

How We're Working Together for Mississippi Children

Explaining Forum for the Future and the State of the State Event

What is Forum for the Future?

Forum for the Future is a movement to transform the childcare system in Mississippi. Currently, three organizations - the *Mississippi Early Learning Alliance*, the *Children's Foundation of Mississippi*, and *Child Health and Development Project: Mississippi Thrive!* - are responsible for keeping this movement organized and moving forward toward our 2030 goal.

However, the success of Forum for the Future will rely upon the continued guidance, participation, and support of many organizations and individuals working on behalf of children across the state.

THE GOAL:

By 2030, Mississippi's childcare system will be **state-of-the-art**, fueled by robust data, resources, and cross-sector collaboration to meet the needs of **all children and families**.



What was the State of the State event?

The State of the State event was designed to officially launch our goal, and to invite stakeholders to partner with us to accomplish it. During the event, we explained how and why we chose our 2030 goal; reported our findings from interviews we conducted with 25 childcare providers, early childhood system leaders, and parents; and explored how those findings align with data on childcare in Mississippi from other sources. Guided by these findings and small group discussions, we began building a vision for what a state-of-the-art childcare system could include, and previewed next steps for our work together.

What We Heard during State of the State: Major Takeaways



Collaboration is hard, but worth it.

Building a state-of-the-art childcare system will require innovative solutions, and these solutions won't come from just one person or organization. Mississippi will not make meaningful changes unless organizations and individuals within the early childhood landscape work together to co-create solutions and share resources.



Building trust is critical to our shared success.

Building trust cannot be seen as a desired secondary outcome of this process. Instead, building trust and overcoming mistrust must be included as a core strategy for our work.



Creating systems-level change is a marathon - and you can't run a marathon with a pebble in your shoe.

Some of the issues we hope to address are highly complex (e.g. balancing quality, access, and affordability) - these will require longer timelines and multifaceted approaches. Some issues, however, are more straightforward but no less painful to stakeholders. One Forum for the Future member used this metaphor - "if you're running a marathon and you get a pebble in your shoe, you need to stop and shake the pebble out before you continue the race." It's important to capitalize on opportunities to resolve "pebble problems" as we continue working to address broader challenges.

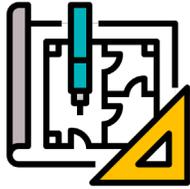


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Next steps for Forum for the Future & additional events

Together, we want to finalize a vision for what a state-of-the-art childcare system should look like in Mississippi, create a blueprint for building it, then put our plans in action.

To do this, we need to assemble two types of groups.



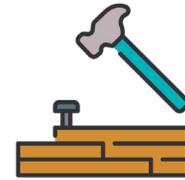
Steering Committee/Design Team

What does it do?

This group solidifies our shared goal - members are tasked with defining the scope of our collective work, providing strategic direction, and determining measures of success. Another important role of this group is to champion the overall work of the initiative.

Who are the members?

This group should include cross-sector community partners. Membership should reflect all levels of the early childhood education and childcare system.



Working Groups

What do they do?

Working groups focus on specific parts and strategies within the overall initiative, then make them happen. These groups turn plans into action.

Who are the members?

Working group membership is determined by the focus of each specific group. They need to include people with the right skills, expertise, connections, and lived experiences to effectively implement strategies.

Our Current Status

We surveyed State of the State participants to ask if and how they'd like to remain involved in this work.

6

participants

Expressed interest in joining the **steering committee.**

9

participants

Expressed interest in joining a **working group.**

We are grateful for participants' willingness to dive into this work with us! We understand that our partners are extremely busy. With that in mind, we are working with a Collective Impact expert, Deb Halliday, to determine the best structure for the steering committee/design team and working groups. We want to ensure that participating in these groups is an effective use of our partners' time and actively advances their own work.

COMING SOON: Join MELA for Early Childhood Development Day at the Capitol (Virtual)

We hope you will join us for our third annual Early Childhood Development Day at the Capitol! This year, we're focusing on a key part of early childhood development and education: **childcare**. Capitol Day is a great way to explore the role that policy (and policymakers) can play in supporting early childhood development, and helps participants build working relationships with legislators, childcare providers and other early childhood professionals.

The event will be virtual, and will take place on Tuesday, January 18 from 11:00am - 3:00pm. We'll also invite legislators to connect with their constituents after the event in regional breakout sessions (from 3:00 - 5:30, schedule permitting).

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What we heard at State of the State: Detailed Review

During the State of the State event, we presented our interview findings and related data from outside sources. These data and findings were grouped into four major themes, and participants were invited to choose one theme they wished to discuss in a small group. A detailed summary of participant feedback on each theme is provided below.

Theme 1: We're all trying to stay afloat.

