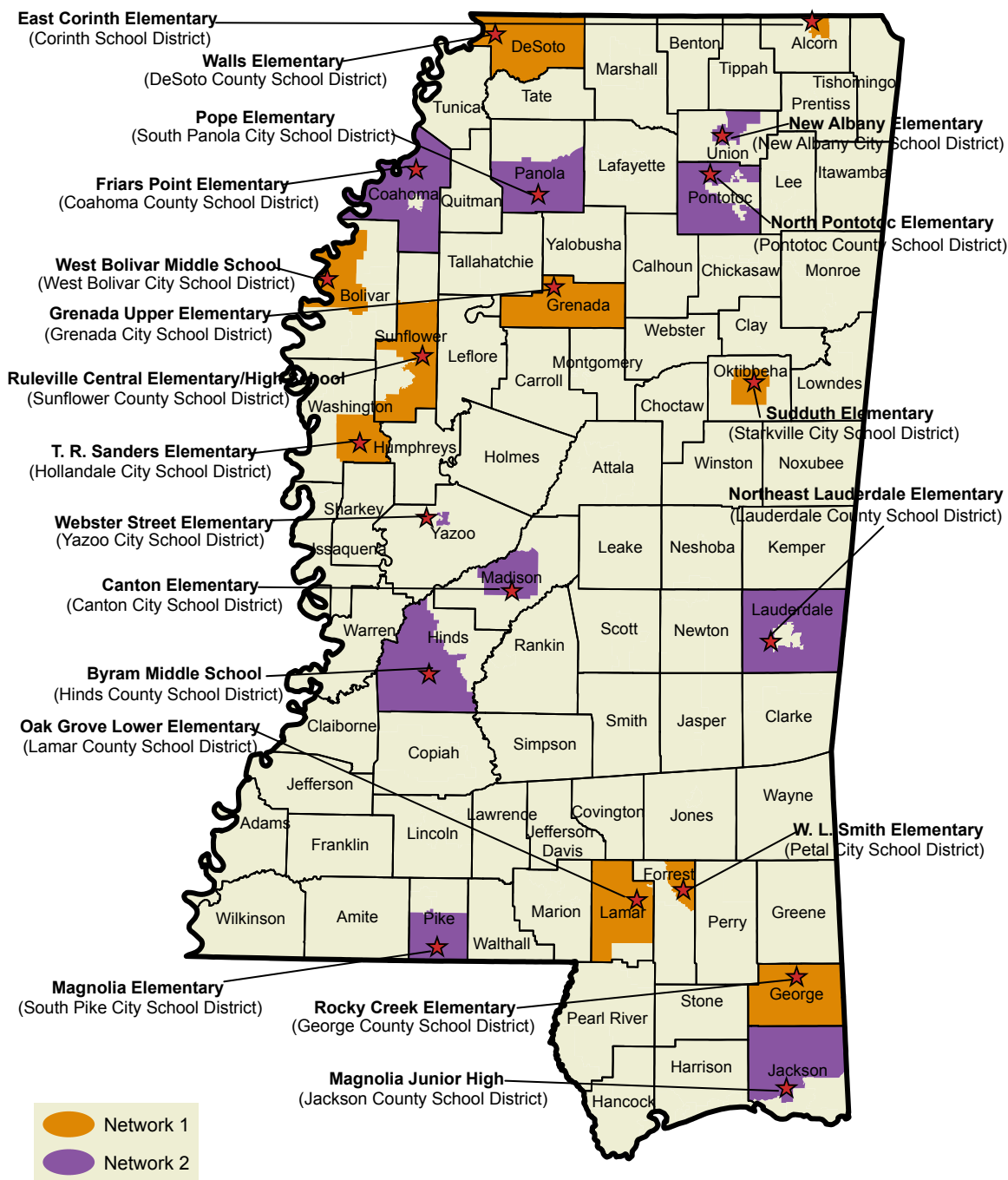
The John D. Bower School Health Network is a cooperative initiative between The Bower Foundation and the Mississippi Department of Education. The purpose is to implement the Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP), a coordinated and holistic program designed to assess and enhance the health of young children and adolescent students. To date 30 programs have been set up in predominantly elementary school in 20 schools districts. Network 1 schools were in the first round of funding, and Network 2 schools were in the most recent round of funding (J.D. Bower Foundation, 2009).

The networks include eight components:

1. Healthy school environment (built environment and social environment)
2. Health services (service to appraise, protect and promote health)
3. Health education (K-12 curriculum)
4. Physical education (K-12 curriculum)
5. Counseling, psychological and social services
6. Nutrition services (access to nutritious meals)
7. Family and community involvement (integrated school, parent and community involvement)
8. Health promotion for staff (health assessments, education and fitness activities)

Healthy Schools

John D. Bower School Health Networks, 2010



Source: J. D. Bower Foundation; MS Office of Healthy Schools

Figure 27

Policy Considerations

As noted above, some of the recent, positive policy changes at the state level include HB 1078 which provides incentives for schools to participate in the HealthierUS School Challenge and HB 1079, which requires comprehensive training on certain school food service practice. In addition, the State Board of Education now requires a three year plan to eliminate fried foods, reduce the fat content in milk to 1%; increase whole grain products to at least one serving three days/week.

Additional recommended policy considerations are needed to continue Mississippi's efforts to not only curb and reverse childhood obesity, but to also continue to improve the healthy school environments for children. These include:

- Issue fitness report cards each semester to parents of all school age children
- Implement all components of the Healthy Students Act of 2007 by all schools
- Increase access to mental health services to students within the school settings
- Fund school nurses to meet the nationally recognized ratio of one nurse per 750 students
- Implement to the extent possible, recess before lunch, as research indicates that children make healthier lunch choices
- Expand Safe Routes to School and Farm-to-School programs
- Implement screening, vision and oral health screening prior to entry to kindergarten or Pre-K

"Schools are to be commended for their commitment to the implementation of coordinated school health policies and programs. This integrated and collaborative effort improves opportunities for success in the classroom and beyond."

**Shane McNeill, Director, Office of Healthy Schools,
Mississippi Department of Education**

Healthy Schools

Success Story: Coordinated School Health Program New Albany School District

Many factors contribute to the overall health picture of children. When they are served nutritious meals, have opportunities for daily physical activity, feel safe in their environments and have access to health care, their chances of academic success are increased as well. In fact, studies have linked physical activity with an increased ability to concentrate in the classroom (Symons, Cinelli, James, and Groff, 1997) and an improvement in student scores in mathematics, reading, and writing (Sallis, McKenzie, Kolody, Lewis, Marshall, and Rosen-gard, 1999). Eliminating junk foods and substituting more nutritious choices in school cafeterias also may contribute to an increase in positive behaviors among students as well as an increase in concentration on school work (as cited in Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). It's kind of like the old fashioned game of "Connect the Dots." Eating healthy foods, participating in physical activity, having access to counseling services and physical health services all must be connected in order to provide a healthy environment for a child. When some of the "dots" are not connected, less than optimal results may occur.



In Mississippi where obesity and poverty rates are the highest in the country, many policy makers, communities, schools and families are connecting their "dots" in a collective effort to raise healthier generations. The passage of the Mississippi Healthy Students Act of 2007 jumpstarted the process when school districts were required to provide 150 minutes per week of physical activity-based instruction and 45 minutes per week of health education instruction for students in Kindergarten through the eighth grade (S.B. 2369, Mississippi 2007, enacted). Additionally, nutrition standards in Mississippi have increased, and the positive results are telling. In just a two year period, Mississippi increased the number of schools that do not allow soda or fruit drinks (other than 100% juice) from 22% to 75% (as cited in Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

In New Albany, a 4A school district in north Mississippi, promoting healthy lifestyles for students, staff and faculty is a way of life. "It's imperative that we teach our children those things that make them healthy individuals and then provide them an atmosphere that's conducive to the retention of that education," says Phil Nanney, Executive Director of the Union County Development Association. "From an economic developer's standpoint, if we don't have healthy kids, 20 years from now I don't have a healthy workforce." The development association is just one

Healthy Schools



Lance Evans, Principal, New Albany High School

"It's imperative that we teach our children those things that make them healthy individuals and then provide them an atmosphere that's conducive to the retention of that education."

Phil Nanney, Executive Director, Union County Development Association

of the many partners that the New Albany School District has joined forces with to ensure that all students are given every opportunity to adopt a healthy lifestyle that they may carry with them throughout their lives.

"When you look at Mississippi's track record, it's time for organizations, schools and parents in Mississippi to step up," says Lance Evans, the Principal at New Albany High School. Evans himself has lost 90 pounds by cutting fried foods from his diet and increasing his daily exercise routine. Evans' commitment to healthy living along with the commitment of other staff and faculty members resonates with the students. Haven Boyd, a senior

at New Albany High School, says that having the faculty and staff "walk the walk" means so much more than a lecture. "Not only are they telling us about healthy living, but they are also getting involved personally. They want to be a part of it themselves. That shapes us into a better school district."

The change in mindset has been a gradual process among school district personnel and community members. Seventeen years ago, Tammie Reeder, RN, BSN was the district's only school nurse. "Most of what I was doing was putting out fires. I stayed in my vehicle going from one school to the next and had no time for preventive work." Today Reeder is the School Health Services Coordinator for the district and oversees numerous grants including the John D. Bower School Health Network at New Albany Elementary as well as a Centers for Disease Control grant which provides a staff wellness program. She also works with the district-wide Carol M. White Physical Education SHAPE Up! Grant. The school district itself also has been recognized by the Mississippi Office of Healthy Schools as the recipient of the Mississippi Healthy School Board award.



Tammie Reeder, RN, BSN, School Health Services Coordinator

Healthy Schools



Warner Creekmore, Parent

So how did New Albany go from being reactionaries to visionaries? Reeder insists that it took a little bit of creativity and a lot of collaboration. "My motto in the beginning was 'Make Yourself Indispensable'. We looked at the district as an open field and knew we could do so much with it." With little money in the district budget for health promotion, Reeder began to solicit the help of health professionals in the community. Partnering with Baptist Memorial Hospital-Union County and the local health department enabled Reeder to obtain free classroom materials and classroom speakers free of charge as well. "My goal was to add something new each year that didn't cost anything." In the meantime, Reeder began to apply for health related grants which over the years have brought in thousands of dollars for the effort. Warner Creekmore, a parent of three children and New Albany's tennis coach says that the go-getter

attitude of the district in seeking out grants is commendable. "We don't just sit around on our hands waiting for things to drop in our laps," she says. "We have to go get what's out there."

In Mississippi, few school districts are able to employ full time nurses at every school site (see **Figure 6**). The New Albany School District has managed to provide full-time nurses in each of the three schools as well as an additional part-time nurse at the elementary school site. In the beginning, the nurses' salaries were made possible by various

grants; now the district has maintained its commitment to keep them using district funds. The nurses are no longer "putting out fires". Instead they are actively providing health care services to students and staff and conducting regularly scheduled classroom educational programs with topics based on student suggestions. The nurses even assist families with applying for health care coverage. School nurses also provide CPR, AED, and First Aid training to all coaches and to any staff member who would like to become certified in CPR.



Haven Boyd, Student and Mary Margaret King, Teacher, New Albany High School

The district also has a genuine interest in keeping its personnel healthy and fit. Every year, all employees are offered flu vaccinations at no charge. Typically, about 75% of all school employees receive the vaccine (M. Shannon, Public Relations Director New Albany School District, personal communication, April, 2010). In the fall of 2010, employees participated in a new staff wellness vaccination program that provided the flu vaccinations along with hepatitis vaccinations. The local healthplex offers discounted membership fees to school employees through payroll deduction, and every school in the district has a Bulldog Health and

Healthy Schools

Fitness Center equipped with treadmills, elliptical machines, exercise bicycles, and weight machines which are available to any employee. "If we keep our faculty healthy, then I think it just makes us better teachers," says Mary Margaret King, an English teacher at New Albany High School. "I think it shows that the district cares about the health and well-being of the teachers as well as the students, and that's important to me."

District officials believe that having a healthy faculty and staff translates into a better academic performance for students because teachers will have a decrease in absences. "What's encouraging to me is the amount of faculty and staff who are making lifestyle changes," says Jamey Wright, the Principal at New Albany Elementary School. "When the cafeteria workers have finished serving lunch, they are back on the treadmills. The teachers are at school because they are healthier." Stephanie Simmons, a teacher at the elementary school agrees that the faculty and staff commitment has been encouraging to the students as well as the community. "The kids started seeing the teachers change into their aerobics clothes after school. We started as a school to get fit, and that's when the community came in."



Stephanie Simmons (Teacher, NAES), Jamey Wright (seated, Principal, New Albany Elementary School), Angela Spencer (Teacher, NAES), and Jonna Shaw (Teacher, NAES)

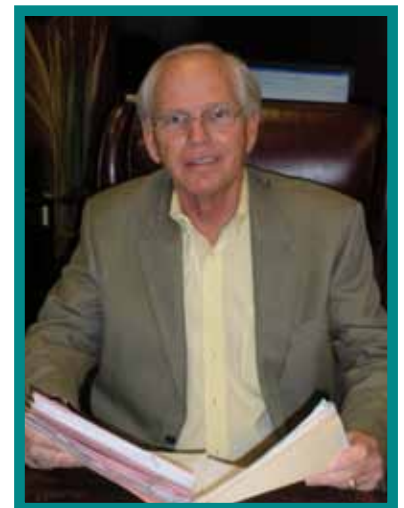


Eydie Pullman (Parent), Phil Nanney (Executive Director, Union County Development Association), Crystal McBrayer (Community and Occupational Health Coordinator, Baptist Memorial Hospital-Union County)

"We are trying to model in every way possible a lot of things to help people put an emphasis on being healthy."

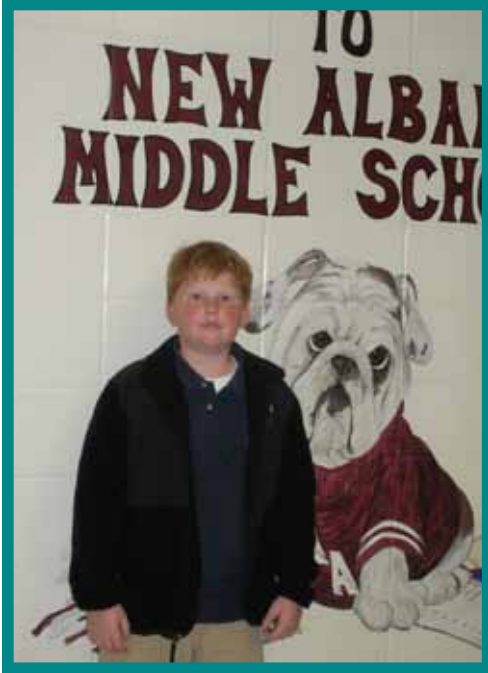
Dr. Charles Garrett, Superintendent, New Albany School District

The community plays an important role in providing support to the students of the district. For example, local physicians conduct annual athletic screenings for all students at no cost. The Lions Club conducts vision screenings as well. "I have most of the doctors in town on speed dial," says Dr. Charles Garrett, New Albany's School Superintendent. "If we have students who need help, we get



Dr. Charles Garrett, Superintendent, New Albany School District

Healthy Schools



Rush Butler, Student



Hannah Harris, Student

them help.”

The school district also has partnerships with the New Albany Police Department to provide crossing guards at school sites and the Mississippi State University Extension Service and Baptist Memorial Hospital –Union County to conduct educational programs for students. There is a strong sense of teamwork between the district and the community. “We’re here to add to their program and to be supportive,” says Crystal McBrayer, Community and Occupational Health Coordinator for Baptist Memorial Hospital-Union County. “They [the school district] open their doors to us.” Teachers agree that having health care professionals addressing topics is welcomed by the students and taken very seriously. “My mother quit smoking because of her grandchildren and because of this school [New Albany Elementary School],” says Jonna Shaw, a third grade teacher. “It has changed the lives of students, and I’ve seen it firsthand.” First grade teacher Angela Spencer adds, “Kids go home and tell their parents, ‘I’m a healthier eater.’”

