



Mississippi Early Learning Alliance Annual Impact Report

July 2022 - June 2023
Published November 2023

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Mississippi Early Learning Alliance (MELA) Annual Report is designed to summarize our activities and accomplishments over the past year. In this report, we will 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. This report will cover the time period of July 2022 - June 2023 and will include next steps and future directions for the next year.

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.

MELA 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. Mrs. Morgana Freeman worked tirelessly to establish the Thrive by 3rd Advisory Committee which laid the groundwork for MELA.

THE MELA TEAM July 2022 - June 2023



Biz Harris
Executive Director



April May
Coalitions and Programs
Director



Chloe Lake
Communications
Director

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CONTACT US

If you have questions or comments about this report, please contact Biz Harris at Biz@MsEarlyLearning.org.

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 a common goal: improving the early care and education 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 focus our efforts on priority areas that must be addressed to make meaningful progress toward our vision.

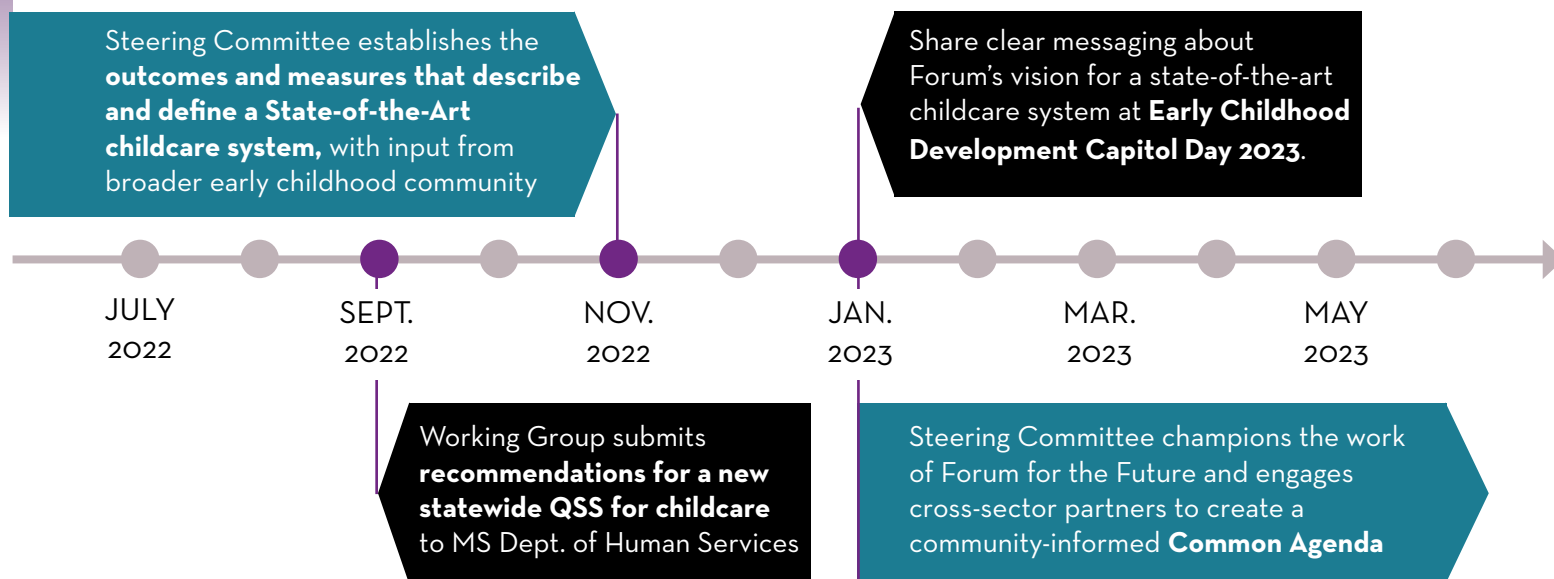
Based on multiple surveys, focus groups, and conversations with Mississippi early childhood professionals, policymakers, parents and caregivers, and business leaders, we’ve identified a focus area for our work over the next seven years:

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.**

MELA’s YEAR AT A GLANCE



2020 - 2023 STRATEGIC 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 continued progress in each of our goal areas over the past year (July 2022 - June 2023).

GOAL 1

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

All of our coalition building efforts are generously sponsored by the Tallahatchie River Foundation.

