



Mississippi Early Learning Alliance Annual Report

July 2021 - June 2022

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Mississippi Early Learning Alliance (MELA) Annual Report is designed to summarize our activities and accomplishments over the past year. In the report, we'll share our vision for early childhood in Mississippi, explain the strategies and tactics we are using to drive progress toward that vision, and highlight emerging areas of work and collaboration.

While we are excited to share and celebrate the work we have done, MELA also intends for this report to serve as an accountability tool. We seek to be transparent about our progress with our funders, partners, and the greater early childhood community of Mississippi.

This report will cover the time period of July 2021 - June 2022, and will include next steps and future directions for the next year.

THE MELA TEAM

July 2021 - June 2022



Dr. Angela Bass
Executive Director



Biz Harris
Deputy
Director



April May
Coalitions and Programs
Director



Chloe Lake
Communications
Director

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For more information about MELA, visit our website at MSEarlyLearning.org. You can also follow us on Facebook ([@MSEarlyLearning](https://www.facebook.com/MSEarlyLearning)) or Instagram ([@MSEarlyLearningAlliance](https://www.instagram.com/MSEarlyLearningAlliance)).

Imagine what we can do for Mississippi children if we...

Leverage the work and resources of many early childhood organizations and advocates to work smarter, not harder.

Keep the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of childcare providers and parents at the center of our work.

Speak with one voice to push for realistic, research-based policies and practices that set children up for lifelong success.

Focus our combined efforts on one common goal: improving the childcare system in our state.

Our Story

MELA was founded in 2019 to help the Mississippi early childhood community turn “what if’s” into “here’s how.”

VISION

MELA will work with partners to bring about systemic change for Mississippi’s children lasting well into adulthood, which leads to a more skilled workforce and better economy.



MISSION

MELA drives collective impact with diverse stakeholders to achieve systemic change leading to the holistic development of Mississippi children in their first 8 years of life.

MELA’s long-term vision is an early childhood infrastructure that ensures all children receive the high-quality care and learning experiences they need in their first eight years of life to reach their fullest potential. We know that investing in our youngest residents now helps us build the future we want for Mississippi: one characterized by healthy families, a strong economy, and a skilled workforce.



Our Priority Area for Change

We are most effective when we identify strategic priorities that will help us make meaningful progress toward our vision.

Over the past 12-18 months, MELA has used information from national research and conversations with Mississippi early childhood professionals, policymakers, parents, and caregivers to identify a priority area for change:

childcare.



MELA is driving collective efforts in Mississippi to **rethink our current childcare system and design one that works better for everyone: parents, employers, childcare providers, other early childhood professionals, and of course, our children.**

2020 - 2023 Strategic Plan Progress Update

From September – March 2020, MELA developed a formal, three-year strategic plan to guide our work. To develop the plan, MELA conducted a thorough landscape analysis informed by over 50 early education leaders and stakeholders in Mississippi. This process yielded three overarching goals.

To download the [full strategic plan](#), visit the [“About Us”](#) page on our website.

We are proud to share that we’ve made significant progress toward each of these goals over the past year (July 2021 - June 2022).

GOAL 1

Form a statewide coalition that will identify, pursue and achieve shared goals for positive early childhood system change.

Established a common goal for change that is rooted in community voices.

In partnership with MSU’s Social Science Research Center’s *Child Health and Development Project: Mississippi Thrive!* and the Children’s Foundation of Mississippi, MELA gathered feedback and support from childcare providers, early childhood professionals, system leaders, and parents for the following 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.**

Built buy-in for the 2030 goal and officially launched our collective impact initiative: Forum for the Future.

The “statewide coalition” has evolved into a collective impact initiative called *Forum for the Future*. *Forum for the Future* is intended to grow into a powerful and responsive network of individuals and organizations who align their efforts, resources, and expertise to build a state-of-the-art childcare system.

We officially launched this initiative and our 2030 goal at our virtual and interactive State of the State event in November 2021. We invited influential childcare providers and early childhood advocates who represented a broad range of perspectives and backgrounds - 42 early childhood professionals attended.

Established the infrastructure that will propel this movement forward.

Over the past year, MELA and partners launched the *Forum for the Future* Steering Committee and the first working group.

Over 70 individuals or organizations are engaged in or publicly supportive of *Forum for the Future* efforts.

GOAL 2

Serve as a Mississippi-focused information hub with a clear communication plan to disseminate information about the statewide early childhood system.

Established MELA as a trusted source of important information for childcare providers and early childhood advocates.

We’ve used direct email campaigns, social media, and our website to share timely and important information, including:

- Deadlines for grants and requests for proposals.
- Calls to participate in pilot projects, qualitative research or paid work groups.
- Professional development opportunities.

For example, **MELA served as a critical messenger for information about child care strong grants.** In addition to our announcements and updates via digital communications channels, we promoted and hosted information sessions to help ensure that information from the Mississippi Department of Human Services reached childcare providers.

Improved the performance of our digital communications channels.

During this reporting period:

- Overall social media reach **increased by 150%**
- Email campaigns **consistently performed above industry benchmarks** for open rates and engagement.

Connected childcare providers to resources in-person and online through our shared services platform

Over 1,400 childcare providers and early childhood professionals are registered members of our shared services platform, Mississippi Early Learning Resources.

In June 2022, over 100 early childhood and childcare professionals attended our first Shared Services conference. Most attendees rated the conference as “Very Good” or “Excellent” on a follow-up survey.

GOAL 3

Develop multiple, differentiated funding streams to sustain MELA’s statewide efforts.