A key component in New Albany’s success is found in the school cafeterias. No fried foods are served on any campus. Deep fat fryers have been replaced by combination steam ovens, and more whole grains and green vegetables are being served daily. Fruits such as kiwi are being introduced in the cafeterias too. Middle school student Rush Butler says he now prefers baked foods and likes trying new fruits and vegetables. The student body is embracing the changes being made. Hannah Harris, a fourth grader likes the whole wheat pizza; Haven Boyd a senior won’t go back to fried foods. “When I was younger, I didn’t know you could bake foods instead of frying them.”

The effort to provide healthier foods in the cafeterias comes from the school district’s involvement in the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) HealthierUS School Challenge. USDA established the program to recognize schools which are creating healthier school environments through the promotion of good nutrition and physical activity. Schools may obtain one of four levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Gold of Distinction (United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, n.d.). New Albany’s Office of Child Nutrition participated in the rigorous application process and

has been certified to receive Silver Status (For a listing of other Mississippi schools, see **Figure 3**). The district's latest figures indicate that 80% of the student population is now purchasing meals in the cafeteria on a daily basis (J. D. Bower Foundation, 2009).

In 2000, the New Albany School District employed one nurse, spent very little of the annual budget on the

"We expect a lot from our community, and our community expects a lot from us."

**Stephanie Simmons, Kindergarten-First Grade Looping Teacher,
New Albany Elementary School**

promotion of good health, and lacked physical education equipment or even a physical education building at the elementary school. Within a ten year period, the district and the community have become one of the leaders in the health reform movement in the state of Mississippi, and they insist that more communities can do the same if they are willing to seek grants, expand existing resources, and enlist the support of the entire community. "Look at what you've got and what you can build on," says Becky Thompson, a middle school parent. "None of this came about in the last nine weeks. It has taken years, and it has just gotten better and better." Reeder agrees that tapping into available resources and setting goals will be the beginning of success for any district. "We know that making a change or a paradigm shift takes time, and so if we change the way kids are thinking and the way they are making decisions, then we can affect their lives."

Healthy meals, physical activity opportunities for staff and students, community support, and a lot of teamwork have made the New Albany School District a model for other districts to follow. From the superintendent to the student, the physician to the parent, everyone is equally involved in the effort. "We're doing everything that we know possible to do to promote health and fitness within our school system, within our staff, and within our community," says parent Warner Creekmore. It has to start with a group of individuals who are committed to connecting all the "dots" in an effort to create healthy living environments for students and their families. When that spirit of cooperation occurs, all of the community benefits. According to parent Eydie Pullman, "I'm very excited that regardless of what maybe previous generations learned in school, the generation today in New Albany and in other districts across the state is learning healthy eating and healthy skills to have a more productive educated life. I am very hopeful for Mississippi's future because we're raising a generation of healthy individuals."

*"We know that making a change or a paradigm shift takes time,
and so if we change the way kids are thinking and the way they
are making decisions, then we can affect their lives."*

**Tammy Reeder, RN, BSN, School Health Services Coordinator, New
Albany School District**

High School Graduation Rates

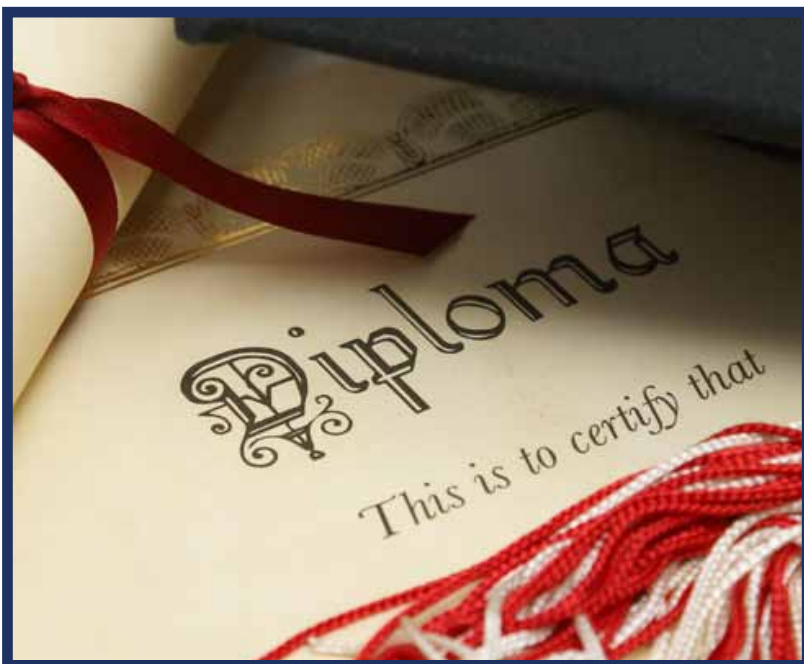
Introduction

High school graduation by a student's eighteenth birthday is often recognized as one of the education system markers of success. Attainment of a high school diploma is a strong predictor of future educational opportunities, economic independence and the level of future civic engagement.

This section will provide an overview of the landscape of high school graduation rates, high school dropout rates, successful strategies of other states and policy considerations for Mississippi. This will be followed by data on Mississippi's graduation and dropout rates and visualization of contextual variables that influence both graduation and dropout rates. Finally, the success of the United Way of the Capital Area in Jackson, Mississippi area is highlighted as an example to promote high school graduation rates across the state.

Individuals who do not complete high school face serious disadvantages in income and employment outlook for both the short and long term. For the class of 2009, just five months after graduation, the Bureau of Labor

Statistics found that high school graduates not attending college had a 70% participation rate in the labor force, which is the proportion of the population either working or actively looking for work. High school dropouts' labor force participation rate, by contrast, was only 48.5%. Similarly, only 35% of 2009 high school graduates were unemployed, compared to over 55% of high school dropouts (United States Department of Labor, 2010). Data from the most recent census indicates that over the course of their lifetimes, high school dropouts make nearly \$10,000 less in income per year compared to high school graduates, a figure that only increases when compared to two-year college graduates, four-year college graduates, and those with advanced degrees (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b).



High School Graduation Rates

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) Mississippi's public high school graduation rate was below the national average (Stillwell, 2010). Mississippi's graduation rate was 61% in 2009 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009c). A more detailed look at the statistics behind Mississippi's graduation rate provides a fuller perspective. In 2008, the graduation rate for Whites (67%) was 14% below the national average for Whites while the graduation rate for Blacks (60.5%) was 1% below the national average for Blacks (Stillwell, 2010). Therefore, Mississippi is similar to the rest of the country in that there is a gap regarding graduation rates between its White and Black populations. However, the disparity is not as great as the national average. Breaking the numbers down by grade level adds another layer of nuance: Mississippi's dropout rates for 9th, 10th, and 11th graders exceed the national averages for dropouts in each of these grades. The dropout rate for 12th graders falls well below the national average for 12th grade dropouts (4% in the state compared to 6.1% nationally; Stillwell, 2010). These numbers should help focus efforts to graduate more Mississippi students. Once students enter twelfth grade, they tend to finish school.

Mississippi's demographic statistics in terms of dropouts are consistent with national trends. Nationally, a disproportionate number of high school dropouts nationwide are from disadvantaged demographic groups. For example, only 55% of Latino and 51% of Black students graduate from high school (Dugger, 2010), and the gap between minority students and White students can be as high as 50 percentage points (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). Other groups generally at risk for dropping out include members of single-parent households, students of low socioeconomic status (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004), and students with limited English-proficiency (Pallas, 2002).

High School Graduation Rates, 2009-2010

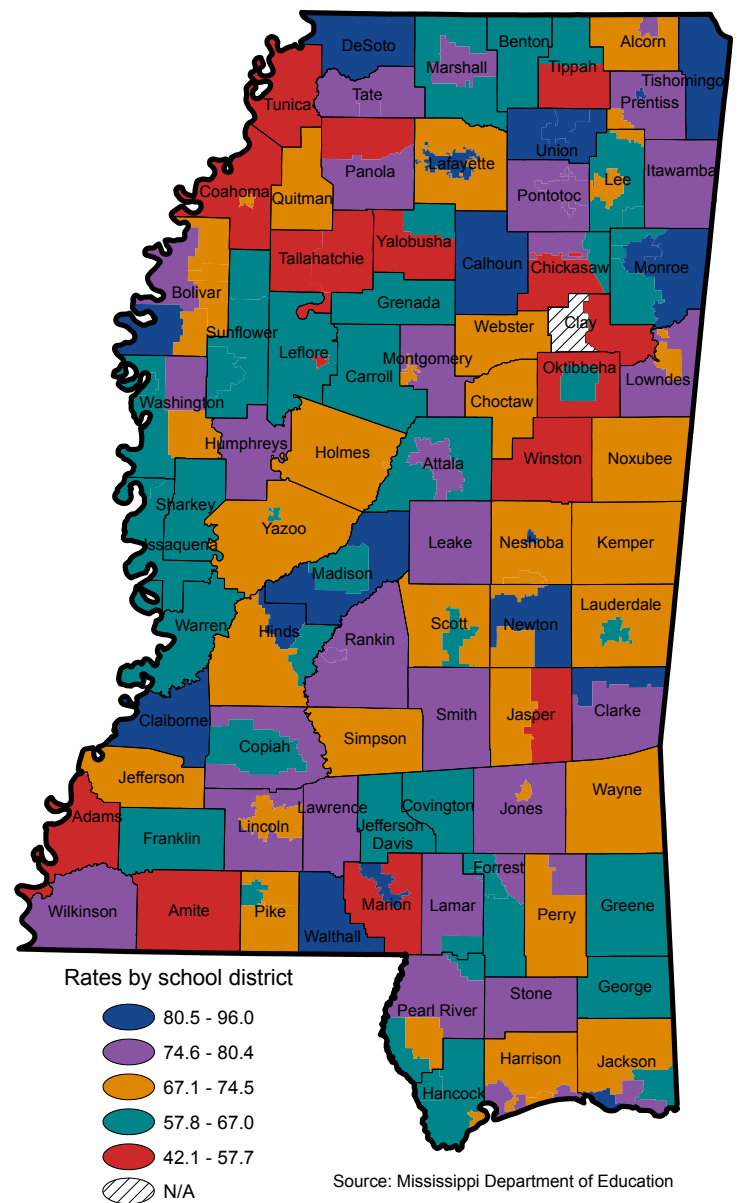


Figure 1

High School Graduation Rates

Because “living wages and benefits have virtually disappeared for students without a high school diploma” (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004), the resulting costs to society due to underemployment, welfare programs, and other factors are significant. Each dropout costs an additional \$260,000 in public funding over a lifetime when compared to high school graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b). This toll adds up – it is estimated that dropouts account for an additional \$8 billion each year in expenditures on food stamps and other public assistance programs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). Healthcare represents a significant proportion of these additional costs. Dropouts are less likely to be employed in positions with comprehensive health insurance coverage and, as a result, receive less medical care and experience poorer health outcomes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006a). A 2006 study of the relationship between high school dropouts and state Medicaid expenses found that each high school dropout in Mississippi costs the state nearly \$8,000 in lifetime Medicaid costs. By contrast, if the state had been able to graduate all of its students in the class of 2006, it would have saved over \$121 million in Medicaid costs over the students’ lifetimes (Muennig, 2006). Moreover, the students would enjoy an additional \$4 billion in income (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b), a figure that increases to \$4.2 billion for the Mississippi dropouts in the class of 2009 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

The failure to graduate more students from high school represents significant opportunity costs for state and local governments. Dropouts with lower incomes can contribute less through taxation. One study indicates that each high school dropout pays \$60,000 less in taxes than a high school graduate over the dropout’s lifetime. However, high dropout rates also affect states in less quantifiable ways; for example, a chronically undereducated workforce often struggles to attract new businesses and investors to the region (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b). For all these reasons, it is crucial that Mississippi increase its graduation rates as an important step toward making headway in various other economic development issues in the state.

High School Dropout Rates, 2009-2010

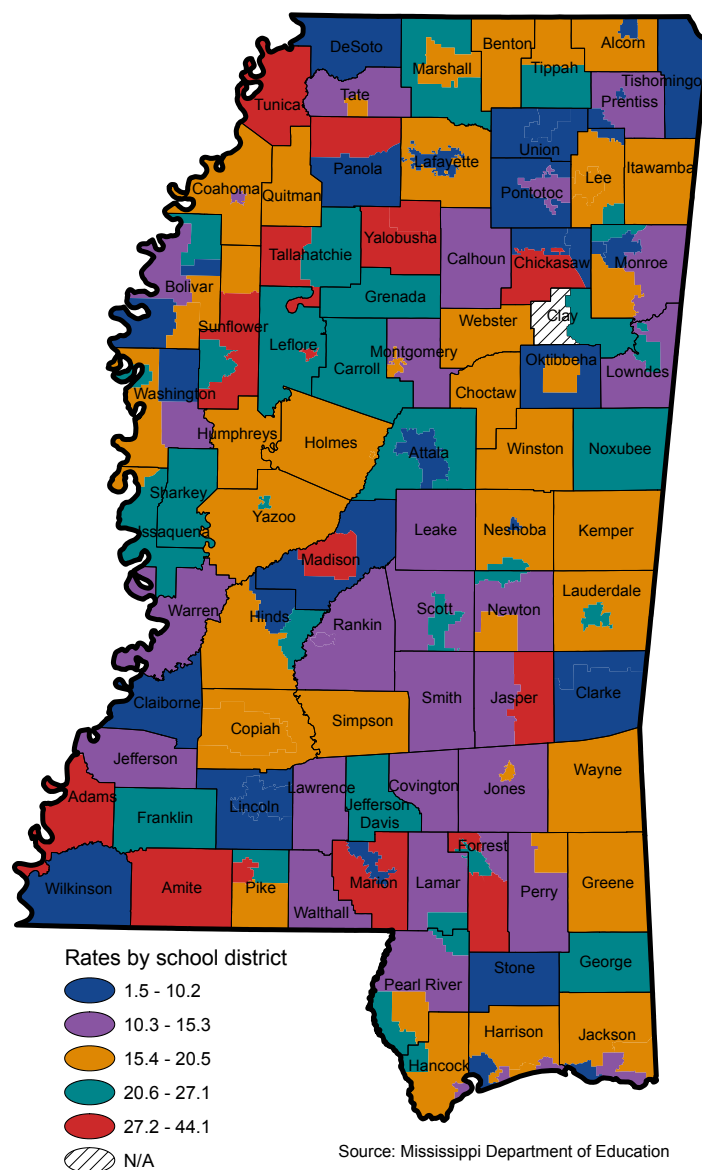


Figure 2

High School Graduation Rates

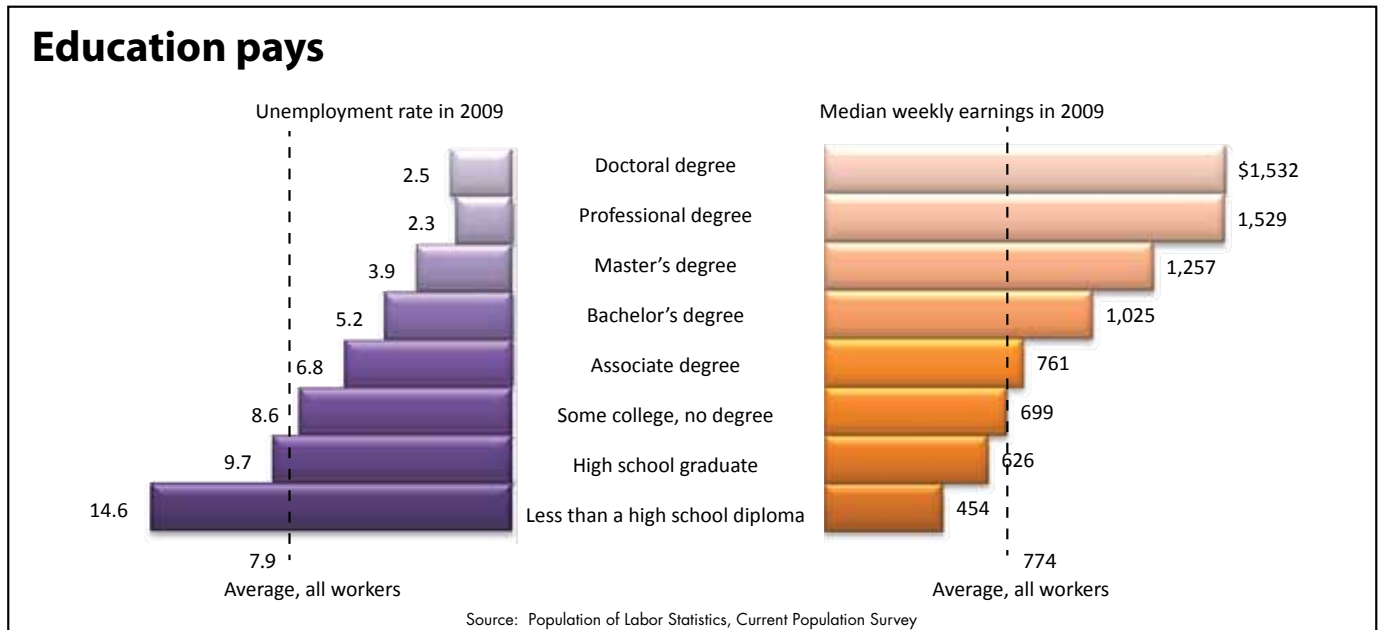


Figure 3

“CREATE’s Commission on the Future of Northeast Mississippi believes that higher levels of educational attainment are critical to our future economic and social success. The new global economy requires graduates to work in teams, be good readers, understand basic math, and be critical thinkers. With a high number of children unable to get meaningful support from their families, quality early childhood programs would give more children opportunities to report to school ready to learn.”