The statewide coalition, Forum for the Future, officially launched in 2021.

Created a community-informed Common Agenda based on our long-term goal

The Steering Committee (SC) was tasked with defining what outcomes are associated with a "state-of-the-art childcare system" and how to measure those outcomes. Once the SC created the overall description of how we would define and measure success, we asked experts and key decisionmakers for their feedback and input. This process has resulted in a broadly-approved common agenda that will guide Forum for the Future's work over the next seven years or more.

Forum for the Future has launched four working groups thus far.

- Working groups are time-bound and project-focused; they are the action teams of any collective impact initiative. Forum for the Future working groups complete projects that build upon one another - as well as related work being done outside of Forum for the Future - to help us make incremental progress toward a state-of-the-art childcare system in Mississippi.
- Previous working group: QSS Recommendations Team, which ran from May 2022 - September 2022
- 3 working groups launched in May 2023

Defined what membership includes and recruited members.

Over the past year, MELA defined what being a member of Forum for the Future means - including member requirements and incentives - and invited childcare providers, early childhood advocates, business leaders and more to become members.



ABOUT 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: **build 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).

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.**



The Mississippi Early Learning Alliance is the backbone and primary facilitator of Forum for the Future. However, the success of this movement will be driven by the continued guidance, participation, and support of the many organizations working on behalf of children across the state, as well as the involvement of parents, business owners, elected officials, researchers, and more.

Guiding Principles

Trust the Process

Balance Power

Dismantle Inequities

Overcome Mistrust

Resist False Dichotomies

Own the Work

55+

Individual Members

20+

Childcare Center Members

15+

Nonprofit, Academic, & Gov't Org Members

90+

Supporters

ABOUT THE COMMON AGENDA

We know that a “state-of-the-art” childcare system looks different to everyone. However, we knew that we needed to define what state-of-the-art means to Forum for the Future in order to build a common agenda for change. To create this definition, we combined grassroots insights with state-level data and national research. We spent nearly two years listening and talking to childcare providers, early childhood agency leaders, parents, policymakers, and business leaders about how they’d like to see childcare change in Mississippi and what building blocks need to be in place to improve the early care and education system. Throughout this process, we researched promising new practices from other states, and kept current with national data on childcare workforce issues, quality improvement, and access to care.

The Forum for the Future Steering Committee was tasked with taking all of this information, combining it with their own lived expertise, and creating a comprehensive definition of “a state-of-the-art childcare system” for Mississippi.

This Graphic represents the four components of the Forum For the Future Common Agenda and provides the basis for the coalitions future work and recommendations.



DEFINING WORKING GROUPS

Another critical aspect of our coalition-building work has been to develop a clear process for our working groups. Our working groups complete projects that align with the common agenda. These projects build upon one another – as well as related work being done outside of Forum for the Future – to help us make incremental progress toward a state-of-the-art childcare system in Mississippi.

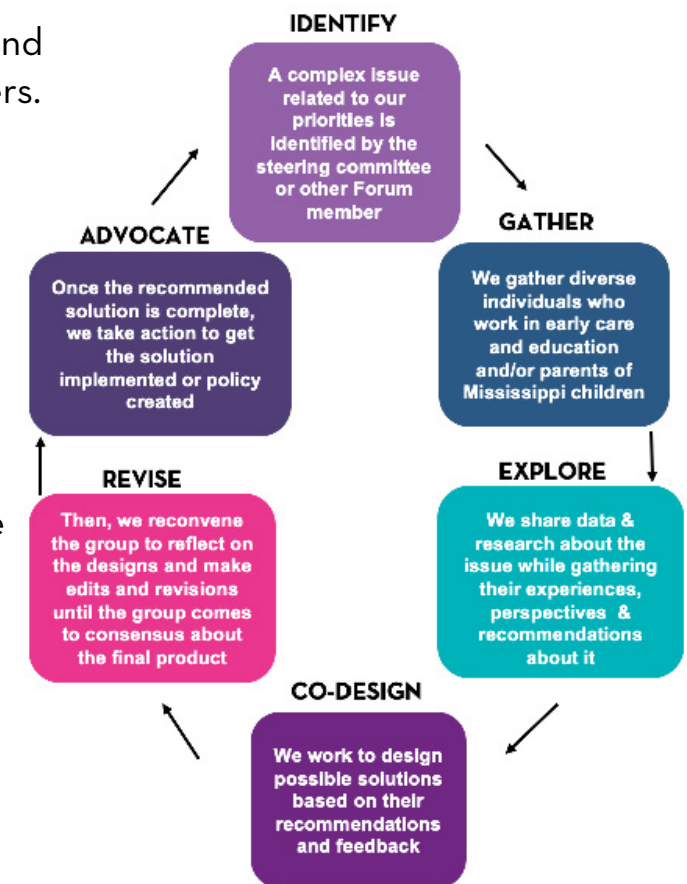
In conjunction with creating the working group process, we launched three additional working groups at the 2023 May Summit focused on critical issues related to the common agenda and co-facilitated by Forum For the Future members. These three working groups will continue into the 2023-2024 Fiscal Year.