Completed steps to secure funding that aligns with our mission and organizational scope.

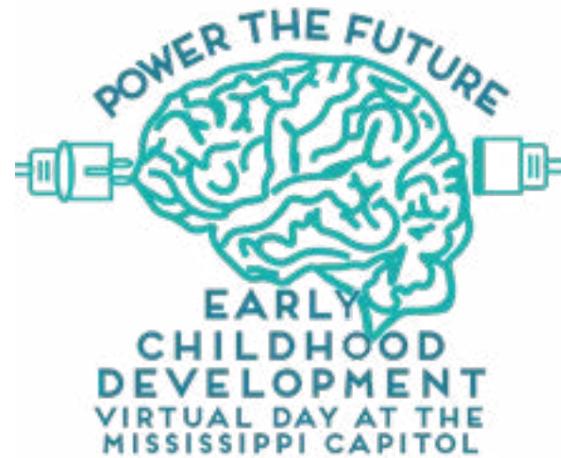
During this reporting period, MELA successfully registered as a public charity. We also **received funding to participate in several projects that will further our work and the work of other Mississippi early childhood organizations, secured sponsorships from private companies to help fund events, and developed a standard pitch** to assist with future fundraising efforts.

Our Strategic Evolution: *Building trust to drive change*

While coalition-building and strategic communications remain key pillars of MELA's overall approach to driving systemic change, we have recognized that building trusting relationships is foundational to our work. Our long-term success will be rooted in our partners' ability to trust us and each other.

To secure that trust and incentivize continued collaboration, we have prioritized relationship-building in all of our programs and strategies.

We serve as the backbone for a long-term collective impact initiative, and adhere to principles that ensure this initiative remains community-led. We are using a collective impact structure to help us engage a broad variety of partners and find solutions that are grounded in their lived experiences.



We host a shared services platform for childcare providers (MSEarlyLearningResources.org) to give them access to free or low-cost resources. These resources can help them save time, reduce costs, enhance their services, and succeed as small business owners. The platform is designed to maximize the benefits of collaboration over competition between childcare providers.



We host annual Capitol Days to ensure that people who work with children every day know how to advocate for themselves, their businesses, and the families they serve. These events connect legislators to their constituents, helping policymakers understand the challenges and priorities of the people they represent.



We facilitate the *Leading from Strength Empowerment Network*, an initiative to promote the professional advancement of women of color working in early childhood care and education. Mentorship and network-building is at the core of this initiative.



We honor our commitment to mutually-supportive partnerships by providing ad-hoc support to provider-led initiatives.



We provide curated and strategic communications that work to inform and empower early childhood professionals, especially childcare providers. We hope to continually prove ourselves as a trustworthy and credible source.



Our Impact: *July 2021 - June 2022*

This report will highlight the tangible ways our programs and strategies are working to transform Mississippi's early childhood system. Because building strong, trusting partnerships is essential to our work, we'll also highlight the ways we leveraged our events, meetings, and programs to incentivize collaboration and deepen existing organizational relationships.

FORUM FOR THE FUTURE

Forum for the Future is a movement to transform the childcare system in Mississippi. More specifically, Forum for the Future is a collective impact initiative that is intended to help individuals and organizations align their efforts, resources, and expertise around a long-term common goal: **building a state-of-the-art childcare system that meets the needs of all children & families.**

MELA is the backbone of this movement, which means we are the team responsible for keeping the work organized and moving forward. We are supported in this role by partners from the Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center (SSRC)'s *Mississippi Thrive!* project and the Children's Foundation of Mississippi.

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.**



Forum for the Future's long term goal (above) is reflective of national trends and best practices, backbone members' many years of experience in the early childhood sector, and quantitative and qualitative data on childcare in Mississippi.

MELA and SSRC conducted interviews with 25 childcare providers, system leaders, and parents to ensure the goal was reflective of their experiences, challenges, and hopes for the future.

While MELA serves as the backbone of this work, Forum for the Future is a community-led initiative, and isn't owned by any one organization or entity.

The success of this movement will be driven by the continued guidance, participation, and support of many organizations working on behalf of children across the state, as well as the involvement of parents, business owners, and policymakers.

Guiding Principles

Trust the Process

Balance Power

Dismantle Inequities

Overcome Mistrust

Resist False Dichotomies

Own the Work

STATE OF THE STATE EVENT

November 4, 2021

This event convened influential early care and education professionals to gather their feedback and gauge their support for the 2030 goal. MELA and other Forum for the Future backbone members (*Mississippi Thrive!* and the Children's Foundation) shared findings from the interviews, and connected these findings to existing qualitative and quantitative research on childcare in Mississippi.

Attendees provided their feedback on both the goal and the findings through small group discussions, and were invited to partner with us in our work moving forward.

This was not a strictly invite-only event, but backbone organizations collaborated to create a curated list of individuals to invite. This list prioritized influential childcare providers and early childhood advocates who represent a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds.



Most attendees indicated support for the 2030 goal and for Forum for the Future in a follow-up survey after the event.

The majority of survey respondents felt energized by the 2030 goal.

Attendees were asked how energized they were by the goal, on a scale of 1 to 7.



73% of respondents said they felt energized by the goal.

This event garnered public support for Forum for the Future

16

16 attendees agreed to publicly support this work on behalf of their organization.

14

14 organizations are represented across those 16 attendees.

5

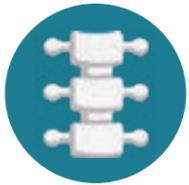
5 attendees agreed to support this work as an individual.