Lewis Whitfield, Sr. Vice President, CREATE Foundation

Students’ successes in high school are influenced by their successes in early care and educational experiences. As noted in the earlier section on Early Care and Education, Mississippi is beginning to make some strides in promoting quality Early Care and Education, a crucial foundation for sound educational attainment. One great example is via the CREATE Foundation, based in Tupelo, Mississippi. Lewis Whitfield, a retired banker and now Senior Vice President of the CREATE Foundation, with a special focus on Education, notes: “CREATE’s Commission on the Future of Northeast Mississippi believes that higher levels of educational attainment are critical to our future economic and social success. The new global economy requires graduates to work in teams, be good readers, understand basic math, and be critical thinkers. With a high number of children unable to get meaningful support from their families,

High School Graduation Rates



quality early childhood programs would give more children opportunities to report to school ready to learn. CREATE's Marchbanks Fund has supported several early child initiatives, including Baby Steps in Okolona, a quality improvement project for early childhood centers in Lee County, and Mississippi Building Blocks."

Increasingly, throughout Mississippi and Northeast Mississippi, in particular, communities are providing financial incentives to high school graduates to their education at a local community college, with the Tuition Guarantee Program. During the Fall 2010, 2400 students participated in this program from 14 of the 16

northeast Mississippi counties served by CREATE (Lewis Whitfield, personal communication, November 1, 2010). Additional students participated via the East Mississippi Community College. This program, in essence, provides tuition guarantees for high school seniors who have successfully earned their high school diploma to attend community colleges. Itawamba Community College, Northeast Mississippi Community College and East Mississippi Community College are participating (CREATE Foundation, 2010).

Consequences of Mississippi's Low Graduation Rates

While it is commonly known that low graduation rates vastly reduce earning potential (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b), there are other, less obvious consequences. Low graduation rates have a direct impact on health care costs and crime-related costs within the state. Mississippi has about "168,000 high school dropouts on Medicaid, costing the state more than \$208 million annually" (On the Bus, n.d.). Furthermore, the Alliance for Excellent Education has found that "were Mississippi to increase the graduation rate and college matriculation of its male students by only 5%, the state could see combined savings and revenue of almost \$93 million each year in crime related expenses" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006b). Between lost revenue and added costs for welfare and incarceration, high school dropouts cost the state over \$458 million per year (On the Bus, n.d.).



High School Graduation Rates

Addressing the Problem

The Office of Dropout Prevention

In 2006, the Mississippi legislature directly addressed the state's graduation rate problem by creating the Office of Dropout Prevention and by mandating that all school districts implement a dropout prevention program by the 2008 school year (Mississippi Code § 37-13-80). The Office's top goal is to raise the state graduation rate to at least 85% by the 2018-2019 school year (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). The Office established a State Dropout Plan shortly after it was created. The State Dropout Prevention Plan puts forth the following strategies (Bounds, Hill, and Smith, 2007):

- Facilitate the development of Dropout Prevention Teams and Dropout Prevention Plans in every school district by giving districts "the framework and required components for the development of the Local District Dropout Prevention Plan"
- Provide training opportunities to local districts to assist with their Dropout Prevention Plans
- Create a public relations dropout prevention awareness campaign
- Compile data on graduation rates from the local districts

In addition to facilitating these local dropout prevention plans, the Office of Dropout Prevention has created the On The Bus campaign. The On The Bus Campaign, which began in 2008, has released television, print, and radio advertisements and launched a website, all aimed at raising public awareness of the graduation rate issue and building public support for the state's efforts. The Arkansas Safe Schools Initiative considers Mississippi's comprehensive dropout prevention program, particularly On the Bus, a model approach to solving the dropout problem (Arkansas Safe Schools Initiative, n.d.).

"The education pipeline leads directly to the doors of industry and business, so it only makes sense for us to pay attention to the quality of what goes into that pipeline in a child's early years and do what we can to ensure that the young adults who come out are prepared to join a quality workforce."

Blake Wilson, President, Mississippi Economic Council

High School Graduation Rates

15 Dropout Prevention Strategies					
	District-wide	Pre-Kindergarten	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Systemic Renewal	Dyslexia Program	Early Prevention, Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program (EPSDT)	Early Prevention, Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program (EPSDT)	Early Prevention, Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program (EPSDT)	Early Prevention, Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program (EPSDT)
	Data Improvement Project (MSDIP)	Title III English Language Learners	Title III English Language Learners	Title III English Language Learners	Title III English Language Learners
	Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)	Title I, Part C, Migrant Education Programs	Title I, Part C, Migrant Education Programs	Title I, Part C, Migrant Education Programs	Title I, Part C, Migrant Education Programs
	Title VI.B.2 Rural and Low-Income Schools		Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT2)	Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT2)	High School Redesign
	Title I, Part F, Comprehensive School Reform				
	Title I, Part C, Migrant Education Programs				
	Student Progress Monitoring System (SPMS) Tracking Tool				
	Teacher Preparation Programs at Public & Private Institutions				
	Mississippi Sabbatical Program				
School-Community Collaboration	School-Community Involvement Evaluation Instrument	Support Our Students	Even Start Family Literacy Program	Support Our Students	Support Our Students
	Title IV-B 21st Century Community Learning Centers	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Support Our Students	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act
			Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act		
Safe Learning Environment	Effective School & Classroom Management				
	School Safety Environment Assessment Tool				
	Safe and Orderly School Climate Evaluation Instrument				
Family Engagement	School-Community Involvement Evaluation Instrument	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Even Start Family Literacy Program	Title III English Language Learners	Title III English Language Learners
	Public Relations Evaluation Instrument		Title III English Language Learners	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
			Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)		
Early Childhood Education			Even Start Family Literacy Program		

Source: Mississippi Department of Education, State Dropout Prevention Plan, 2010

Figure 4

High School Graduation Rates

15 Dropout Prevention Strategies					
	District-wide	Pre-Kindergarten	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Early Literacy Development	Three Tier Policy		Reading First Grants		
			Even Start Family Literacy Program		
Mentoring / Tutoring		Support Our Students	Support Our Students	Support Our Students	Support Our Students
		Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act
Service-Learning					High School Redesign
Alternative Schooling			Alternative Education	Alternative Education	Alternative Education
			Title I, Part D Subpart 1 Neglected and Delinquent	General Educational Development Option (GED) Program	General Educational Development Option (GED) Program
				Title I, Part D, Subpart 1 Neglected and Delinquent	Title I, Part D, Subpart 1 Neglected and Delinquent
After-School Opportunities		Support Our Students	Support Our Students	Support Our Students	Support Our Students
		Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act	Title X, Part C, Homeless Children and Youth Act
Active Learning	Three Tier Policy		Reading Sufficiency Grants	HIV/AIDS Prevention	Talent Search Grant
	Integrating Curriculum Assessment, and Instruction Training				Redesigning Education for the 21st Century Workforce (Plan)
	Physical Education Framework Training				HIV/AIDS Prevention
					High School Redesign
Educational Technology			Intel Teach to the Future	Intel Teach to the Future	Intel Teach to the Future
			Enhancing Education Through Technology	Enhancing Education Through Technology	Enhancing Education Through Technology
					Mississippi Virtual Public School (MVPS)
Individualized Instruction	Three Tier Policy			Foreign Language Grant	Foreign Language Grant
	Personnel Appraisals of School Staff				
	Instructional Process/ Curriculum Delivery				
Career and Technical Education (CTE)					Jobs for MS Graduates Grant
					Redesigning Education for the 21st Century Workforce (Plan)

Source: Mississippi Department of Education, State Dropout Prevention Plan, 2010

Figure 5

High School Graduation Rates

15 Dropout Prevention Strategies					
	District-wide	Pre-Kindergarten	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Professional Development	Effective		Intel Teach to the Future	Intel Teach to the Future	Intel Teach to the Future
	School & Classroom		Project Stream	Project Stream	Project Stream
	MS-E Learning for Educators			Mathematics Academies	Mathematics Academies
	MS Online				
	The Institute for Effective Instructional Leadership-Administrator Training Technology Evaluation				
	Mathematics and Science Partnership Grants				
	Mathematics Framework Training				
	Three Tier Policy				
	Integrating Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction Training				
	Title IV Program				
	Comprehensive Health Education Framework Training				
	Personnel Appraisals of School Staff				
	Instructional Process/Curriculum Delivery				
	Title I, Part C Migrant Education Programs				
	Teacher Preparation Programs at Public & Private Institutions				
	Blue Ribbon Commission to Examine Teacher Education Programs				
	Mississippi Sabbatical Program for Administrators				

Figure 6

Source: Mississippi Department of Education, State Dropout Prevention Plan, 2010



High School Graduation Rates

Alternative Education Programs

Mississippi law requires each school district to provide an alternative school system for students with major behavioral issues so as to facilitate such students' continuing education despite their (at least temporary) inability to participate in mainstream schools (Mississippi Code § 37-13-92). In addition, the state Department of Education contains within the agency the Office of Vocational and Technical Education (OVTE), which licenses and provides resources for various vocational education programs throughout the state. These programs are offered in over 500 Mississippi schools, and upon completion students obtain national industry certifications (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010).

While the OVTE encourages vocational programs throughout the state, it does not presently include wholly alternative options for students who drop out of mainstream high school programs to obtain high school diplomas. However, the Department of Education's Career Pathways program more directly links vocational training to the goal of dropout prevention. The Pathways program aims to provide students with alternative school hours, online vocational training, a personalized learning environment, and a "relevant connection between school and work" in order to keep them in school even if they are not in traditional programs. School districts can choose to implement individual "pathways" in several vocational training areas, including business (information technology, management, and/or marketing), health sciences, construction, and several other fields (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). The program is promising, but districts must opt in to participate. In addition, districts and individuals must share some of the costs of implementing the program, which may serve as a deterrent to widespread participation.

Best Practices in Other States

Many states have taken measures to improve their high school graduation rates, with some states experiencing success and others remaining relatively stagnant. However, states in both categories have developed promising and noteworthy policies and programs. The primary objectives of these measures are to provide more opportunities and incentives for students to stay in school, encourage those who dropped out to re-enroll, identify the students who are most at risk of dropping out, and incentivize schools to keep students in the classroom and to recover those students who have already dropped out.



High School Graduation Rates

Dropout Prevention Strategies

1. Have an early impact on students

An important factor in preventing students from dropping out is to reach students before they get to high school. Research has shown that reducing class sizes from 25 to 15 students from kindergarten through third grade corresponds to an increase in graduation rates of 11 percentage points (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009). Even more striking, one study found that attending a quality preschool would improve graduation rates among disadvantaged students from 41% to 66% (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009). Therefore, a comprehensive approach to increasing high school graduation rates must necessarily begin early and also include a strong early childhood education foundation.

Additionally, to help ensure that at-risk students are given the proper resources and attention before they drop out, it is crucial to have a mechanism for flagging these students. Louisiana has an early warning data system that identifies students who are deemed to be at risk of dropping out. The system flags a student if absent for 10% of their enrolled days, if they receive disciplinary action on 7% of their enrolled days, if the students grade point average is 1.00 or less or has dropped by at least 0.50, or if they are over-age for their grade (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009).

2. Provide novel incentives to students

Tennessee has recently seen major improvements in its freshman graduation rates. In the period from 2002-2008, the graduation rate rose nearly 12 points (Stillwell, 2010). This amazing progress can be at least partially attributed to some creative state policies. State law requires students to make satisfactory academic progress or else have their driver licenses suspended. Satisfactory progress is defined as passing at least three of four classes or five of seven classes, depending on the type of schedule. Additionally, a student's license is suspended if he or she has ten consecutive unexcused absences or a cumulative total of 15 unexcused absences (Tennessee Code Ann. § 49-6-3017, 2010).

3. Provide more options and resources for students

Georgia is another of Mississippi's southern neighbors that has experienced gains in graduation rates, with an increase of approximately five points from 2002-2008 (Stillwell, 2010). Georgia has instituted a number of promising prevention programs and policies. In 2006, Georgia provided funding for a "graduation coach" for each high school in the state. The role of graduation coaches includes connecting students to mentoring, tutoring, and life skills programming, as well as intervening with school attendance issues. In the 2007-2008 school year, graduation coaches worked with almost 35,000 students who had poor attendance, and successfully got over 13,700 of those students back to regular attendance (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009).

High School Graduation Rates

Georgia's Department of Education also operates Georgia Virtual School, which offers high school courses online to all Georgia public school students. Students may take up to 1.0 Carnegie unit of online courses free of charge as part of their state reported school day, and they may also take additional courses for tuition. Depending on the attendance policies of the local school or district, students may have the option of taking the online courses off-campus and on their own schedule (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.). Additionally, Georgia offers a credit recovery program through the virtual school, in which students can work to earn credit for courses that they failed (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009). The credit recovery program offers options for after school, intersession, and summer school programs (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.).

4. Increase accountability and incentives for schools

A factor contributing to Tennessee's increased graduation rates is that the state set a high benchmark for improvement, aiming for a 90% graduation rate by the 2013-2014 school year (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009). The state held local principals accountable for improving their schools and working toward this goal (NWTN Today, 2010). The number of percentage points needed for each school to reach 90% graduation was evenly apportioned across ten years, and each school had to steadily increase its graduation rates by the apportioned amount in order to make adequate yearly progress (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009).

Another strategy is to provide a state accountability system that incentivizes schools to retain students rather than letting them drop out. The Louisiana Graduation Index, which was created in 2007, seeks to reward schools for preventing dropouts. Under this accountability system, 70% of the school's state accountability score is based on test performance and 30% is based on students graduating. Schools receive points for students who remain in school, even if they do not graduate within four years, but are penalized for each student who drops out (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009). By treating graduation rates as part of the accountability system as opposed to solely relying on test scores, the state has given schools an incentive to keep struggling students in the classroom as opposed to letting them drop out for the sake of increasing the schools' average test scores.