WORKING GROUP A: Explore Childcare Participation in Early Learning Collaboratives

WORKING GROUP B: Explore funding structures to provide wage supplements and professional development directly to childcare professionals.

WORKING GROUP C: Analyze the cost of providing quality childcare services across care models & settings. Determine how to close the gap between how much quality services cost and how much families can afford to pay.

THE PROCESS



FORMALIZING COALITION MEMBERSHIP

Another important step we took for the Forum this year was defining what “membership” meant for an individual or organization. We unveiled this definition of membership at our May Summit, and as a result, we had over 50 individuals sign on as full members and over 15 organizations or agencies. Here’s what it means to be a Forum For the Future FULL member:

- Publicly show support for Forum for the Future (name & logo on the website)
- Stay informed and engaged: read email updates, participate in meetings, consider joining a working group
- Align your work/your organization’s work with the common agenda. Share relevant data, partnership opportunities, and updates about aligned projects with other members.
- Publicize or share Forum announcements, resources and progress with your networks.

ADDITIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF FORUM FOR THE FUTURE:

- The Quality Support System Working Group wrapped up and produced key deliverable: *Recommendations from Child Care Providers for a New Mississippi Child Care Quality Support System* Report. This report was submitted to the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS).



Recommendations from this report were heavily referenced in MDHS's strategic plan for the Preschool Develop Grant Birth to Five Renewal (<https://www.msearlylearning.org/pdg-b5/>). This grant provides Mississippi with \$30 million over the next three years to improve access to high-quality early child care and education programs. Additionally, much of the language and recommendations were reflected in a series of MDHS Town Hall Meetings that shared future plans for a new Quality Support System.

- The generosity of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation allowed the Social Sciences Research Center's Systems Change Lab to become the official data partner of the Forum. This partnership has been invaluable to the work of the Forum as it is a move toward the pooling of resources and shared ownership of the Forum work that we have been seeking.
- We held a **Membership Summit** where we:
 - Shared the Common Agenda
 - Defined what it means to be a member of Forum for the Future
 - Launched three new working groups

THE SUMMIT HOSTED OVER 85 ATTENDEES (Virtually and In-Person) AND INCLUDED REMARKS FROM THESE LEADERS:



Dr. Libbie Sonnier
Louisiana Policy Institute for Children



Dr. Jill Dent
MS Department of Education



Hope Mikell
Hattiesburg Public School District



Chad Allgood
MS Department of Human Services



Tiffannie Hedin
Toyota

SUPPORTING FUTURE COALITION MEMBERS: 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.
- Leading From Strength Cohort 1 wrapped up in June of 2023.

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 Summer of 2022:



Two members accepted new positions that represent significant career advancements.



One member presented her work at a national conference.





SUPPORTING CHILDCARE PROFESSIONALS TO ADVOCATE FOR COALITION RECOMMENDATIONS

MELA consistently seeks to elevate the voices and perspectives of people caring for and educating young children. We know that legislators and other policymakers need to hear personal stories from these educators to connect the dots between policy, childcare, and the strength of Mississippi's current and future workforce. Part of this work involves building the capacity of childcare workers to advocate effectively for themselves.

In preparation for the Mississippi legislative session, MELA partnered with the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning to host a virtual advocacy workshop for childcare workers. The workshop was offered at three different times and attendees received two contact hours. A recorded version of this workshop is available on mearlylearningresources.org.