12

12 attendees expressed interest in joining a Forum for the Future working group.

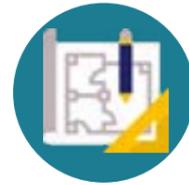
FORUM FOR THE FUTURE INFRASTRUCTURE

We spent much of the past year creating connections and relationships with additional partners and supporters, and implementing strategies to ensure Forum for the Future remains true to its guiding principles. A key part of this work was building our infrastructure, which consist of three main elements:



Backbone

The backbone team is dedicated to keeping the work organized and moving forward. Maintaining momentum isn't left up to chance. MELA fills this role with support from MSU's SSRC and the Children's Foundation.



Steering Committee

This group provides strategic direction, helps determine overall measures of success, and champions the work and the movement to others.



Working Groups

These are the implementation teams. These groups complete specific projects that will move us closer to our 2030 goal. Working Groups form in response to a specific need, then dissolve when that need has been met.

In May 2022, MELA and its backbone partners officially launched the Steering Committee and the first Forum for the Future Working Group.

Steering Committee

7 Members

Members consist of childcare practitioners, leaders in early education training and degree programs, advocates for young children and their families, and business and workforce experts. All were recruited for their unique perspectives, ability to inspire others, and their capacity to act in bold and innovative ways to transform the early care and education system in Mississippi.

First Project:

Define what we mean by "state-of-the-art" by winter 2023, including outcomes and measures of success associated with a "state-of-the-art" childcare system.

This will help Forum for the Future develop an overall strategic plan for change (**common agenda**) that many organizations can rally around.



FORUM FOR THE FUTURE INFRASTRUCTURE

Quality Support System for Childcare Working Group

Project:

Convene childcare providers to create high-level recommendations for a statewide Quality Support System (QSS) for childcare in Mississippi. These recommendations are synthesized in a report that was submitted to the Mississippi Department of Human Services in early fall 2022.

58 Members were divided across three project teams.



Recommendations Team: 19 members

This team was responsible for crafting the overall recommendations - members are the primary authors of the report. This team consists entirely of childcare providers, and members were selected via a statewide application process.



Advisory Team: 25 members

This team consisted of early childhood professionals who bring a wealth of institutional knowledge in early care and education to the table. They provided suggestions for and reflections on the process and quality support systems in general, based on their understanding of national research and lessons learned from previous quality improvement efforts in Mississippi.



Convening Team: 14 members

This team was responsible for recruiting members for the teams listed above, facilitating all meetings and focus groups, synthesizing findings & decision points, and communicating about the project. Members consisted of representatives from national entities, such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (project funder), state organizations, and parent and childcare representatives.



Over 70 individuals or organizations are engaged in or supportive of Forum for the Future.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CAPITOL DAY 2022

January 18, 2022

MELA sought to leverage our third annual Early Childhood Development Day at the Capitol as a tool to strengthen organizational relationships and amplify the voices of childcare providers. We partnered with four organizations to plan and host a virtual capitol day that met the following objectives:

- Provide a platform for childcare providers and early childhood organizations to build working relationships with legislators and one another.
- Raise awareness of childcare issues and opportunities in Mississippi, explore the roles legislators can play in supporting early childhood education, and discuss the impacts policy can have in this arena.
- Help childcare providers and early childhood organizations understand how policy is made, and how they can exert influence on the system.

4	organizations co-hosted Capitol Day with MELA	MELA worked with Mississippi First, Mississippi State University-Meridian, the Mississippi Early Childhood Association, and Marion Love & Care Babysitting Center, LLC to plan and host Capitol Day 2022.
8	organizations hosted breakout sessions	Organizations were invited to apply to host a breakout session during Capitol Day. MELA and the planning team selected speakers from seven Mississippi organizations and one national organization.
8	legislators participated (bipartisan)	Eight Mississippi legislators participated in either our pre-recorded panel discussion or our regional discussion sessions (or both). Both political parties were represented in the panel and discussion sessions.

Capitol Day 2022 Videos

MELA prepared two videos to screen during Early Childhood Development Capitol Day



Childcare Issues and Opportunities Video
MELA recorded interviews with childcare providers and early childhood professionals to give them a platform to discuss challenges they've faced, how they've stepped up to meet the needs of children and families, and what's needed to improve the childcare system.

192 views
In the 6 months following Capitol Day, this video was viewed 192 times on YouTube.



Mississippi Legislator Panel
MELA pre-recorded a panel with Mississippi legislators to get their thoughts on several key topics within early education and childcare. Our panel featured Representative Kent McCarty and Representative John Hines. The questions we asked our panel members reference the Childcare Issues & Opportunities video, as well as feedback and questions we gathered from childcare providers and early childhood advocates across the state.

HOW TO WATCH: Visit mearlylearning.org/take-action/capitol-day

CAPITOL DAY 2022 OUTCOMES:

Registration & Evaluation Survey Data

The majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- | | | | |
|------------|--|------------|--|
| 81% | "I learned about an organization that I want to connect with in the future." | 81% | "I learned something new about the legislative process." |
| 94% | "I have a better understanding of the way legislators impact childcare." | 85% | "I learned more about how I can exert influence on policy that impacts me" |

87% of survey respondents rated Capitol Day 2022 as **"Excellent."**
13% rated it as **"Very Good."**

89% of survey respondents said they were **"very likely"** to attend **Capitol Day 2023.**

258 early childhood interest holders from across the state pre-registered for Capitol Day 2022, and over 100 attended:

Capitol Day 2022 attendees said:

"Incredible job as always! I love the way the theme and focus shifts each year so it feels different but we know to expect the same exceptional quality and incredibly effective time together. I'm ready to be in person again when it is safe to do so!"