5. Help to ensure juvenile delinquents re-enter school after release from confinement

Some states have also sought to ease the transition process for juvenile offenders who seek to return to school. Nationally, most youth who are incarcerated in juvenile detention centers do not return to school after leaving confinement. The rates of delinquents failing to reenter school may range from two-thirds in New York City to 95% in the state of Kentucky (Brock, O'Cummings, and Milligan, 2008). In combating this problem, important considerations include making sure each juvenile receives a timely school placement, his or her family is involved in the re-enrollment process, and the inter-agency roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Virginia has enacted policies aimed at addressing these considerations. Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice must begin the school enrollment process for a juvenile offender one month preceding his or her release. During this time period, the local school authority is notified, the youth and his or her family receive documentation of the enrollment process, and a re-enrollment plan is developed regarding the youth's placement and academic program. The primary goal is to ensure that the youth is re-enrolled in school within two school days of release (Princiotta and Reyna, 2009).

High School Graduation Rates

Data Section

School Accountability

School accountability scores are generated every school year to provide parents and administrators with an assessment of the school district. Of the 152 Mississippi school districts, 2% (three districts) are *Star Districts*, 16% (24 districts) are *High Performing*, more than a third, 34% (51 districts) are *Successful*, almost a quarter, 24% (36 districts) are on *Academic Watch*, 21% (32 districts) are *At Risk of Failing* and 4% (6 districts) are *Failing*. The three star performing districts are Enterprise, Petal, and Pass Christian. The 24 high performing districts are Amory, Biloxi, Booneville, Clinton, Corinth, DeSoto County, Gulfport, Itawamba County, Jackson County, Kosciusko, Lamar County, Long Beach, Madison, Monroe County, Ocean Springs, Oxford, Pearl, Pontotoc City, Pontotoc County, Rankin County, Senatobia, Tishomingo County, Union County and Winona. Finally, six districts are rated as *"Failing."* They are Drew, Hollandale, Okolona Separate, Hazlehurst City, Kemper County and West Tallahatchie (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010).

Compared to last year, Mississippi school districts have made considerable progress. The category of "Successful" school district jumped dramatically from 25% in 2009 to 34% in 2010, while the category of at risk for failing decreased from 30% in 2009 to 21% in 2010 (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010).

	Number of Districts		% of Districts	
LABEL	2009	2010	2009	2010
Star District	2	3	1%	2%
High Performing	21	24	14%	16%
Successful	38	51	25%	34%
Academic Watch	37	36	25%	24%
Low Performing	0	0	0%	0%
At Risk of Failing	45	32	30%	21%
Failing	8	6	5%	4%
Successful and Above	61	78	40%	51%

Figure 7

High School Graduation Rates

Mississippi Department of Education Accountability Status Ratings by School District,
2009-2010

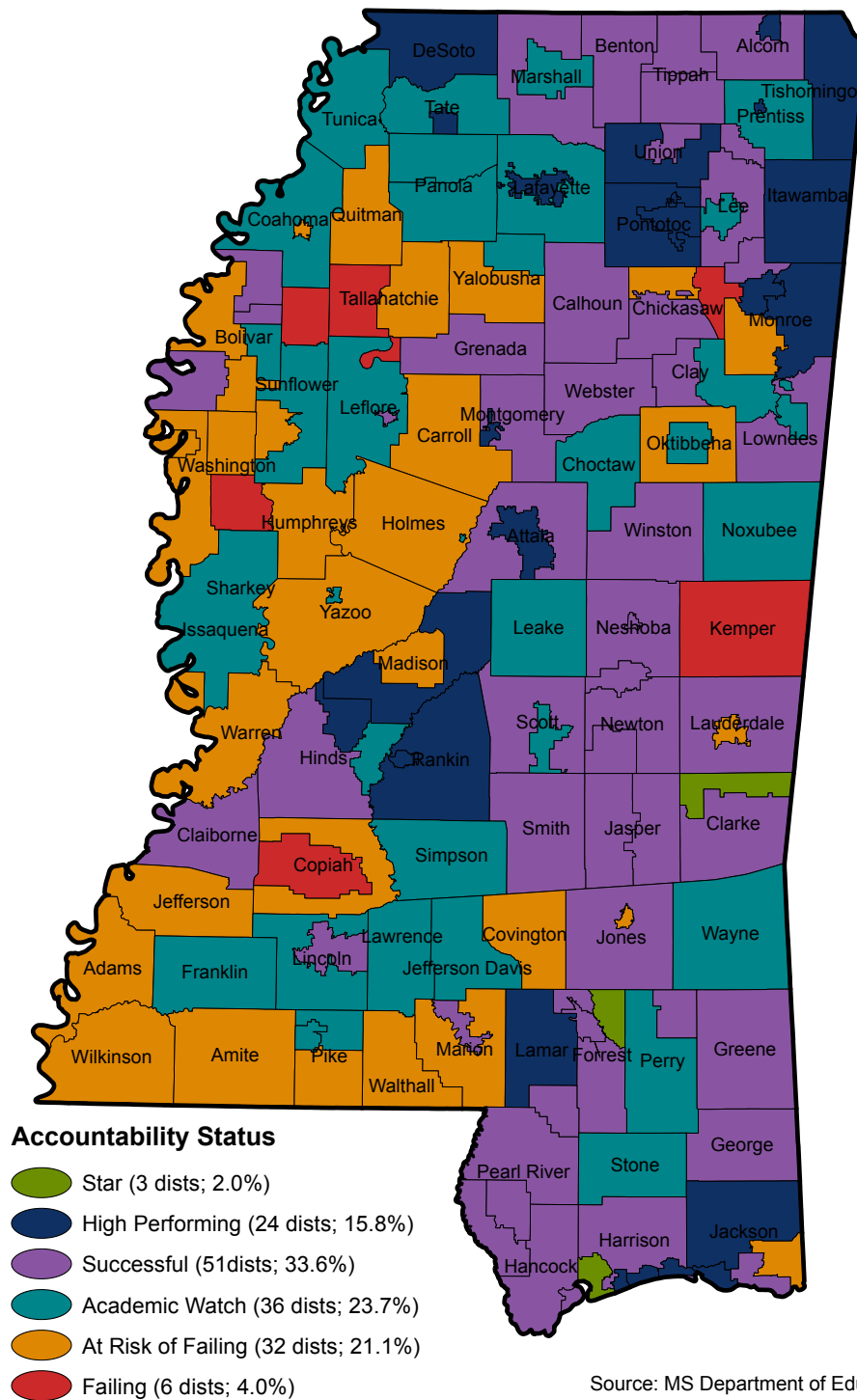


Figure 8

Source: MS Department of Education

High School Graduation Rates

Districts With Highest % of Absenteeism by Grade												
Rank	District	Grade 1	District	Grade 2	District	Grade 3	District	Grade 4	District	Grade 5	District	Grade 6
1	Baldwyn	9.8%	Shaw	7.7%	Oktibbeha	9.0%	Clay	9.6%	Lumberton	10.3%	Greenwood	7.3%
2	Marshall	8.0%	Jefferson Davis	7.2%	Montgomery	8.0%	Greene	7.6%	Amite	8.6%	Marion	7.1%
3	Marion	7.9%	Lafayette	7.0%	Attala	7.9%	Benton	7.1%	Enterprise	7.6%	South Dela	6.9%
4	Carroll	7.6%	West Jasper C	7.0%	Hazlehurst	7.6%	McComb	6.4%	North Bolivar	7.1%	Yazoo City	6.9%
5	South Delta	7.6%	Jefferson	6.9%	McComb	7.1%	Marion	6.3%	Marshall	7.0%	Richton	6.6%
6	Attala	7.4%	Chickasaw	6.7%	Picayune	6.9%	Newton Co	6.2%	Montgomery	6.9%	Stone	6.6%
7	Benton	7.3%	Kemper	6.6%	Chickasaw	6.8%	Yazoo	6.2%	Marion	6.7%	Western Line	6.6%
8	Lafayette	7.0%	Pass Christian	6.4%	Clinton	6.7%	Oktibbeha	6.1%	Water Valley	6.2%	W Bolivar	6.6%
9	Jefferson	6.9%	E Tallahatchie	6.3%	Noxubee	6.6%	Tate	6.1%	Webster	6.2%	Quitman	6.5%
10	Jefferson Dav	6.9%	Holly Springs	6.2%	Baldwyn	6.6%	Water Val	6.0%	McComb	6.2%	Lowndes	6.2%

Districts With Highest % of Absenteeism by Grade												
Rank	District	Grade 7	District	Grade 8	District	Grade 9	District	Grade 10	District	Grade 11	District	Grade 12
1	Yazoo City	7.4%	Drew	8.7%	Coahoma	13.1%	Greenwood	11.1%	Drew	13.3%	Okolona Sep	14.0%
2	Meridian	7.3%	Amite	8.6%	Greenville	11.2%	Greenville	10.3%	Holly Springs	10.5%	Greenville	10.6%
3	Stone	7.2%	Coahoma	8.1%	Holly Spr	10.2%	Drew	10.1%	Hinds Co Ahs	10.4%	Tunica	10.3%
4	Natchez-Ad	7.2%	Coffeerville	8.1%	Jackson Pub	9.2%	Moss Point	9.2%	Greenville	10.1%	Coahoma	10.0%
5	Hattiesburg	7.0%	W Tallahatchie	7.5%	Carroll	8.9%	Holly Spr	9.0%	Coahoma	9.4%	Holly Spr	10.0%
6	Newton Mun	6.8%	North Pike	7.5%	Yazoo City	8.7%	Yazoo City	8.8%	Yazoo City	9.1%	Greenwood	10.0%
7	Newton Co	6.7%	Meridian	7.5%	Amite	8.2%	Lafayette	8.8%	Marion	9.0%	Drew	9.7%
8	Greenwood	6.5%	Greenwood	7.4%	Forrest Ag	8.1%	Durant	8.2%	Quitman	8.2%	Marion	9.7%
9	Jefferson Dav	6.4%	Carroll	7.4%	Jefferson	8.1%	Jefferson	8.2%	Greenwood	8.1%	Jefferson Dav	9.4%
10	Baldwyn	6.1%	Newton Co	7.4%	Water Valley	7.8%	Indianola	8.2%	Canton	7.8%	Pontotoc City	9.3%

Source: MS Department of Education

Figure 9

Given the strong correlation between absenteeism and school dropout rates, it is important to determine which school districts are having less than optimal student attendance. The percentage of absenteeism varies both by district and grade level as noted in **Figure 9**. Among the districts (grades 1-6), the percentage of absenteeism ranges from 10.3% in grade 5 (Lumberton School District) to 7.3% in grade 6 (Greenwood School District). Among grade 1 absentees, Baldwyn School District has a 9.8% of absenteeism. In grades 7-12, with the exception of grade 10, there is a steady increase among the districts with the highest percentages across grades 7-12. The percentages of absenteeism range from 14.0% in grade 12 (Okolona Separate School District) to 7.4% in grade 7 (Yazoo City School District).

Note: Calculations were made by using the Mississippi State Department of Education's Monthly Enrollment database and the Average Daily Attendance for the month of August, 2009 from the most recent completed (2009-2010) academic school year. Absenteeism percentages were derived by subtracting the monthly enrollment minus attendance [(Average Daily Attendance (ADA))], divided by enrollment. Both databases can be found at: <http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/>

High School Graduation Rates

Districts With Lowest % of Absenteeism by Grade												
Rank	District	Grade 1	District	Grade 2	District	Grade 3	District	Grade 4	District	Grade 5	District	Grade 6
1	Montgomery	0.4%	Sunflower	1.1%	Claiborne	0.3%	Forest	0.4%	W Tallaha.	0.6%	Houston	1.1%
2	Claiborne	1.9%	E Jasper Con	0.7%	W Bolivar	0.0%	Mound Bayou	0.5%	Sunflower	0.3%	Covington	1.5%
3	W Talla.	2.0%	Forest	0.4%	W Tallahatchie	0.3%	Durant	1.3%	Wilkinson	0.6%	Claiborne	1.7%
4	Franklin	2.3%	Claiborne	0.9%	Sunflower	1.0%	Claiborne	1.3%	Forest	0.6%	Carroll	1.7%
5	Sunflower	2.5%	Coffeeville	1.0%	Moss Point Sep	1.2%	Lumberton	1.4%	Quitman	1.1%	N Tippah	1.8%
6	W Bolivar	2.6%	W Tallahat.	1.5%	Leland	1.4%	W Tallahatchie	1.4%	Shaw	1.2%	Greene	2.0%
7	Newton	2.7%	Newton	1.8%	Newton	1.6%	N Bolivar	1.6%	Pontotoc	1.6%	Attala	2.4%
8	E Jasper Con	2.7%	Drew	2.0%	Pontotoc	1.8%	Benoit	1.7%	Winona Sep	1.6%	Benton	2.4%
9	Drew	2.8%	Mound Bayou	2.1%	Wilkinson	1.8%	Louisville	1.9%	Mound Bayou	1.7%	Sunflower	2.5%
10	Leflore	2.8%	Brookhaven	2.2%	Quitman	1.9%	Wilkinson	1.9%	Noxubee	1.8%	Jefferson	2.5%

Districts With Lowest % of Absenteeism by Grade												
Rank	District	Grade 7	District	Grade 8	District	Grade 9	District	Grade 10	District	Grade 11	District	Grade 12
1	Jefferson	0.1%	Okolona Sep	1.3%	Mound Bayou	1.6%	Union	0.6%	Okolona Sep	0.4%	Oxford	0.9%
2	Drew	0.3%	Noxubee	1.4%	Madison	2.3%	Chickasaw	1.1%	Choctaw	0.6%	Meridian	1.9%
3	Noxubee	1.0%	Benton	1.4%	Columbia	2.3%	Webster	1.7%	Pass Christian	2.1%	Newton	2.2%
4	Durant	1.3%	Durant	1.5%	Pass Christian	2.4%	Poplarville	2.2%	Prentiss	2.1%	Union	2.3%
5	Benton	1.5%	N Bolivar	1.5%	Quitman	2.5%	Sunflower	2.2%	Durant	2.1%	N Tippah	2.3%
6	Quitman	2.0%	Claiborne	1.5%	Greene	2.5%	Oxford	2.3%	Meridian	2.3%	DeSoto	2.5%
7	Claiborne	2.1%	Leland	1.6%	Corinth	2.6%	Pass Christian	2.4%	Forest	2.3%	Brookhaven	2.9%
8	Holly Springs	2.2%	Newton	2.2%	Calhoun	2.6%	Noxubee	2.4%	Nettleton	2.4%	Stone	3.0%
9	Mo. Bayou	2.2%	Franklin	2.3%	N Bolivar	2.6%	Mound Bayou	2.4%	Madison	2.5%	Clinton	3.0%
10	E Jasper Con	2.2%	Holly Springs	2.3%	S Delta	2.9%	Walthall	2.5%	Poplarville	2.6%	Madison	3.0%

Source: MS Department of Education

Figure 10

As noted in **Figure 10**, among grades 1-6, school districts with the lowest percentage of absenteeism range from 0% in grade 1 (Montgomery School District) to 1.1% in grade 6. In grades 7-12, there is a low of 0% in grade 7 (Jefferson County) to 0.9% in grade 12 (Oxford School District).

As noted earlier in this section, interventions to both prevent and curb excessive absenteeism are clearly needed.