Attendees learned:

- How early childhood and childcare policy is made, and the points in the process where constituent input can have the greatest impact.
- How to get face-time with their senators, representatives, and other elected officials.
- How to make the most of their time with legislators to drive the changes they want to see.
- Where to find resources, guidance, and opportunities for advocacy

Related Outcomes:

- One childcare provider (Joanne Weith) invited her Senator (Chad McMahan) and the Mayor to her center in Lee County after support from the MELA team. Joanne and Penny Mansell also met with Sen. McMahan the day after Early Childhood Capitol Day, demonstrating their commitment to maintaining a continued relationship with their elected officials.
- Tamara Smith, Director of Early Childhood for Midtown Partners, Inc. met with Senator Brice Wiggins to discuss childcare participation in ELCs and wage supplements for childcare workers.



We Hosted 3 Virtual Sessions with Forum For the Future Partner, Dr. Cathy Grace.

48 childcare providers attended at least one session.

ACTIVATING THE COALITION: EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy change is necessary to produce systems-level change. During this reporting period, we expanded our work to shape or change early childhood laws or policies. We also worked to give childcare workers the tools and training needed to share their stories with policymakers and advocate for changes they would like to see on a local, community, and statewide scale.

State Senate Hearings on the Needs of Women, Children, and Families

In the wake of the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* Supreme Court decision, Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann created a senate study group to explore the potential impact of the decision on Mississippi families. The group was chaired by Senator Nicole Boyd, and lawmakers were tasked with making legislative recommendations related to families and young children from birth to 3 years old. The study group held four public hearings in September and October 2022 to hear testimonies from experts on various topics including: maternal and child healthcare, adoption, foster care, child support, early intervention services, and childcare availability.

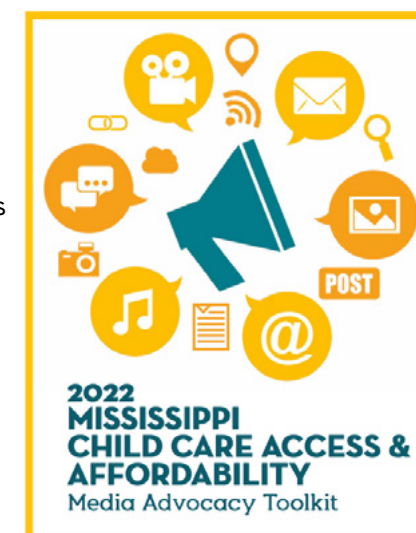
In preparation for the hearing focused on childcare availability, MELA, the University of Mississippi's Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning, and other early childhood education partners gathered data and community input on policy solutions that could increase working families' access to affordable childcare. **The following recommendations were shared before and during the hearing:**

- **Promote childcare teacher retention through a voluntary wage supplement program funded through unallocated/unencumbered state dollars, such as excess lottery funds.**
- **Remove the child support requirement from the Child Care Payment Program application.**
- **Reduce the overall cost of childcare for families through a refundable Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit.**
- **Transfer the maximum amount of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars allowed to increase funding to childcare assistance for eligible families.**

To help the early childhood community speak with a unified voice to promote policy solutions, MELA created two policy briefs, a policy recommendation summary document, and a Media Advocacy toolkit.

The Advocacy Toolkit included:

- Press release for local newspapers
- Sample social media posts
- Guidance for submitting a Letter to the editor or Op-Ed
- 2 policy briefs
- One summary document



These efforts received earned media attention in advance of the hearings. These are samples of the coverage:

- The Picayune Item: [Advocates Share Solutions to Increase Access to Affordable Childcare](#)
- The Daily Journal: [Letter to the Editor - Child Care Educators are the Workforce Behind the Workforce](#)

EARLY CHILDHOOD CAPITOL DAY

Every year, MELA partners with other early childhood organizations to host an Early Childhood Capitol Day. Two of these events were held virtually, due to COVID-19 precautions, and two have been in-person events. During this reporting period, Capitol Day was on January 18, 2023 and was an in-person event at the state Capitol building, followed by a networking reception at the Old Capitol Inn.

This was the first Capitol Day focused on a specific, shared policy agenda and included four legislative recommendations that were developed with input and feedback from Forum partners and other leaders and coalitions.