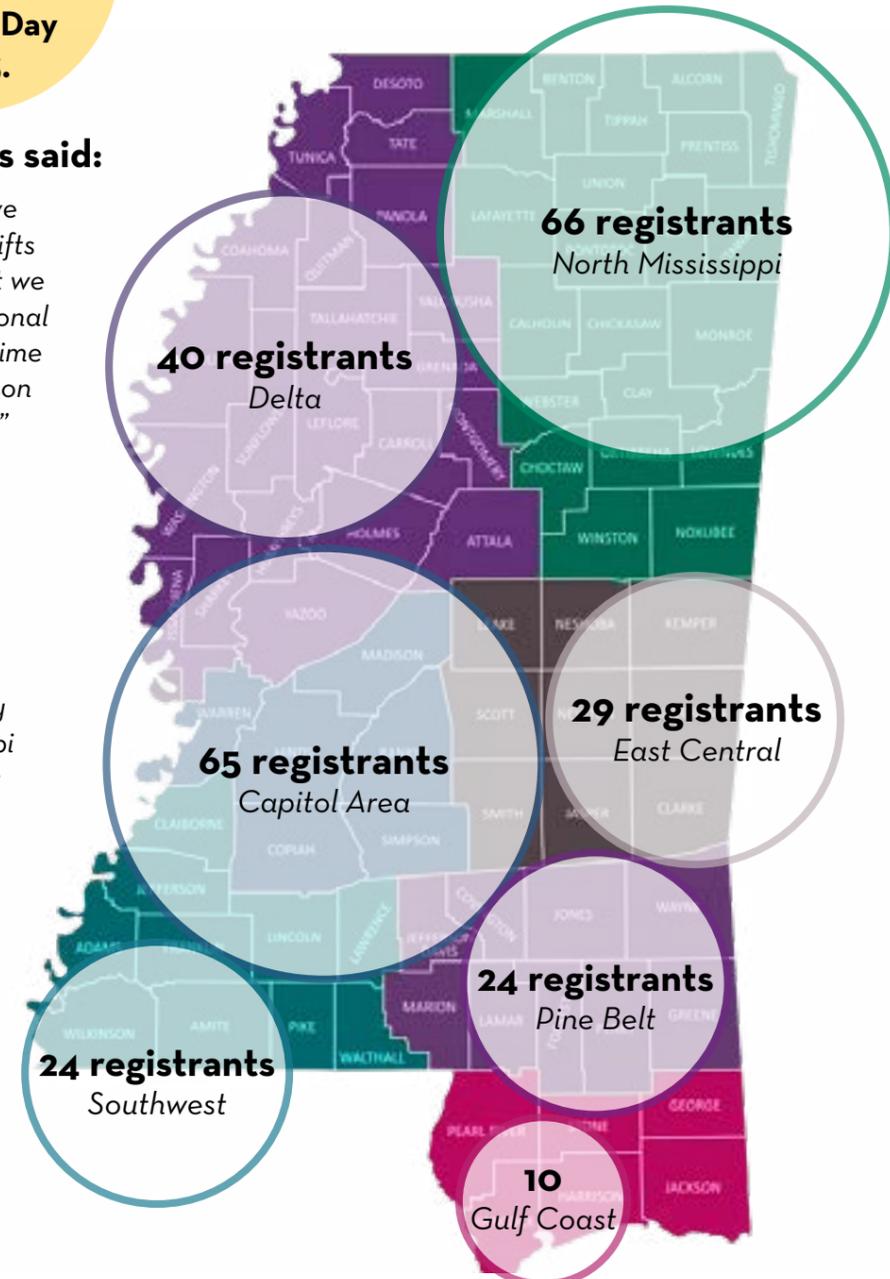
"This event was VERY well organized and informative. Thank you!"

"Everything was great. I really enjoyed hearing the Mississippi Legislator Panel. It was great to hear these gentlemen's passion about ECE."

"The videos were powerful."

"I think this is so important to our future."

"I would love to collaborate more with MELA."



MISSISSIPPI EARLY LEARNING RESOURCES

MELA's Shared Services platform for childcare workers

Mississippi Early Learning Resources (MSEarlyLearningResources.org) is designed to help childcare directors and providers reduce costs, strengthen their business practices, and focus on what matters most: providing high-quality care and education to Mississippi kids.



Childcare workers register as members on the site to gain access to:

<p>30% 50%</p> <p>Discounts on essential supplies, products, and services.</p>	<p>Ready-to-use tools and templates, such as business plans and employee handbooks</p>
<p>Mississippi childcare policies, forms, and licensing regulations - all in one place</p>	<p>Regularly-updated resources and tools to encourage parent and family engagement</p>
<p>Educational activities, assessments, and lesson plans to use in their classrooms.</p>	<p>Advocacy & professional development resources for directors and staff.</p>

There are currently **over 1,500** registered members on the site

This represents a **20% increase** from the previous reporting period (Jan. 2020- June 2021)

Membership has remained **FREE** for approved users

Mississippi Early Learning Resources has been recognized as an innovative tool with the power to connect childcare providers to low-cost health benefits and support staff retention.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Solve Challenge is a competitive funding opportunity with global reach - it attracts candidates from around the world.