High School Graduation Rates

National ACT Scores, 2010

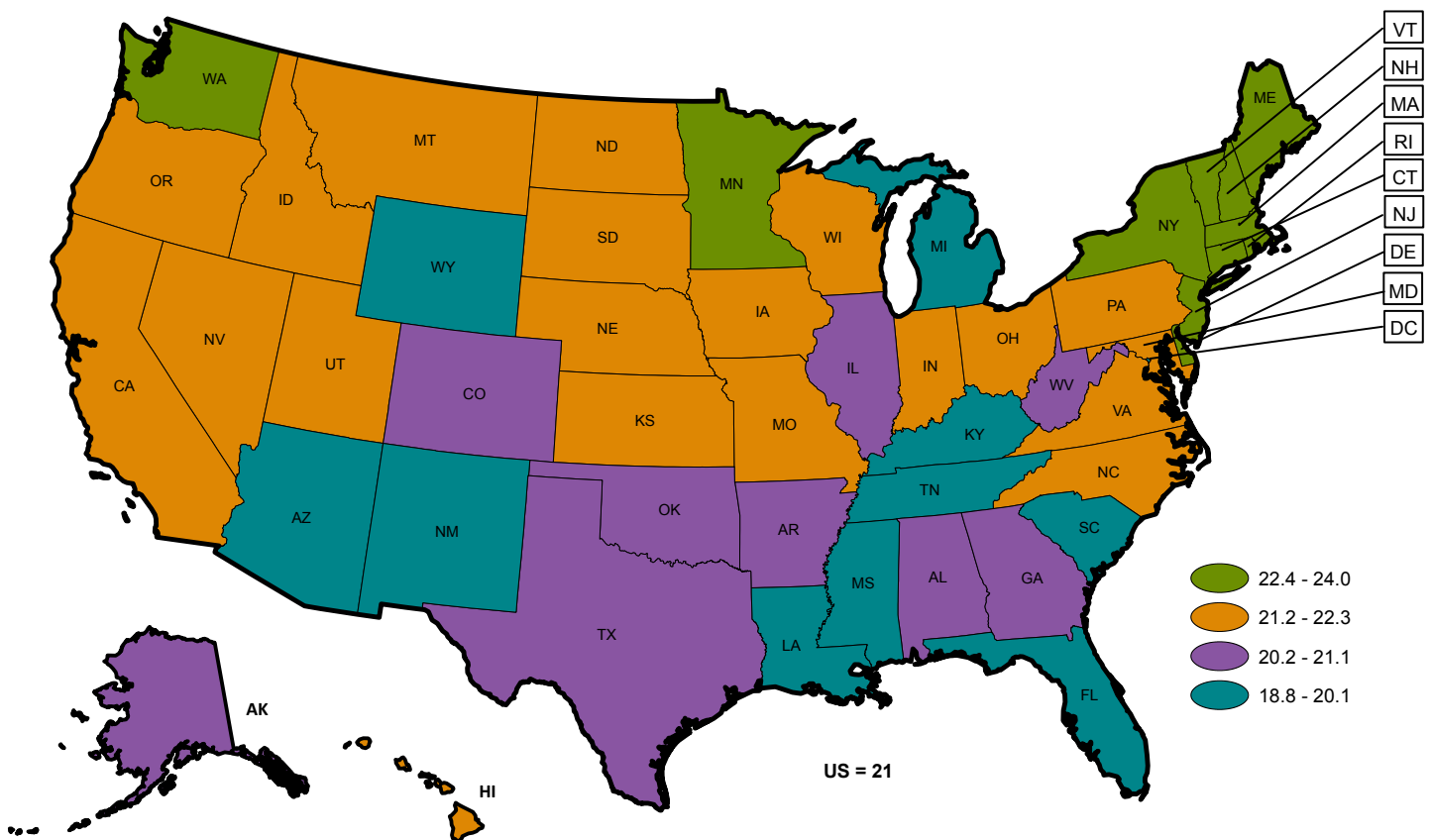


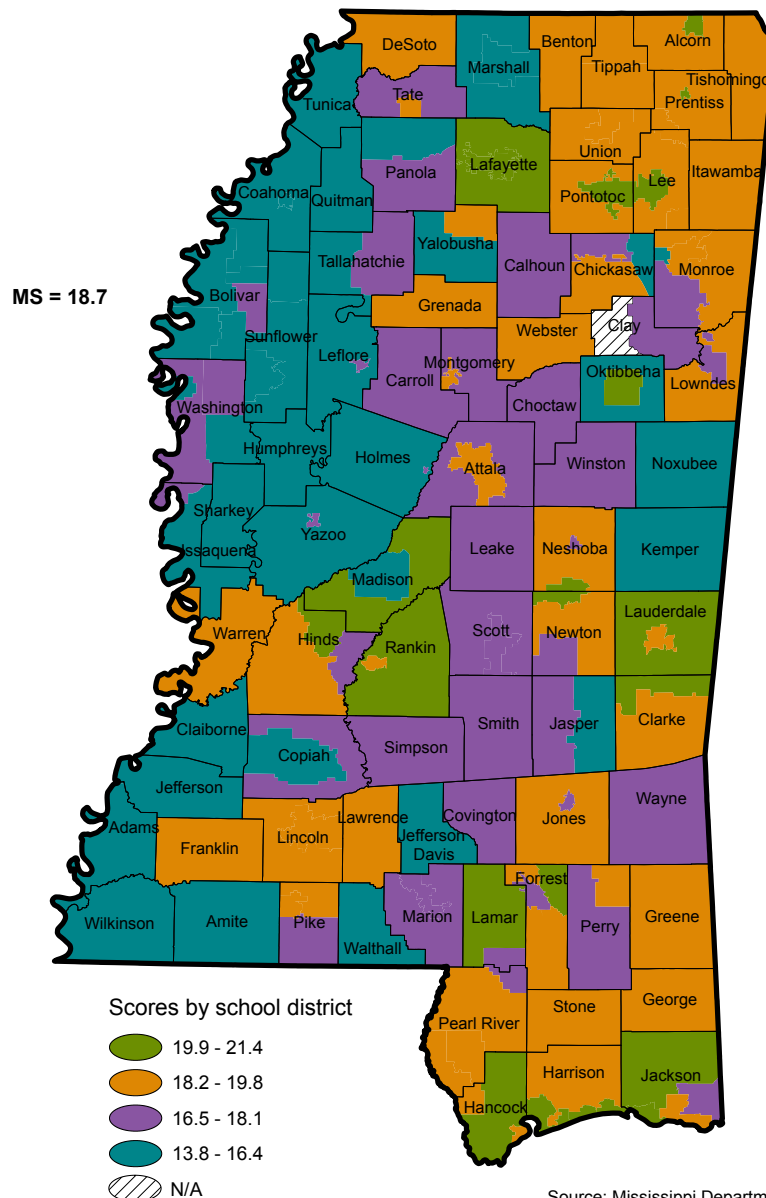
Figure 11

Source: www.act.org

The U.S. average composite ACT score is 21 for the school year 2010. The national ACT averages ranged from a high of 24 in Massachusetts to a low of 18.7 in Mississippi. Along with Mississippi (18.7), other states that scored below 20 were Kentucky (19.4), Florida (19.5), Tennessee (19.6), Michigan (19.7), and the District of Columbia (19.8).

High School Graduation Rates

Composite Scores for Graduating Seniors, 2009



Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Figure 12

Mississippi's average ACT score is 18.7. Within the state of Mississippi, the average ACT scores range from a high score of 22.4 (Mississippi School for Math and Science), followed by Oxford (21.4), Madison County (21.2), Ocean Springs (21.1), along with Petal and Union (21).

School districts in Mississippi with the lowest average ACT scores include: Coahoma County (13.8), Drew (14.8), as well as Leflore, Jasper Consolidated and Humphreys County (15).

High School Graduation Rates

Children Who Repeated One or More Grades Since Kindergarten, 2007

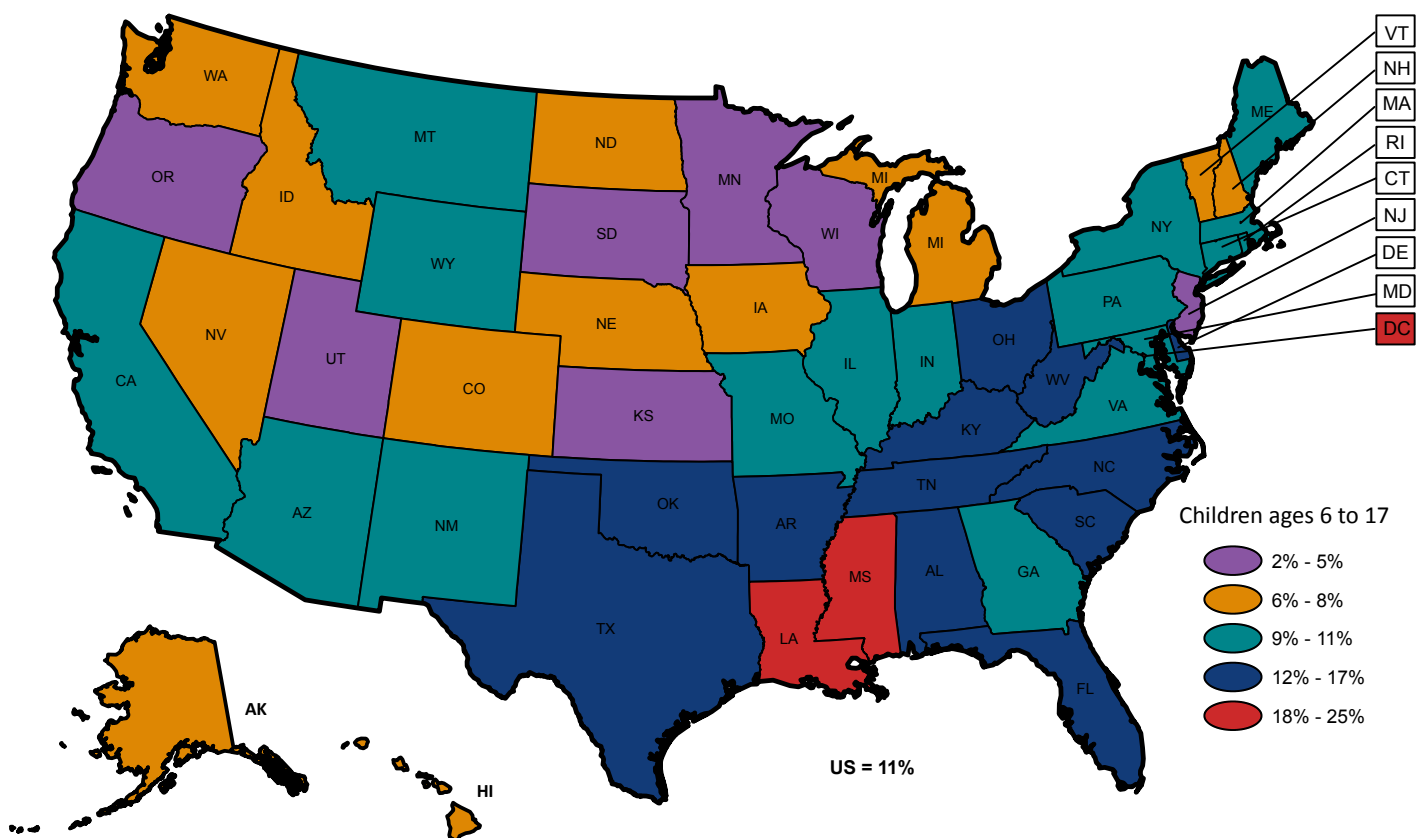


Figure 13

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Children Who Repeated Grades

In Mississippi (2007), almost a quarter (21%) of children ages 6 to 17 repeated one or more grades since starting kindergarten, almost twice the national average of 11%. This is the second highest rate in the nation, behind Louisiana at 25%. The lowest rate in the nation is 2% in Utah. Regionally the percentages are as follows: Alabama 17%, Tennessee 14%, Arkansas 14%, and Georgia 9% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

High School Graduation Rates

Figure 14

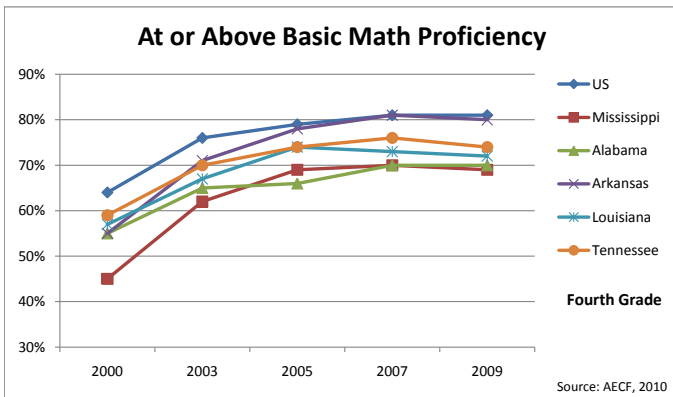
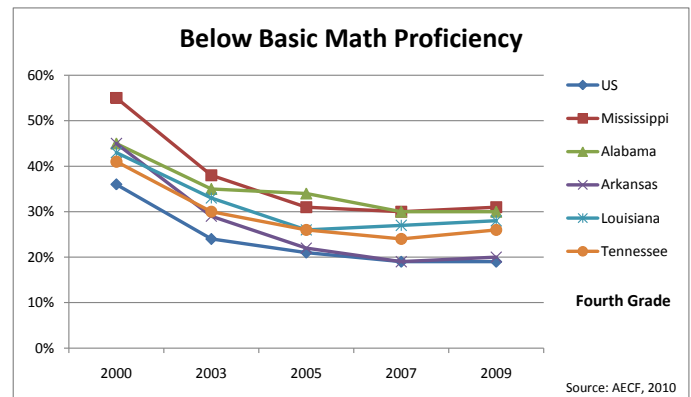


Figure 15



Mississippi's fourth grade students have made improvements in their Basic Math Proficiency, decreasing from 55% in 2000 to 31% in 2009. The U.S. average in 2009 for Below Basic was 19%.