What we shared	What we heard
<p>There is broad consensus from system leaders, childcare providers and parents that Mississippi's childcare system is in dire need of improvement. Childcare providers and parents find the system confusing and overwhelming to navigate. Families with limited resources, who would benefit most from established childcare supports (such as CCDF, or CCPP in Mississippi), face the most obstacles to accessing those supports. Meanwhile, system leaders lack the infrastructure they need to effectively distribute, maintain and evaluate resources and supports.</p> <p>There is a disconnect between system-provided resources and their intended audiences. Resources exist to help parents find childcare that meets their needs, just as resources exist to support childcare centers in their quality improvement efforts. However, these resources remain underutilized due to awareness and access issues.</p>	<p>Participants shared that barriers to redetermination are a hindrance to parents accessing CCPP for their children. Some providers feel that the barriers are there intentionally. Providers shared that they have experienced difficulty with obtaining accurate and pertinent information related to this process. There is a breakdown in communication between CCPP program staff, childcare providers, and parents - participants suggested that more or different training for CCPP program staff is needed.</p> <p>When parents are not approved for redetermination, it causes issues for providers as well, specifically financial issues. Providers recruit parents for CCPP, and they feel responsible for CCPP parents. All barriers are parent barriers, but providers take them on as their own barriers.</p> <p>When asked about the waitlist data, many providers said that they did not have a waitlist, as the data suggested. Instead, they reported having vacancies. Participants suggested that the waitlist data shared during the presentation may be tied to redetermination data, in that providers who had to turn down parents who lost their CCPP added them to the waitlist until they got it back.</p>
<p>Types of data points shared:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Childcare waitlist data (center-reported)• CCPP eligibility and utilization• Loss of CCPP assistance during redetermination• Major resources available for parents/childcare centers	

Theme 2: Coordination and Collaboration

What we shared	What we heard
<p>There is broad agreement that efforts to improve coordination and communication are needed at every level of the childcare system. To move forward, we need to break down silos, organize around shared goals, and establish consistent messaging about early childhood.</p> <p>To break down silos, we need to overcome mistrust between system leaders and childcare providers, improve communication, and ensure that all types of stakeholders have a true seat at the table. We will also need to establish clarity around shared goals, expectations, and individual roles within group efforts. To reduce confusion and generate public support, early childhood professionals need to reach consensus around key recommendations and speak with a unified voice.</p>	<p>Participants agreed that collaboration is key, and that, in general, interest in collaborating is increasing in the early childhood education community of the state. The State of the State and the collective impact framework were seen as good examples of ways to help foster collaboration.</p> <p>There are challenges to collaboration, such as a decentralized state infrastructure; differences of capacity and how different organizations (ex: University vs. community organization) operate; and the need to continue to build trust. Participants all had experiences of trying to collaborate, and recognize that collaboration is an ongoing effort that requires skillful attention to relationships and communication.</p>
<p>Types of data points shared:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Childcare participation in Early Learning Collaboratives• Early childhood network mapping data highlighting common goals across organizations, and high levels of reported trust and value for partners across the early childhood landscape.	

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What we heard at State of the State: Detailed Review, continued

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Theme 3: Things are different now

What we shared	What we heard
<p>The past few years have brought about major changes in the childcare landscape. Some changes represent opportunities, including new funding streams, increased public support for early care and education, and Mississippi's recent success in building a model for publicly-funded preschool.</p> <p>Other changes represent challenges, including workforce shortages and the continued impact of COVID-19.</p> <p><i>Types of data points shared:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of federal funding Mississippi will receive for childcare and early education via the American Rescue Plan Act. • Number of children served by the Pre-K collaboratives. • Percentage of Mississippi 4-year-olds enrolled in some form of publicly-funded education. • Impact of COVID-19 on childcare expenses, revenue, enrollment, ability to remain open, and more. 	<p>In order to understand the changes happening now, we need to understand the history of the early childhood system. We have to know what programs offer, to who, and for how long. In order to grow, we have to avoid duplicating services and resources, but we need enough of each to improve the early childhood landscape.</p> <p>Mistrust is the number one barrier that we have to overcome to make positive changes.</p> <p>We also have a new crop of advocates and programs that are pulling together to build capacity in the state of Mississippi.</p>

Theme 4: Childcare access, quality and affordability

What we shared	What we heard
<p>Providing high-quality childcare at a price that parents can afford, while adequately compensating providers and teachers, often feels like a catch-22. Further, defining quality is challenging, and many childcare centers in Mississippi would need additional resources (money, time, personnel and training) to meet national quality standards. Efforts to establish quality standards in Mississippi must consider both the costs and incentives associated with those standards for childcare centers and parents.</p> <p><i>Types of data points shared:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childcare center-reported data related what they would need to improve quality • Average cost of childcare in Mississippi compared with median income • Childcare subsidy reimbursement rate for centers vs. true cost of providing care. 	<p>This catch-22 perception has been around for many years. In many ways, it feels intractable. However, if we want to improve outcomes for low income families, we cannot operate from a "quality VERSUS affordability" standpoint - we cannot have one without the other.</p> <p>The early childhood education community must come to an equitable understanding of what quality is. Quality" means different things to everyone. Further, "quality" has become a confusing, loaded, and sometimes dirty word for many people.</p> <p>We do not have consensus around what quality means or looks like in practice, but everyone agrees that great staff are a central component. To build a quality system, we need to consider the costs associated with hiring and retaining great childcare and early education professionals.</p>