MELA was selected as a Solve Challenge finalist for our plan to leverage Mississippi Early Learning Resources to help childcare center owners and directors offer their employees dental, vision, telemedicine, and other key benefits at a cost that won't break centers' budgets.



FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE

June 11, 2022

We hosted our first annual shared services conference this summer in partnership with Loving Hands Educational Services. This conference was designed to bring childcare and early education professionals together in person to:

- Learn how to maximize the resources available to them on MSEarlyLearningResources.org.
- Explore how the shared services approach can help early care and education programs take their work to the next level.
- Connect and network with other providers, vendors, and early childhood experts.

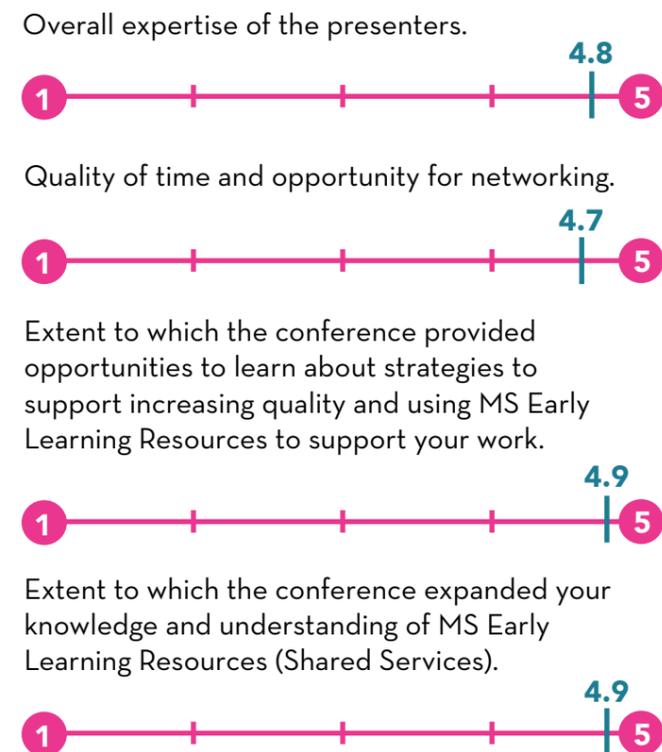
The conference **strengthened MELA's relationships with early childhood professionals, and increased awareness of our resources for childcare providers.**

14	14 speakers representing 8 organizations gave presentations throughout the day
8	8 organizations set up vendor tables to network with attendees between sessions.
2	Two companies chose to financially support the conference as sponsors.

Over 100 childcare and early childhood professionals attended the conference

Data from an evaluation survey suggests that we met our goals:

Survey respondents were asked to rate the following event aspects on a scale of 1 to 5 (1= poor, 5 = excellent). Average ratings are below:



Survey respondents shared what they got out of the day:

"New resources, new partnerships, new insights."

"I learned so much about creating my own works for the classroom and I am so excited to go back to my class and create!"

"I learned more on child development, and how to react towards parents in certain situations."

"I learned how important it is to include parents in your planning as much as possible."

"Many ideas were inspired from this conference."

LEADING FROM STRENGTH

MELA's Empowerment Network for Women of Color

Leading from Strength is designed to promote the professional advancement of highly-qualified women of color working in early childhood care and education. This initiative seeks to promote racial and gender equity within the field by providing participants the support, mentorship, and networking opportunities they need to step into the leadership roles they are ready and equipped to hold.



The initiative consists of small cohorts of highly-qualified women of color who engage in a series of learning experiences over the course of one year. These experiences are designed to honor and elevate members' wisdom and lived experiences, foster collaboration among women across disciplines, and provide professional leadership training. We recognize each woman as the author and authenticator of her own growth and development – as such, *Leading from Strength* activities and experiences are designed to help women capitalize on their own inner strength and power.

FAST FACTS:

- MELA partnered with Leading for Children to facilitate the first cohort.
- The first cohort launched in February 2022 and consists of 14 members,
- MELA and Leading for Children hosted a half-day in-person convening on May 13, 2022. At this session, members received leadership training, had professional head shots taken, and shared personal experiences, reflections, and expertise.

What cohort members told us about the in-person convening:

"The session was awesome. It was so much positive energy in the room."

"This was a gift that continues to bless me every day. I really enjoyed it."

"This convening was amazing. Love having the 'no judgment zone' and being able to share feelings openly."

"Our time together was refreshing and inspiring!"

Member achievements since May 2022:



Two members accepted new positions that represent significant career advancements.



One member presented her work at a national conference.



SUPPORT FOR PROVIDER-LED INITIATIVES

We understand the need to work toward long-term change while also helping partners, supporters, and childcare professionals meet their immediate needs. Our partners know they can come to us when they need resources, advice, or a helping hand. Below are some highlights of ways the MELA has provided ad-hoc support to special projects designed to help childcare providers.

Provided communications and logistics support for an Early Childhood Job Fair.

In November 2021, MELA helped Agape Christian Academy World, Teachers C.A.R.E., and Loving Hands Educational Services make their Early Childhood Job Fair a success. The job fair connected early education students and retired or former teachers with childcare and early childhood employers.

MELA created a press release, flyer, and a social media toolkit to promote the event and recruit vendors, helped secure a location for the event, and participated as an event vendor.



Coordinated a bulk order of COVID-19 rapid tests during a statewide shortage.



In January 2022, there was a shortage of COVID-19 tests available to the public through drug stores and other retailers. Childcare providers were unable to get tested for COVID-19 quickly following an exposure. We heard from childcare centers that this delay in testing forced them to shut down classrooms.