As shown by **Figure 14**, students in Mississippi have risen in Basic Math Proficiency, scoring 45% in 2000 and 69% in 2009. The trend (2002-2009) as shown in the graphs has found all the states and the U.S. steadily increasing. Although Mississippi had increased in the At or Above Reading Category, the state was still well below the national average in 2009 (81%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

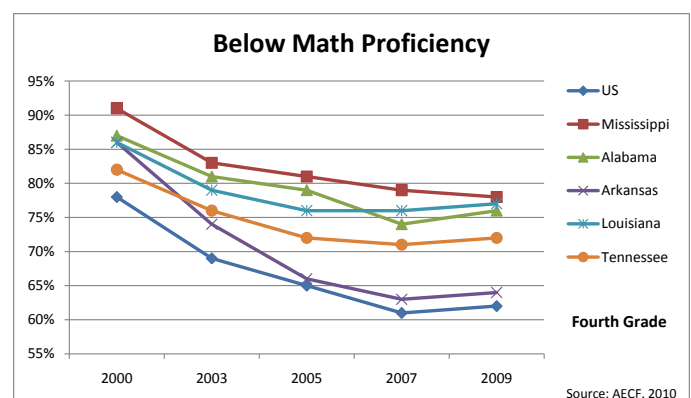
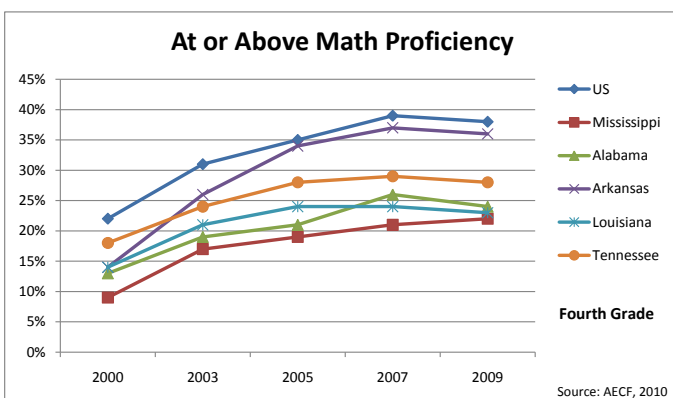


Figure 16

Figure 17

High School Graduation Rates

Children Living Below 200% Poverty, 2009

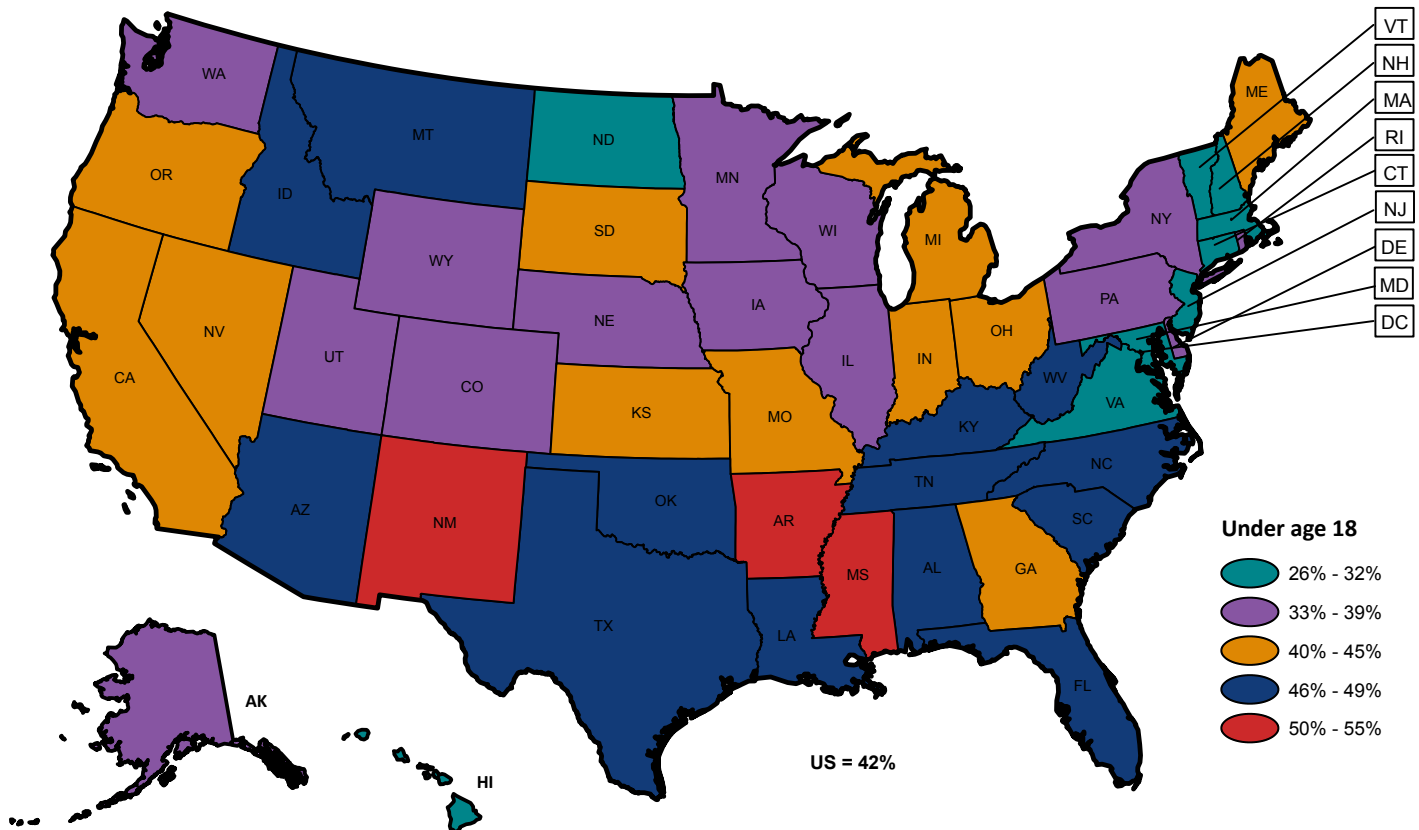


Figure 18

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Mississippi lead the nation in the percentage of children living in poverty in 2009 (defined as living in a family that earns less than 200% of the federally defined poverty rate). More than half (55%) of Mississippi children lived in poverty, followed closely by Arkansas (54%) and New Mexico (52%). As a region, the South leads in this category. Among children living at 200% of poverty in the southern region, state percentages include: Alabama (49%), Tennessee (47%), Louisiana and Florida (46%), Georgia (45%). The lowest rates in the nation were found in Connecticut and New Hampshire (26%), Maryland and Massachusetts (27%) and New Jersey (29%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

High School Graduation Rates

Children Living Below 100% Poverty (under age 18), 2009

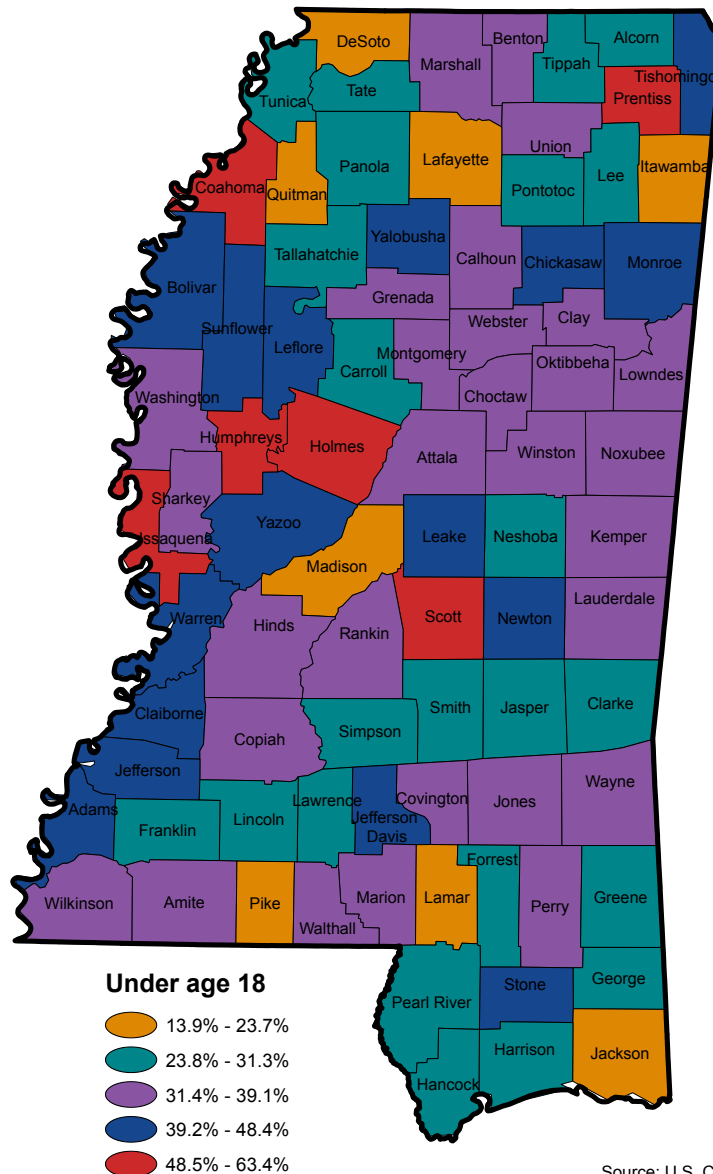


Figure 19

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Almost two thirds (63.4%) of children residing in Humphreys county lived in poverty in 2009, a measure defined by the federal government based on family income. Mississippi counties with more than 50% of children living in poverty in 2009 included: Holmes (61.2%), Scott (55.0%), Prentiss (53.3%), Issaquena (53.1%), and Coahoma (52.3%). The national average for children in poverty is 20.0% (or 1 in 5 children). Mississippi's average for children in poverty is 30.7% (almost 1 in 3 children). Mississippi counties with the lowest percent of children in poverty in 2009 included: DeSoto (13.9%), Quitman (15.8%), Madison (17.1%), Lamar (19.4%) and Jackson (21.9%).

High School Graduation Rates

Children Living in Single-Parent Families, 2009

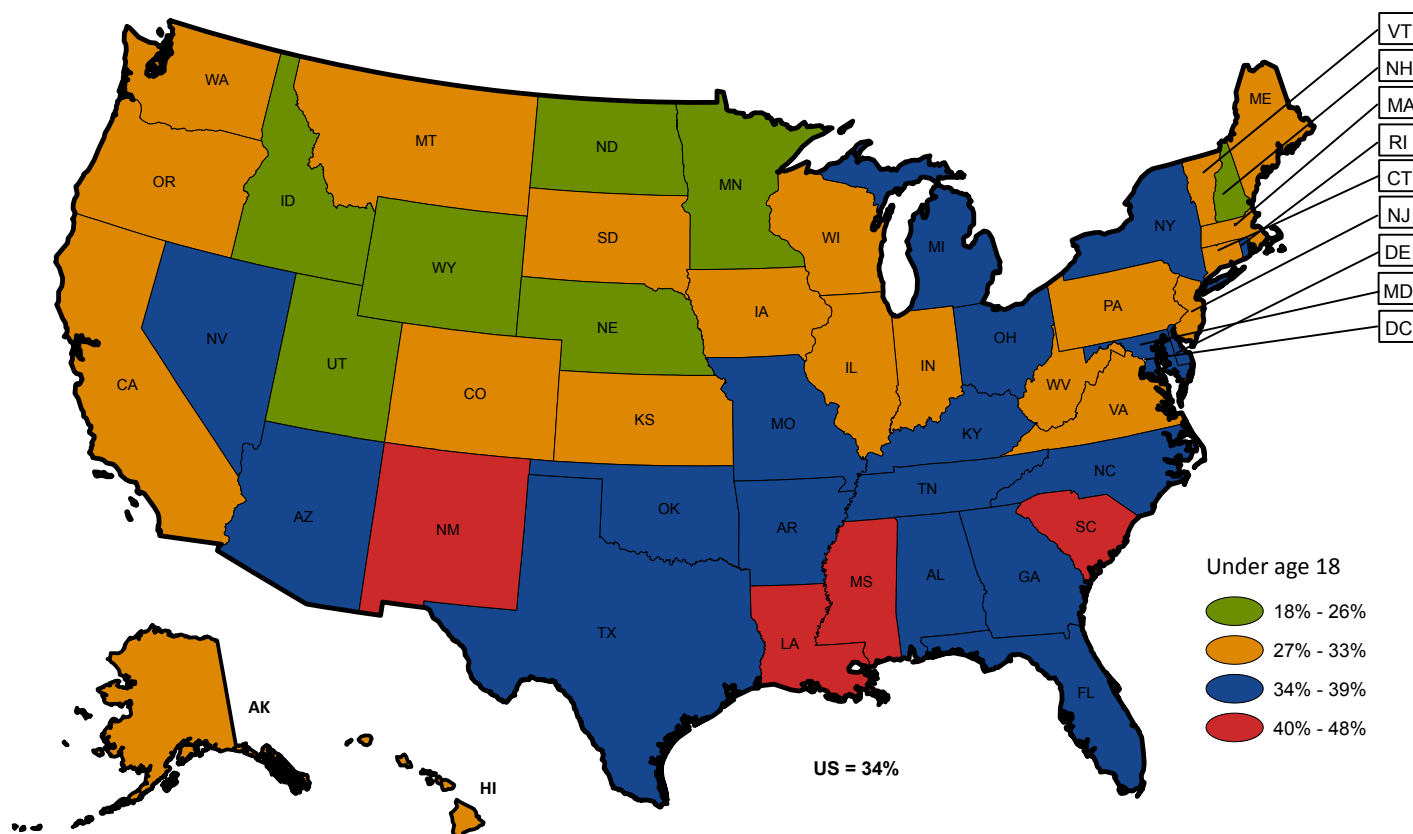


Figure 20

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

Almost half of Mississippi children (48%) lived in single-parent families in 2009. This was the highest percentage in the nation and 6% above the next highest state, Louisiana with 42% of children living in single-parent families. Other states in the region did not fare well either with rates above the national average of 34%. Alabama's percentage of children living in single-parent families was 39%, Florida's (38%), Arkansas (38%), Georgia (37%), and Tennessee (36%). The lowest state in the nation, with a percentage almost half the national percentage was Utah, with 18% of children living in single-parent families. Second lowest was Idaho at 24% and third lowest was North Dakota tied with New Hampshire at 25% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

High School Graduation Rates

Grandchildren Living With Grandparents, 2006-2008

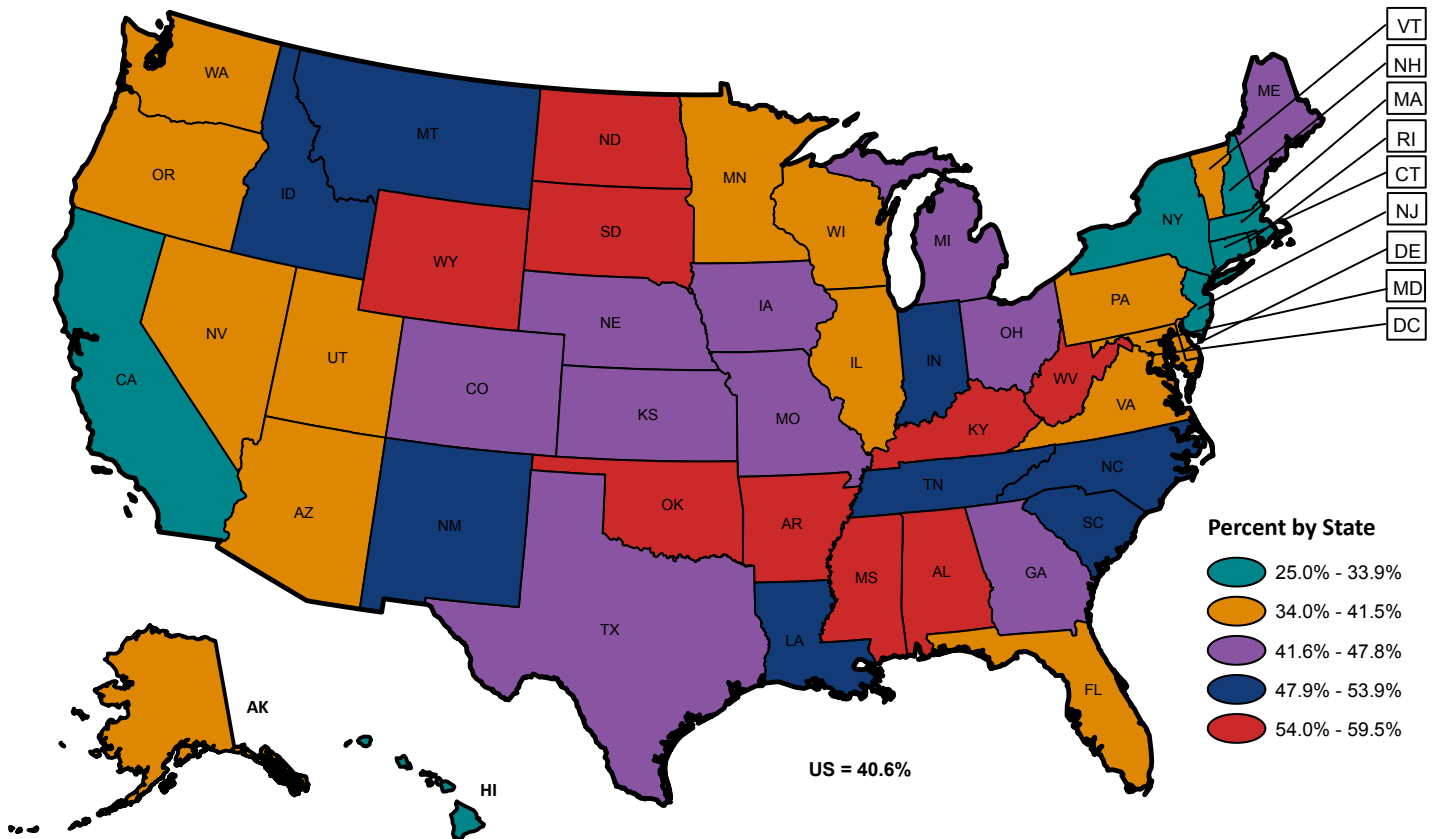


Figure 21

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

In response to the question "Does this person have any of his/her own grandchildren under the age of 18 living in this house or apartment?" on the American Community Survey (ACS), conducted in 2006-2008, on average in the United States 40.6% of grandparents have a grandchild living with them. Mississippi ranks second in the nation, with 59.1%, only slightly behind Arkansas with 59.5% of grandparents living with grandchildren in the household. However, this does not suggest that more than half of grandparents are primarily responsible for raising their grandchildren. The grandchild's parents may also be present in the household. The state with the lowest percentage was Hawaii (25.0%). Regionally the percentages are: Alabama (56.2%), Louisiana (53.9%), Tennessee (52.5%), and Georgia (45.9%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