Previous Capitol Days provided an opportunity for early childhood professionals to learn more about policy, share information about their work with each other and their legislators, and begin developing connections with their elected officials. This year, MELA and partners built on that foundation and capitalized on the momentum created by the senate, study-group hearings to encourage the legislature to take action on four issues across health and education that impacted young children in Mississippi.

OUR 4th ANNUAL CAPITOL DAY BY THE NUMBERS

80 joined us in the Capitol Rotunda to learn more about the four recommendations.

8 legislators engaged with early childhood professionals and advocates during or immediately after Capitol Day.

50+ childcare providers and advocates attended the networking reception, and 9 organizations hosted informational tables for our partner organizations and their initiatives.



CAPITOL DAY UPDATES

At the 2023 Capitol Day, we shared four specific policy recommendations with lawmakers and the public. We believe that taking action on those four policy recommendations is one way to start a domino effect that reduces cross-sector worker shortages, cuts red tape, and strengthens our economy. We are thrilled that three out of four of our recommendations have come to fruition!

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Increase single parents' access to childcare by removing the requirement that they cooperate with child support enforcement to be eligible for the Child Care Payment Program (CCPP).

WIN! The requirement that single parents cooperate with child support enforcement was removed, effective May 15, 2023.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Create long-term, cost savings by reducing health problems and deaths associated with pregnancy by continuing Medicaid coverage through 12 months postpartum.

WIN! This recommendation has been signed into law! As of July 1, 2023, women who were eligible for Medicaid coverage during their pregnancies will remain eligible for Medicaid coverage through 12 months postpartum.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Create an Early Intervention task force and pilot project to study methods and models to increase the number of children served, keep qualified early intervention practitioners in the state, reduce special education costs when children enter school, and improve the lives of Mississippi children and families in need.

WIN! This recommendation was addressed across two bills: Senate Bill 2485 (passed and signed into law) and Senate Bill 2167 (passed by House and Senate, awaiting Governor's signature). The first bill helps to expand and retain a qualified, early-intervention workforce in the state by broadening the qualification requirements for early intervention service providers. The second would establish a recommended task force – but not a pilot project. Our Executive Director, Biz Harris, was appointed as a member to the task force which began meeting in July of 2023.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Resolve the childcare staffing crisis by allocating lottery funds (or other unallocated funds) to a program that provides professional development and wage supplements directly to participating childcare staff.

UPDATE: This recommendation was not taken up by the legislature, but adequate compensation and professional support for childcare workers remains a high priority issue that is being explored by both Mississippi Forum for the Future and the Mississippi State Early Childhood Advisory Council (MS SECAC).

GOAL 2

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

All of our communications efforts are generously sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

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

We have 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 working groups.
- Professional development and advocacy opportunities
- Event and networking invitations.

Reached more people through digital communications and earned media.

During this reporting period:

- Email campaigns **consistently performed above industry benchmarks** for open rates and engagement, and we gained over 100 additional subscribers.
- Overall social media reach **increased by 17%**
- **Two news outlets published MELA-created items** related to the policies to increase access to affordable childcare, and our **Early Childhood Capitol Day received press coverage.**

Connected childcare providers to resources online through our shared services platform

Over 1,600 childcare providers and early childhood professionals are registered members of our shared services platform, Mississippi Early Learning Resources.



ABOUT OUR COMMUNICATIONS HUB WORK

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.

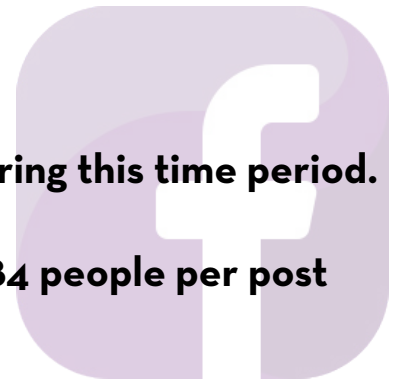
Social Media Performance: July 2022 - June 2023

Facebook: 1,464 followers (as of June 30, 2023)

We gained **140 new followers** during this time period

Our posts reached a total of 13,236 different people during this time period.