To help, MELA and Loving Hands Educational Services worked with a local supplier, Mississippi Cares (a Mississippi Early Learning Resources vendor), to purchase rapid tests in bulk.

Because many childcare providers did not have the resources to purchase a bulk order themselves, we coordinated with Mississippi Cares to combine smaller orders to meet the bulk requirement (500 tests). Ordinarily Mississippi Cares would require individual centers to purchase at least 40 tests at \$14 per test, (\$560). With this process, providers could choose to order as few as 10 tests (\$140). **25 centers ordered tests, and MELA distributed them personally.**

Leveraged relationships and networks across the state to conduct focus groups and interviews for the Mississippi State Early Childhood Advisory Council (MS SECAC)'s Early Childhood System Asset Map project.

In the spring of 2022, MELA was recruited to conduct focus groups and individual interviews with childcare providers and parents to inform MS SECAC's landscape analysis of early childhood systems in Mississippi. Start Early, an organization contracted by MS SECAC, used this qualitative data to identify opportunities for, and barriers to, collaboration and coordination across early childhood education programs and services.

MELA engaged over 80 demographically diverse parents and childcare workers across the state through focus groups and individual interviews. Findings and direct quotes from the focus groups and interviews are included in two publications from MS SECAC's Mississippi Early Childhood System Asset Map project: the **Program Profiles Report** and **Strengths and Opportunities Report**.

COMMUNICATIONS HUB

MELA uses several digital media channels to share information and resources that empower early childhood professionals, especially childcare providers.

MELA uses social media (Facebook and Instagram), email campaigns/newsletters, and our website to:

- Increase MELA's visibility within the early childhood landscape. This includes sharing opportunities to engage with us and our partners, and updates related to our work.
- Amplify news about important policies, events, funding opportunities or other time-sensitive items that affect childcare providers, early childhood professionals, and families with young children.
- Reinforce relationships by highlighting the work and successes of our partner organizations.
- Publicize professional development or advocacy opportunities for early childhood professionals.
- Share relevant research and evidence-based tools and resources related to early care and education.

Social Media Performance: July 15, 2021 - July 15, 2022

Facebook: 1,218 page likes (as of July 15, 2022)

We gained **108 new "page likes"** during this time period

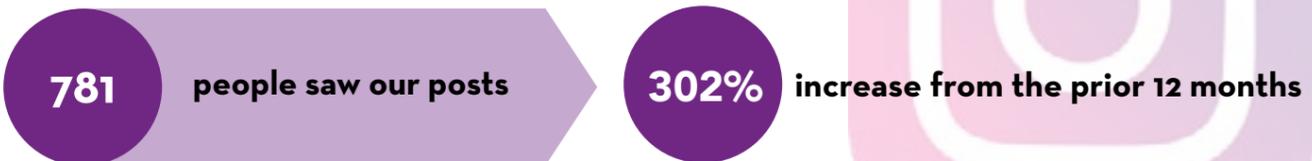
Facebook Reach:



Instagram: 197 followers (as of July 15, 2022)

We gained **34 new followers** during this time period

Instagram Reach:



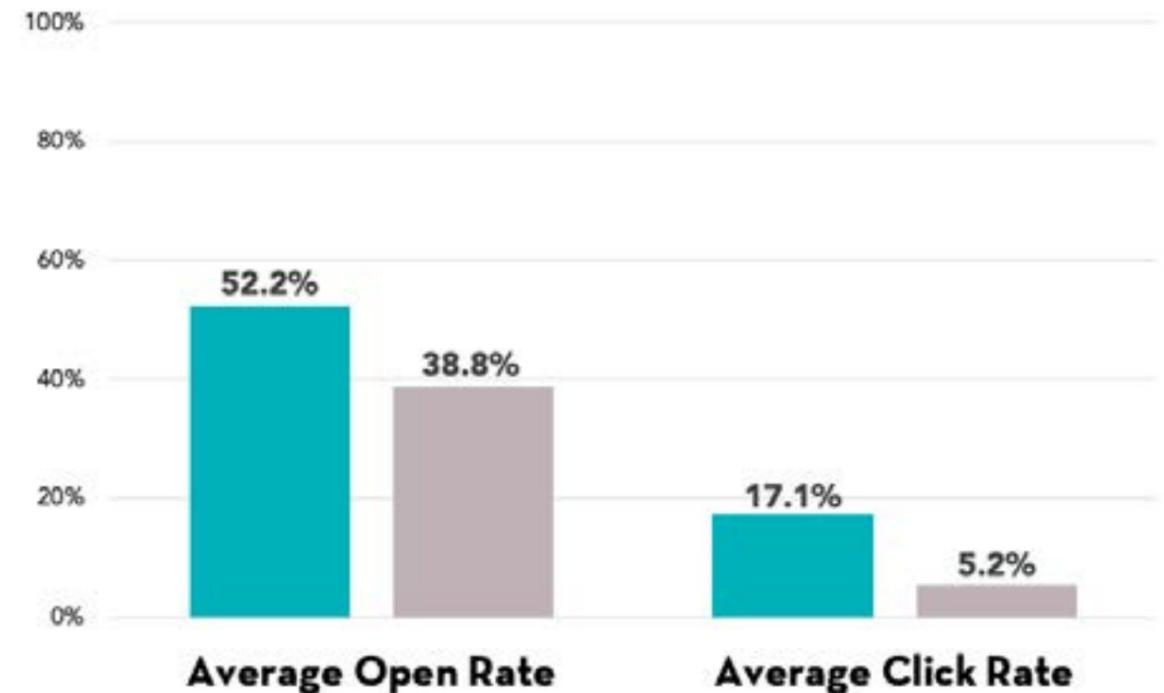
MELA served as a key messenger for information about the **Child Care Strong Grants**. These grants were administered by the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS).