High School Graduation Rates

Mississippi Teenage Pregnancy, 2009

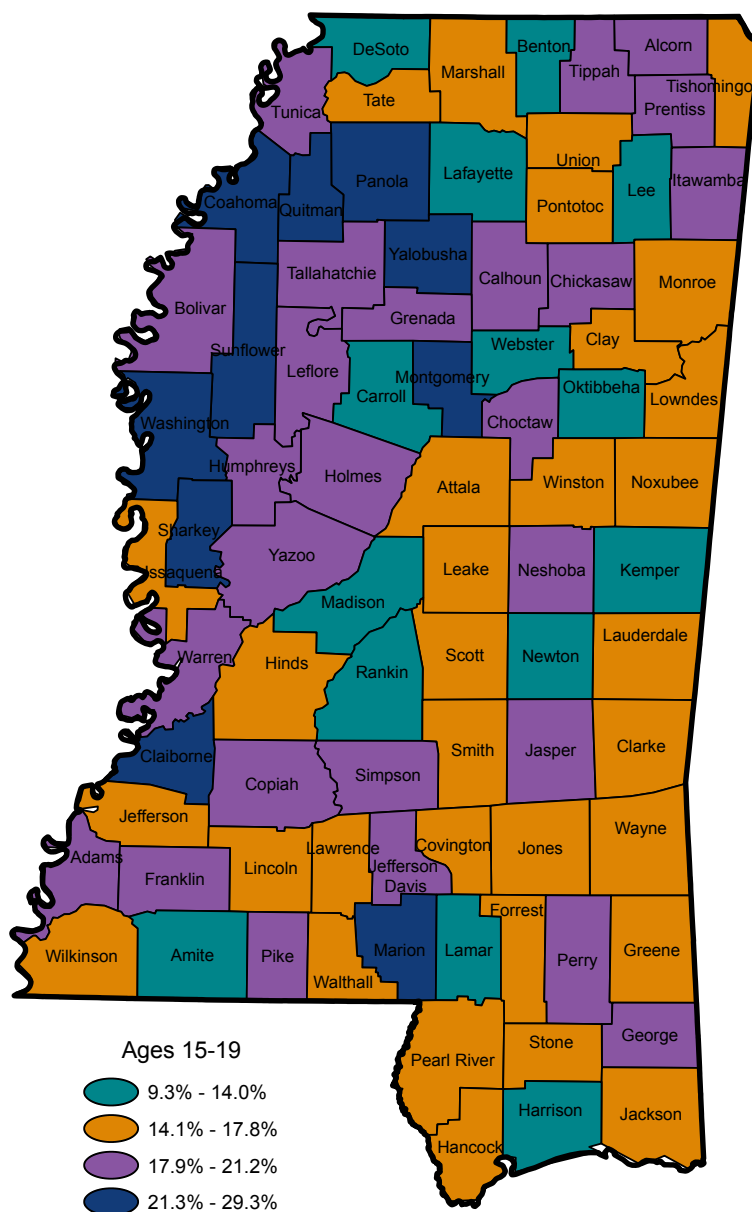


Figure 22

Source: Mississippi Department of Health, Vital Statistics

Almost a third (29.3%) of births in Sharkey county were to teen mothers in 2009, which was almost double the state average of 16.5%. These are births to mothers up to age 19. Fully a quarter (25.7%) of births in Sunflower and Panola (25%) were to teen mothers. As a general pattern, Delta counties are overrepresented in the high teen pregnancy category. The counties with the lowest teen pregnancy rate were Lamar (9.3%), Oktibbeha (9.6%), Desoto (10.3%) and Rankin (10.5%) (Mississippi State Department of Health, 2009).

High School Graduation Rates

Youth Status and Delinquency Offenses, 2009

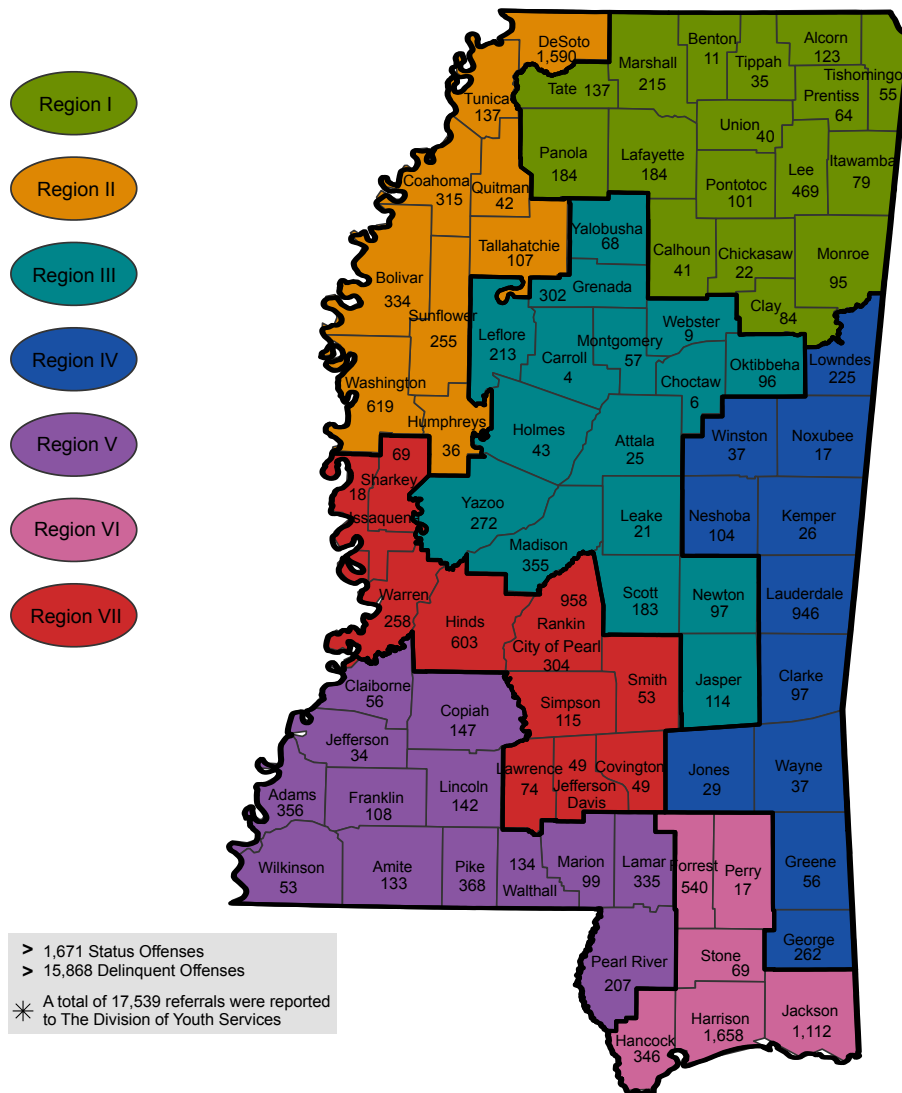


Figure 23

Source: Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Youth Services 2009 Annual Report

This map illustrates the total number of reported referrals, per county, during 2009. In the calendar year, 17,539 juvenile referrals were made (up to age 19), according to the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Youth Services. In the latest year the top five offenses were: disorderly conduct (22%), simple assault (19%), shoplifting (10%), child in need of supervision (9%), and contempt of court (8%). The top five dispositions were: supervised probation (27%), warned, counseled, released (26%), case dismissed (12%), assigned to the adolescent offender program (6%) and case held open or retired (5%) (Mississippi Department of Human Services, 2009).

High School Graduation Rates

Policy Considerations:

Some of the measures involve minimal costs for the state, while other programs require a more substantial investment. However, the cost of ensuring that the state has an educated and skilled citizenry pales in comparison to the various costs associated with maintaining a significant portion of the population that is unable to fill important jobs or attract economic development. In addition to considering best practices (see p. 119) implemented by other states, the following policy considerations to increase high school graduation rates may also be instructive to Mississippi's policy and decision-makers.

- Promote the collection of school, district and state-level data on reasons that students are absent from school, K-12
- Promote the development of "early warning" system reports, denoting at which point(s) in a student's educational trajectory that learning is interrupted and to also intervene with the student and their family at these points
- Promote a quality early care and education system, so that all children have the needed skill sets, entering kindergarten ready to learn
- Full funding of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program
- Target the lowest-performing schools in Mississippi for determining both needed resources and accountability measures to increase graduation rates and decrease drop-out rates
- Provide mechanisms at the state level, to widely disseminate which school districts are the most successful in terms of increasing graduation rates and document reasons for the success of those districts
- Promote tuition guarantee programs throughout Mississippi, as begun in Northeast Mississippi and East Central Mississippi, as a strong incentive for high school students to graduate and attend community colleges, who may not otherwise attend

"We have put in place a more rigorous curriculum and assessment system to ensure that students are receiving a high-quality education and will be ready to compete in a global economy."

Dr. Tom Burnham, State Superintendent of Education, Mississippi

High School Graduation Rates

Success Story - Jackson's Promise Coalition United Way of the Capital Area

Sometimes the road to a destination can be winding and challenging. Travelers may need help in reaching their destination and often rely on a map, a GPS, or a compass to lead the way. Many times the best support in reaching a destination comes as guidance from those who have traveled the road before and are willing to lend a hand. United Way of the Capital Area in Jackson, Mississippi believes that the best approach to helping students navigate the road to graduation is by walking with them. United Way staff and volunteers lead a collaborative community effort to help teens and adolescents find their way, graduate from high school and succeed in life



In 2010, United Way of the Capital Area served more than 24,000 households in the tri-county area of Hinds, Madison and Rankin counties with programs that support education, financial stability and health (United Way, 2009). A focus of the organization's work is dropout prevention to combat a major problem affecting families in the area. According to United Way of the Capital Area's 2009 Annual Report, approximately 27% of students in the tri-county area do not graduate from high school (United Way, 2009).

In 2008, the organization formed a partnership called Jackson's Promise Coalition (JPC), where community partners, staff, volunteers and students themselves actively advocate for high school graduation and the importance it serves in one's future path to success. "It's truly a holistic approach to helping students graduate from high school," said Shawna Davie, United Way's Dropout Prevention Coordinator.

The program is part of America's Promise Alliance, which was established in 1997 by General Colin Powell and his wife Alma with the goal of reducing the nation's dropout rate in half by the year 2018. America's Promise Alliance included Jackson as one of 12 Featured Communities across the country and recognizes United Way as the leader of the Jackson's Promise Coalition because of the organization's effective work at bringing partners together to increase graduation rates. America's Promise Alliance defines Featured Communities as "a local collaboration or group of



*Shawna Davie, Dropout Prevention Coordinator,
United Way*

High School Graduation Rates

partnerships engaging leadership from corporate, philanthropic, government, community-based, and education sectors, as well as the civic community (e.g., parents, youth)" (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). Jackson's Promise Coalition (JPC) now uses the alliance's "key support" areas, or Five Promises to advocate and initiate programs to increase graduation rates (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.).

The Five Promises are:

- Caring Adults
- Safe Places
- A Healthy Start
- An Effective Education
- Opportunities to Help Others

JPC seeks to fulfill these promises on behalf of 31,000 students in the Jackson area. The targeted communities include Lanier, Provine, and Wingfield High Schools, as well as the middle and elementary schools that feed into them, these are called feeder patterns. According to Davie, these locations were chosen because they have the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduation rates in the Jackson Public School District (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Carol Burger, President of United Way of the Capital Area, Davie and community partners have created unique and no-cost programs for students in Jackson. "America's Promise Alliance along with United Way really believe that if students receive the Five Promises, then they are much more likely to graduate high school on time and be prepared for college or work," Davie said of the program's objectives. Davie established a resource team committed to fulfilling the Five Promises in the feeder patterns by facilitating events and councils, coordinating research and writing grants for youth.

According to America's Promise Alliance, over 40% of individuals, ages 8-21, desire more support from adults (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). The Alliance and its Jackson partners believe that families, leaders in school systems, and community members should develop and maintain stable and encouraging relationships with children in order to solidify success. To fulfill the Caring Adults promise, Jackson's Promise Coalition implemented two projects. The first is a resource guide for the Lanier feeder pattern that provides a catalogued list of resources that a school official or parent might need to identify services for their children



Carol Burger, President, United Way of the Capital Area

High School Graduation Rates

“America’s Promise Alliance along with United Way really believe that if students receive the Five Promises, then they are much more likely to graduate high school on time and be prepared for college work.”

Shawna Davie, Dropout Prevention Coordinator, United Way of the Capital Area

(S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). Secondly, one of United Way’s major partners Operation Shoestring, a local organization devoted to providing all children with educational resources and opportunities to thrive in the present and future (Operation Shoestring, n.d.) agreed to co-host an education house party where students, their parents and teachers held a community conversation to discuss two questions:

- 1) What is going on in school?
- 2) How can we increase on-time graduation rates?

Those in attendance formulated suggestions that JPC is incorporating in their programs designed to help the students in Jackson reach short-term and long-term goals toward graduation (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

The Jackson-Hinds Library System is a key partner dedicated to achieving the second promise Safe Places, which seeks to provide solid ground for children to retreat to, whether it is at school, home or in the community (America’s Promise Alliance, n.d.). In 2010, the library system participated in a new JPC program called Pages of Promise, a community book drive aimed at stocking the shelves of the libraries located in Jackson with books that are found on Jackson Public School’s required summer reading lists. “United Way providing extra copies was a blessing,” says Charlotte Moman, the Jackson-Hinds Library System’s Assistant Director for Public Services. “We weren’t able to purchase books because we just don’t have the funds.”

Pages of Promise started when Davie realized that between 95 and 99% of students in the targeted feeder patterns receive free and reduced lunch (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010) and perhaps could not afford to buy the required books. JPC checked with the Jackson-Hinds Library System and discovered that there were not enough books for the approximately 3,000 students per grade. JPC launched Pages of Promise in April and within a few months, more than 800 books were donated by people in the community (S. Davie, personal communication,



High School Graduation Rates



Charlotte Moman, Assistant Director for Public Services, Jackson-Hinds County Library System

December 13, 2010). Community partners Bancorp-South, City of Jackson, local McDonald's restaurants and State Farm Insurance branch offices were designated as drop off sites. The Clarion-Ledger donated advertising space to get the word out.

Davie believes this is an easy program to replicate in other communities because it is free, and community members can easily donate books on the reading lists. Moman wants to tell other libraries that the community and library partnership is a true fit. "It's the greatest thing that can happen because the community is helping with the needs."