- **Increase from last reporting period: 27.7%**
- **Average Reach for all posts during this time period: 84 people per post**
- **Best performing post: 3,450 people reached**

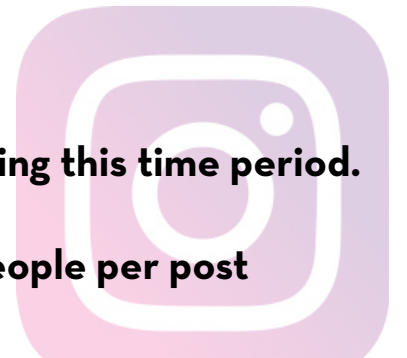


Instagram: 251 followers (as of June 30, 2023)

We gained **54 new followers** during this time period

Our posts reached a total of 1,063 different people during this time period.

- **Increase from last reporting period: 73.4%**
- **Average Reach for post during this time period: 21 people per post**
- **Best performing post: 91 people reached**



TOP PERFORMING FACEBOOK POSTS:

1. Angela to Biz transition post (<https://www.facebook.com/msearlylearning/photos/a.142582617244410/577662437069757/?type=3>) - 3,450 people reached
2. Biz becomes Executive Director Post: (<https://www.facebook.com/msearlylearning/posts/pfbidODP-14wV6b6cstvm2XZF1VfixTY91jMk91x8UhQiVugd5RYbXbtsAMXr8PduyztzXI>) - 2,600 people reached
3. QSS Report Post: - (<https://www.facebook.com/msearlylearning/posts/pfbid02FU1HcpSiJHTwLvgTC0Bm-D12rYCNC7dWo8CYyUfJRxn1pqtZBQJA6pzMmJkbTAzmAl>) - 875 people reached
4. Joanne & Penny at the Capitol Post (<https://www.facebook.com/msearlylearning/posts/pfbidOcdJw3d-48kT9BTsSDJscK84kFb8c1WaEs7FzdGg3LFx5qsUdKtA96BanPQmMSXE4GI>): - 823 people reached
5. Senate Hearing Policy Recommendation (<https://www.facebook.com/msearlylearning/posts/pfbid02SYp-JoipAgVQSpvqBSXyAKVUumLXi3LUi71fB1dxMQx9kvpHNNGnNqWXvoj8scGrKI>) - 535 people reached

Email Campaign Performance: July 2022 - June 2023

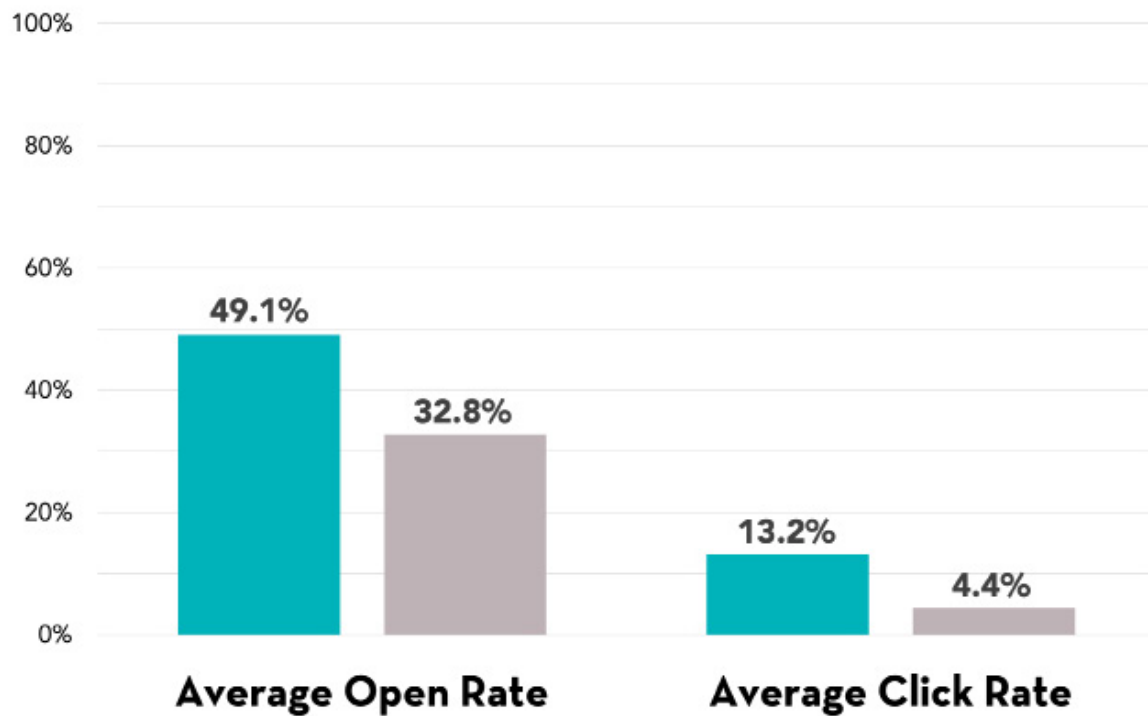
MELA currently has a total **1,876** email campaign subscribers. We sent out **23** email campaigns via MailChimp during this time period.