MELA's posts about *Child Care Strong Grants* and related information sessions reached an average of **201 people per post**.

Email Campaign Performance: July 15, 2021 - July 15, 2022

MELA sent out **30 email campaigns** via MailChimp to various audiences during this time period.

The average **open** and **click rates** for **MELA campaigns** are well above **industry benchmarks** (average campaign performance by email campaigns sent by non-profits, as tracked by MailChimp).



Definitions:

1. **Open rate:** Percentage of successfully delivered campaigns that were opened by recipients.
2. **Click rate:** Percentage of campaigns that received at least one click (virtually all email campaigns contain links).

Website Performance: July 15, 2021 - July 15, 2022

MSEarlyLearning.org received **5,995 visitors** during this time period

Our top two performing pages - other than the homepage - both shared user-friendly information on **Child Care Strong Grants**:

- One page shared a downloadable one-pager we created before to help childcare providers understand what the grants were and how to apply.
- The other page contained specific information about application deadlines, forms to use, and tips to ensure all information was submitted correctly to MDHS.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR MELA?

As we move into our fourth year as an organization, we are proud of the progress we've made on our 2020-2023 Strategic Plan, and we're excited to explore new dimensions of our work. As we move forward, we will continue refining our approach and our role in order to remain responsive to emerging needs and opportunities without losing focus on long-term goals.

We are particularly proud that MELA's programs and long-term goals remain guided by the voices of childcare providers, parents, and other early childhood interest holders. MELA has been honored to provide platforms for childcare providers in particular to share their experiences and perspectives with policymakers, funders, and the early childhood community at large. We will continue to prioritize the needs of those who will be affected most by any changes to the childcare system in Mississippi: childcare providers, parents, and young children.

Team Changes: Continuing MELA's Mission as the Team Evolves

One major change going into our July 2022 - June 2023 reporting period is a staff transition. In July 2022, MELA's founder and Executive Director, Dr. Angela Bass, transitioned out of her role with MELA to become the Mississippi Regional Executive Director of RePublic Schools, a network of public charter schools based in Jackson and Nashville.



MELA's Deputy Director, Biz Harris, is now MELA's Interim Executive Director.

Ms. Harris brings many years of experience in education and early childhood in Mississippi and a successful track record of facilitating collaboration between individuals, organizations, and institutions to the role. She is committed to promoting equity and inclusion at all levels. While Dr. Bass will be greatly missed, MELA is well-positioned to maintain and expand our impact moving forward.

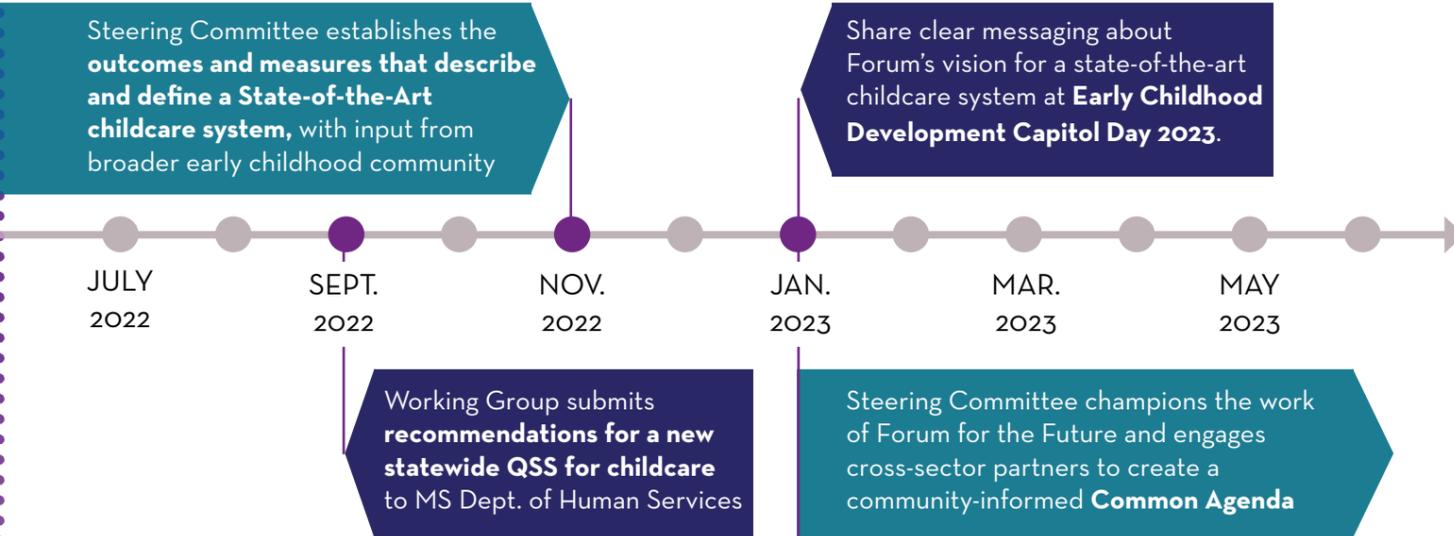
Forum for the Future: Moving from Planning to Action

The Forum for the Future Steering Committee is expected to complete its work defining the measures and outcomes associated with a state-of-the-art childcare system in winter 2022. Their definition will be shared with various interest holders across the state to gather feedback, build buy-in, and solidify Forum for the Future's connections to other organizations' ongoing work.