The third promise, A Healthy Start, ensures that children are in good physical and mental health by practicing healthy habits and productive physical and mental activities (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). To achieve this, the JPC resource team is advancing gardening initiatives within Jackson. Organizations such as the Jackson Inner City Gardeners, the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, the YMCA and Health Help for Kids, a program that helps Mississippi's parents provide health care for their children (Health Help Mississippi, n.d.), joined United Way to educate

Wingfield High School students of ways they could support their school's garden. After the information session, students began working with the Jackson Inner City Gardeners to reconstruct an existing garden at their school and other gardens located in Jackson (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

The fourth promise, Effective Education, pledges to give children the quality education they deserve in order to graduate high school adequately prepared for the future. To positively alter the statistic that 60% of youth, ages 10-21, feel that their school fails to prepare them for life after high school, JPC developed a Summer Resource Guide and provided free educational workshops for students (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). "Once we compiled the information [for the resource guide] we learned that actually we do have quite a resource-rich community, but nobody knows," Davie said. The first guide was enclosed in a weekly newspaper, Jackson Free Press, and provided students with safe places for educational activities as well as volunteer and job opportunities. Davie stated that United Way had to incur some cost to produce the guide, but students and their parents did not have to pay for the booklet because the Jackson Free Press is free to the community (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). The guide can be found <http://www.myunitedway.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Summer-Activities-Guide2.pdf>.

High School Graduation Rates

To further ensure that the Effective Education promise was fulfilled, JPC, America Reads and local volunteers, including teachers, hosted Summer Reading and English II Workshops to provide students with test-taking strategies and writing skills to prepare them for the test, which is a graduation requirement (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). English II Workshops are a great example of how United Way of the Capital Area supports school systems. "I think what we are doing is being a supporter of the families and the schools," Burger said. "Our role is to provide any assistance we can to help these kids learn."

The fifth promise is Opportunities to Help Others, which encourages children and teens to make a positive difference in their homes, schools and communities. Milsha Lowe, the Director of Youth Programs, leads youth community service efforts at United Way of the Capital Area. Lowe believes that, "If we start addressing the issues that are feeding into students dropping out, we can stop it instead of putting a Band-Aid on it."



Alvin Hester and Dewayne West, Wingfield High School Students

According to Every Child, Every Promise, 94% of youth want to make the world a more positive place (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). JPC received a grant from America's Promise Alliance to form a youth-led Drop Out Prevention Council, which has support from JPC (M. Lowe, personal communication, December 13, 2010). The 20 students involved with the council meet once a month from August to May and discuss issues of the community as well as their personal lives. Davie brings in professionals from the community to lead discussions, and there are often civic learning opportunities surrounding drop out prevention. In December 2010, the Drop Out Prevention Council held its first "Graduation Matters" Conference at the Jackson Medical Mall with support from the Opportunities to Help Others Committee. More than 100 teens in the Jackson area gathered to screen a movie, view the winning videos from the "Don't Drop Out" video contest and share their suggestions on how to help more students graduate high school (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). Wingfield High School students Alvin Hester, Dewayne West and Renergee Salahadyn won the "Don't Drop Out" video contest in which participants wrote and starred in short videos promoting the importance of graduating. The students say they want to use their winning submissions to encourage others to stay in school. Salahadyn thinks young adults should have access to a variety of groups like the Drop Out Prevention Council. Hester and West see the benefits of the program, which promotes the importance of graduation. Hester said, "Knowledge. We receive the knowledge and understanding of why something is happening or when it is happening. Knowledge is power."

High School Graduation Rates

"We fund partnerships. We look at how we can put together a holistic approach for families, to meet their education, income needs, and health needs."

Carol Burger, President, United Way of the Capital Area

Davie plans to use the results from the sessions, which were videographed by students, to develop new strategies for Jackson's Promise Coalition. It's all part of the coalition's efforts to create community-driven strategies and interventions for youth. "You've got to take the temperature, right?" Davie said. "When we go to the doctor, the doctor can only do so much. We have to tell the doctor what our symptoms are, what's going on, what we think the root of the problem is and when we started experiencing the problem in the first place" (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Jackson's Promise Coalition also performs primary and secondary research to learn more about what can be done to encourage students to excel in high school and beyond. Recently, JPC compiled information through focus groups funded by a grant from United Way Worldwide with 102 parents and students as well as 50 GED students (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). "What we learned from those focus groups and using the Mississippi Urban Research Center through Jackson State University was that students were really craving relationships, healthy relationships, with caring adults," Davie said. "If those relationships are intact then there is a supportive network to help the student reach the next level of education."

Sixty percent of United Way of the Capital Area's grant funds are invested in its education efforts, ranging from early childhood education to high school graduation and preparation for college and career (United Way, 2009). The agency takes a unique approach by funding partnerships rather than programs. "What our research showed is that if the families are not healthy as a whole, then the students are not going to stay in school," Burger said. "We fund partnerships. We look at how we can put together a holistic approach for families, to meet their education, income needs, and health needs."



Deja Brown, Wingfield High School Student, Rahim Salahadyn, Parent, and Renergee Salahadyn, Wingfield High School Student

High School Graduation Rates

"I think what we are doing is being a supporter of the families and the schools. Our role is to provide any assistance we can to help these kids learn."

Carol Burger, Executive Director of the United Way of the Capital Area

Clearly, Jackson's Promise Coalition succeeds in providing paths to bright futures and training students to be community leaders. Jackson's Promise Coalition wants other communities in the state to know that similar partnerships can be developed at little or no cost. It all starts with a concerned community and leaders. In offering advice to other communities, Operation Shoestring Executive Director Robert Langford believes that getting started involves taking stock in a community's assets. "Work with other people in the community to knit this quilt together with the other patches of fabric that already exist there."

Wingfield student Renegree Salahadyn believes it can be done in other areas and more importantly, that it needs to be done. "It's not only Jackson or Mississippi that's really having the problem. It's all around, so I think they should do it worldwide." Her father, Rahim, echoed, "Because it does take a village to raise a child after all."

Jackson's Promise Coalition sees the dropout prevention program continuing and expanding in the coming years. Already, they have reached out to teens in Canton by holding workshops and hosting CEO Mixers with well-known leaders in the Jackson area (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). "We want to replicate our success in different places because these are models we know will work," Burger said. They also expect to continue producing Summer Activities Guides, recruiting students for the Drop Out Prevention Council and creating new programs and events for the feeder patterns.

There are personal benefits to doing this work. For Burger, the life-changing benefits are priceless. "I think our reward in all of this work is to see these kids who all of a sudden say, 'Hey, somebody cares enough about me to make a difference.'"

"Work with other people in the community to knit this quilt together with the other patches of fabric that already exist there."

Robert Langford, Executive Director, Operation Shoestring

Program of Promise

Program of Promise: Mississippi Building Blocks



The Mississippi Building Blocks (MBB) program is an early childcare intervention initiative whose purpose is to improve school readiness for young children entering kindergarten, especially for those families whose income is too high to qualify for Head Start, but cannot afford private care. Existing childcare programs in the state of Mississippi are required to be licensed by the Mississippi Department of Health and must meet safety, hygiene, and developmental appropriateness standards. However, the license currently has no requirements

for educational standards. According to Dr. Laurie Smith, Executive Director of the MBB program, this form of intervention is inspired by research indicating that good early childhood education can significantly improve educational outcomes of children, as well as lowering crime rates of those children. Accordingly, part of the goal of this project is to increase childcare centers' participation in the Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System (MCCQSS) designed to assess the quality of childcare centers (Hampton, 2009).

The MBB study provides 100 childcare center classrooms with support to improve teaching and increase the school readiness of children. Early childhood professionals conduct on-site teacher training. In addition, \$3,000 is allocated for the purchase of classroom materials. To further improve the classroom experience, teachers are offered scholarships to obtain their Child Development Associate Certificate (CDAC) and are paid a stipend for completing the certification process. Parent advocates also work with participating families to actively engage parents in their children's early childhood education, and teach them about appropriate childhood developmental stages. Finally, consultants assist center staff in the many business aspects of childcare, such as financial management practices. The outcomes of the students in these 100 classrooms are being experimentally compared to 50 control group classrooms to determine the impact of the MBB program (L. Smith, personal communication, October, 2010).

This project is anticipated to provide assistance to 35 centers, 300 classrooms, and 3,500 children over a three year period. At a cost of \$2 million per year, the MBB program anticipates that statewide expansion of the model would cost approximately \$70 million. Long term effects are expected to include reduced drop-out rates, higher graduation rates, improved career outcomes, and fewer interactions with the criminal justice system (L. Smith, personal communication, October, 2010).



*Dr. Laurie J. Smith, Executive Director,
Mississippi Building Blocks*

Mississippi Building Blocks Locations									
Center	Location	Center	Location	Center	Location	Center	Location	Center	Location
Annie's Kindergarten	Picayune	Excellence Childcare	Meridian	Jones ECD Center	Jackson	McCarty Learning Center	Picayune	Pearl River Day Care Center	Choctaw
BeBe Kids Learning Center	Indianola	Faye's Playhouse & Learning Center	Verona	Just Us Kids Childcare Learning Center	Sardis	McComb Education Academy	McComb	Picayune School District Early Head Start	Picayune
Boyd's Early Childhood Development	Jackson	Funtime Pre-School	Clinton	Kids Landing Child Care & Learning Center	Tupelo	Mid-Delta Kids R Us, Inc.	Indianola	Rabbit Patch Daycare	Tupelo
Bright Beginnings Christian Development Center	Picayune	God's Little Creations Child Development Center	Meridian	LaPetite Academy	Horn Lake	Mother Goose Corner	McComb	Small Miracle Child Development Center	Hattiesburg
Buck-A-Roo Child Learning Center	Indianola	Greenbrook Wee Care	Southaven	Leaps and Bounds Developmental Academy	Jackson	MS Kids	McComb	The Frog Pond	Hattiesburg
Christian's Community Learning Center	McComb	Hanging Moss Pre-School	Jackson	Little Angels Day Care	Indianola	Nala Childcare & Learning Center	Guntown	Wayside Child Development	Picayune
Collinsville Education Center, Inc.	Collinsville	Haulcy's Home Childcare Center	Clarksdale	Little Angels Learning Center	Tupelo	Nazareth Day Care Center	Mendenhall	WeeCare Learning Center	Meridian
Connected Branches School of Tutoring, Drama and Fine Arts	Indianola	Hazlehurst United Methodist Church Day Care	Hazlehurst	Little Bears Learning Center	Tupelo	New Jerusalem Christian School	Jackson	West Kemper Kiddie Kollege	DeKalb
Creative Kids Academy	McComb	Hoskins Learning Center	Batesville	Little Sunshine Childcare Center	Clarksdale	Noah's Ark Early Development Center	Meridian	North Mississippi Medical Center Child Care Center	Tupelo
Creative Kids Christian Learning Center #1	Hattiesburg	Imaginarium Learning Center	Drew	Magnolia Kindergarten, Inc.	Batesville	North Jackson Daycare Center	Jackson	Patti-Cake	Magee
Creative Kids Christian Learning Center #2	Hattiesburg	Jesus Loves Me Children's Center	Batesville	Manchester Daycare	Yazoo City	Westside ECD Center	Jackson	YoYo's Little Angels	Magnolia
Dewberry Daycare	Batesville			Source: Mississippi Building Blocks, Promoting the State Plan for Early Care and Education					

Figure 1

"We [Mississippi Building Blocks] believe that the future success of our state is rooted in early childhood education."

Dr. Laurie J. Smith, Executive Director, Mississippi Building Blocks

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Appendix B: Definitions and Notes

Introduction

Overall Rank Table and Map

Overall Ranks for 2000 through 2007/2008 for each state using a consistent set of indicators; namely those used to derive the rank reported in the 2010 KIDS COUNT Data Book.

The Indicators used in the KIDS COUNT Data Books have changed over time, making year-to-year comparisons of state ranks problematic. Overall Ranks are the best source of information to see whether a particular state improved in ranking over the past few years. Note that state ranks in each year are based on data from the previous year for five measures and data from the current year for the other five measures. In other words, data for the Percent Low-Birthweight Babies, Infant Mortality Rate, Child Death Rate, Teen Death Rate, and Teen Birth Rate lag one year behind the other measures.

The District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are not included in maps and rankings because they are not states and therefore comparisons on many indicators of child well being are not meaningful.

Early Care and Education

Children Not Enrolled in Preschool, Nursery School or Kindergarten

The share of children ages 3 to 5 not enrolled in nursery school or kindergarten during the previous two months. "Nursery school" and "preschool" include any group or class of institution providing educational experiences for children during the years preceding kindergarten. Places where instruction is an integral part of the program are included, but private homes that primarily provide custodial care are not included. Children enrolled in programs sponsored by federal, state or local agencies to provide preschool education to young children—including Head Start programs—are considered as enrolled in nursery school or preschool.

Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 American Community Survey.

Population of Children (age 3 - 5) and Head Start Centers

Annual estimates of the resident population by selected age groups and sex for counties in the state: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2008. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/asrh/CCEST2008-agesex.html>

Appendix B: Definitions and Notes

Literacy

Reading Proficiency

Fourth grade public school students' reading achievement levels, as measured and defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test.

Reading Proficiency by Race

Fourth grade public school students who scored below the proficient level in reading, as measured and defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), by race and Hispanic origin. For a more detailed description of achievement levels.

Children Who Repeated One or More Grades Since Kindergarten

Children ages 6 to 17 who repeated one or more grades since starting kindergarten.

U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, HRSA, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, National Survey of Children's Health. The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) interviews the parent or most knowledgeable adult to determine. The NSCH includes information on over 102,000 children under age 18, with roughly 2,000 children per state. Households were selected through a random-digit-dial sample, and one child was randomly selected in each household. Information on each child is based on responses of the parent or guardian in the household who was most knowledgeable about the sampled child's health. Information was collected via a computer-assisted telephone interview.

4th Graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading by School Income

Fourth grade public school students who scored below the proficient level in reading, as measured and defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), by school income.

4th Graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading by Family Income

Fourth grade public school students who scored below the proficient level in reading, as measured and defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), by family income.

Appendix B: Definitions and Notes

Children Living in Single-Parent Families

Children under age 18 who live with their own single parent either in a family or subfamily. In this definition, single-parent families may include cohabiting couples and do not include children living with married stepparents. Children who live in group quarters (for example, institutions, dormitories, or group homes) are not included in this calculation.

Grandchildren Living With Grandparents

The share of children under age 18 living in households where grandparent(s) provide primary care for one or more grandchildren in the household.

Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, 2001 Supplementary Survey, 2002 through 2009 American Community Survey.

Healthy Schools

Persons (age 18 to 24) Not Attending School, Not Working, and No Degree Beyond High School

Persons age 18 to 24 who: (1) are not presently enrolled in school; (2) are not currently working; and (3) have no degree beyond a high school diploma or GED. This measure reflects those young adults who are considered having difficulty navigating what most would consider a successful transition to adulthood.

High School Graduation Rates

Chart: Education Pays

Data are 2009 annual averages for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.

Appendix B: Definitions and Notes

Legislation:

Citations starting with “[State] Code” represent legal codes within the given state. For example, “TN Code Ann. § 49-6-3017:” represents a reference to the Tennessee legal code.

Children Living Below 200% Poverty

The share of children under age 18 who live in families with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. The federal poverty definition consists of a series of thresholds based on family size and composition. In 2009, a 200% poverty threshold for a family of two adults and two children was \$43,512. Poverty status is not determined for people in military barracks, institutional quarters, or for unrelated individuals under age 15 (such as foster children).

National ACT Scores

In spring 2009, all public high school eleventh graders in the states of Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee, and Wyoming were tested with the ACT as required by each state. Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee, and Wyoming students who met ACT’s 2010 graduating class criteria are included in the 2010 graduating class average score results. Consistent with ACT’s reporting policies, graduating class test results are reported only for students tested under standard time conditions.

Chart: 4th Grade Math Achievement Levels

4th grade public school students’ mathematics achievement levels, as measured and defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).



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