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:

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



Website Performance: July 1, 2022 - June 6, 2023

MSEarlyLearning.org received **4,114** visitors during this time period

Top Performing Pages (other than the home page):

- "Our Team" page
- Post sharing information about how to childcare providers can renew their Mississippi Director's Credential.
- "Our Programs" page
- Quality Support System for Childcare Working Group description page (a Forum for the Future working group)
- "Early Childhood Capitol Day" page

CONNECTING TO OUR AUDIENCE: MISSISSIPPI EARLY LEARNING RESOURCES

MELA's Shared Services platform for childcare professionals

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 1,240** individual registered members on the site.

This year we focused on **increasing views, repeat visitors, and time spent on site.**

Membership has remained **FREE** for approved users thanks to the generosity of the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#)

Over the past year, we have worked to increase engagement with Mississippi Early Learning Resources after a drop in early 2022. After some data analysis, we changed our approach and saw an increase of site users and deepening of site engagement.

Some of the effective strategies we leveraged include:

- Hosting additional webinars highlighting services available on the site and offering contact hours when appropriate
- Strengthening partnerships with the Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Early Childhood and worked to increase their staff who interface with childcare providers awareness of the platform.
- Building touchpoints with Resource and Referral associates.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR MELA?

As we move into our next year, we are proud of the progress we have made on our 2020-2023 Strategic Plan, and we are excited to explore new dimensions of our work. As we move forward, we will continue refining our approach and growing our coalition in order to ensure that we make progress for young children.

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.

LOOKING FORWARD

- Although this year saw the launch of three new Forum For the Future working groups, we will not conclude that work until the 2023-2024 fiscal year. The findings of the collaborative groups has the potential to impact access and affordability of child care in big ways.
- This year, we also began a revisioning of MELA's mission. When the organization was founded in 2019, we developed a mission that would give us direction. Now, several years into our work, we have been able to name more clearly what we do and where we want to go. We expect to unveil the new mission in the coming year.
- MELA also will have some staff transition in the upcoming fiscal year, as we bid farewell to Communications Director, Chloe Lake. We will spend the end of the year recruiting and hiring for two new positions, the Director of Communications and Operations and the Director of Advocacy and Policy. These two roles will help us increase our capacity to work with our partners and make a collective impact.

A LETTER FROM BIZ

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together," is a proverb that has been on my mind every day since I joined the MELA team, especially since January when I became the Executive Director. It is my hope that this report and our progress over the past year reflects how MELA lives and breathes "going together."

Building trust and authentic partnerships have been the foundation of MELA's work for the past four years, and I am thrilled to share that the steps we've taken are paying off. This past year, we have seen an increase in partners willingness to work with us and with one another. We had a big success when partners agreed to a shared policy agenda across the spheres of health, development, education, and child welfare. We have had funders agree to support our partners to work with the coalition. We have seen recommendations made by childcare providers in the Quality Support System Report get included in state agency plans and grants.

While these are incremental steps toward authentic collaboration in the Mississippi early childhood realm, each and every step brings us closer to our goal: positive systems change for Mississippi's young children. While I am pleased with the work of the MELA team (and all of our amazing partners!), I know that we have a long way to go to ensure that every Mississippi child has what they need to thrive. Thankfully, we're going there together.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth "Biz" Harris
Executive 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:

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THANK YOU

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We are indebted to the generosity of the Tallahatchie River Foundation for funding our work these past four years. Thanks to the incredible vision and generosity of Mrs. Morgana Freeman and her father, Mr. Morgan Freeman, MELA has had the opportunity to be a coalition builder and authentic collaborator in the Mississippi early childhood community.