Once the Steering Committee finalizes a community-informed definition of "state-of-the-art," this definition will serve as the foundation for Forum for the Future's common agenda (the common agenda establishes a shared understanding of the problem and offers an action plan for solving the problem through mutually-reinforcing activities). The common agenda will include strategies and tactics related to supporting childcare quality that were identified by the Quality Support System (QSS) for Childcare Working Group.

Over the next 12 months, MELA anticipates that Forum for the Future will gather supporters and engage additional partners in two primary ways:

1. Collaborative work to build a common agenda that works to maximize and align outside organizations' existing programs, strategies, and resources, and
2. New, project- or topic-specific working groups that help MELA and all Forum for the Future partners and supporters get closer to achieving our shared goals.



Early Childhood Development Capitol Day: Building Capacity at the Grassroots Level to Inform and Influence Policy

MELA has begun the planning process for the 2023 Early Childhood Development Capitol Day in collaboration with various early childhood interest holders and advocates. In keeping with previous years, we will use Capitol Day to help build the capacity of childcare providers and early childhood professionals to understand, inform or influence policies and legislation that impact young children. This year, however, we will also align early childhood professionals around specific policy recommendations designed to support childcare teacher retention and reduce the cost of childcare for families without reducing provider income or teacher pay. While the exact content and structure of the day has not yet been determined, we know that it will align with Forum for the Future's vision for childcare in our state.

During the 2023 year's legislative session, we will also join partners in celebrating the ten year anniversary of the passage of the Early Learning Collaboratives Act, and consider what other policies and investments are needed to support the development and education of young children in Mississippi.

Mississippi Early Learning Resources (Shared Services): Helping Members Get the Most Out of the Platform

Over the next year, MELA will design and implement a comprehensive strategy to increase childcare provider utilization of our shared services platform, Mississippi Early Learning Resources.

Key tactics include:

- Highlighting specific savings programs designed to support staff retention and satisfaction, such as low-cost dental, vision, and telemedicine benefits that childcare directors can offer their employees.
- Helping members navigate the platform effectively, so they find what they need quickly.
- Partnering with outside agencies to promote the platform, including the Mississippi State Department of Health's Child Care Facilities Licensure Branch.
- Creating training and networking opportunities for members through the annual conference and smaller events (*the 2022 Mississippi Early Learning Resources Conference is pictured below*).



Leading from Strength Empowerment Network for Women of Color: Honoring and Elevating Childcare Directors

The current cohort wraps up their formal leadership training in November 2022, but will continue to remain part of the Leading from Strength network. The next cohort will consist only of childcare directors and owners, in recognition of the critical role that women of color play in childcare settings as leaders, mentors, and business owners.

Additionally, MELA will work to build up relationships and connections with Latinx and Spanish-speaking women of color, and organizations that serve these women. The perspectives and lived experiences of this demographic tend to be underrepresented in efforts to improve early childhood services and policies in Mississippi, at least in part due to a lack of existing partnerships and relationships with Latinx and Spanish-speaking leaders and advocates. MELA hopes to leverage Leading from Strength to begin closing that gap.

TEAM REFLECTIONS

We've spent time establishing strong roots so we can reach new heights.

MELA spent its first two years as an organization taking time to listen and learn from childcare providers, advocates, researchers, and parents. As the MELA team reflects on the progress we've made since MELA's inception, we're proud of the path we've taken to lay the groundwork for systems-level change. We've seen clear benefits from dedicating time and resources to fully understanding the current early childhood landscape through the eyes of caregivers, direct service providers, and system leaders.

Thanks to the deep community roots that MELA has established over the past two years, we are now well-equipped to start identifying specific solutions to improve the childcare system in our state, and leveraging our partners and supporters to help us advocate for or implement those solutions. We are grateful to the many people and organizations who granted us their time and expertise, and trusted us with their stories and hopes for the future.

We look forward to reinforcing existing relationships and engaging new partners as we work on ways to ensure that working parents get the childcare they need, childcare providers are supported as the essential professionals they are, and Mississippi children receive high quality care and education that sets them up for lifelong success.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth "Biz" Harris
Interim Executive Director

April May
Coalitions and Programs Director

Chloe Lake
Communications Director



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MELA is grateful to our current and former members of the MELA Board of Directors. Our board members have volunteered countless hours to guide and oversee MELA and its strategic direction.

Thank you:

- Dr. Devon Brenner, Board Chair
- Dr. Ira Murray, Board Vice Char
- Ross Weems, Board Treasurer
- Dr. Jameshya Ballard
- Corey Hinshaw
- Dr. Richard Long
- Mandy Mahoney
- Dr. Suzette Matthews
- Eddie Oliver, III
- Dr. Alexander Washington
- Alicia Hall (former member)



MELA also extends a warm and sincere thank you to the Tallahatchie River Foundation. MELA's work was started with Mr. Morgan Freeman's vision to support early literacy in Mississippi, and it was carried forward by his daughter, Morgana Freeman. Ms. Morgana Freeman worked tirelessly to establish the *Thrive by 3rd* Advisory Committee, which laid the groundwork for MELA.

Thanks to the incredible vision and generosity of Mr. Freeman and his daughter Morgana, MELA exists today, and will impact the lives of many Mississippi families and children. We owe the Freemans a huge thank you.