

PROCEEDINGS OF
"THE TIES THAT BIND"

The First Annual Mississippi Delta Children's Partnership
Learning Community Conference

Greenville Higher Education Center
Greenville, Mississippi
December 8-9, 2006

Professional Associates, Inc.
Jackson, Mississippi

**Mississippi Delta Children’s Partnership (MDCP)
First Annual Learning Community
“The Ties That Bind”**

December 8 – 9, 2006

Objectives

- To promote openness out of a shared commitment to a common set of values and principles that under gird a strong education ethic in the Mississippi Delta.
- To bring together diverse perspectives and backgrounds to engage in meaningful dialogue and activities that advance our collective knowledge regarding healthy children, families and communities in the Mississippi Delta.
- To ask provocative and meaningful questions that move our shared learning and collective knowledge to a deeper place of understanding.
- To strengthen our collective and individual capacity to transform the Mississippi Delta by connecting the learning, practices and resources of those committed to improving the quality of life of children and families.

Working Assumptions

- Long-term success in the Mississippi Delta is contingent upon our families and communities ability to learn, share and apply new ideas.
- Willingness and commitment to work beyond “business as usual” and to support high achievement among children.
- The learning community process is based on “peers helping peers” and everyone making a valuable contribution.
- Community people are best suited to solve community problems.

**DAY ONE
December 8, 2006**

OPENING SESSION

What is the Mississippi Delta Children’s Partnership?

The Mississippi Delta Children’s Partnership consists of five (5) community non-profit organizations located in Issaquena, Sharkey, Tallahatchie, Quitman and Washington Counties. Each of the five sites or Children Villages has an after school and summer program focused on

enrichment of children's academic, social, and cognitive development and cultural heritage. Family circles provide community-based parenting support and a place where parents can come together and exchange information child-rearing strategies. Using indigenous staff, the program serves more than 23 small isolated communities in the Mississippi Delta.

What is a Learning Community?

A Learning Community is a new face on an old concept. Simply stated, a Learning Community is a coming together to share with each other what we know. One participant likened it to the front porch conversations that use to take place in our communities. The front porch was a place where problems were discussed, wisdom shared and collective problem solving took place.

A Learning Community is a group of individuals bound by shared **values, goals, commitment and practices** that reflect the members' understanding of what is important.

Purpose

To create a climate and culture of interdependence whereby parents, organizations, schools and communities share knowledge and best practices which will sustain a 'spirit of excellence' among children in the Mississippi Delta.

Objectives

- To engage in open dialogue regarding the values and principles that under gird a strong education ethic in the Mississippi Delta.
- To increase dialogue among committed individuals from different education settings regarding supporting high achievement of Delta children
- To increase our collective understanding of child well-being through the sharing of learning from different educational settings.
- To affirm the family, spiritual and community values and principle which have inspired success in the Ms Delta.

Working Assumptions

- Long-term success requires that we all work together on the behalf of children.
- The focus is on helping Delta children be HIGH achievers therefore we can not assume a "business as usual" posture.
- Children's success is maximized through working together and peers helping peers.
- Community people are best suited to solve community problems.

What are the “Ties that Bind?”

Dr. Joyce Ladner, a native Mississippian from Hattiesburg and a graduate of Tougaloo College wrote a book entitled *The Ties That Bind*. What are the ties that bind? It is the glue that held us together. It consists of traditional values passed down from our ancestors that have unified our families and children.

The traditional African-American value system described by Dr. Ladner is premised on four basic principles:

- *The Power of Self-Identity*—Knowing who you are as an individual and who you are as a part of a racial group.
- *The Power of the Extended Family*—There is strength in numbers and every member adds value to the whole. A family contains a multitude of resources needed to create strong, stable families.
- *The Power of the Community to Determine its Future* – The Community works together collaboratively to address community problems. It requires us to be responsible for those who are less fortunate. We are responsible for not only our success but for the success of every child among us.
- *The Power of the Past to Influence the Future*—Slavery, emancipation and Jim Crow laws had a strong impact on black people and of necessity, Black values focused on how to survive.

Out of these four principles, emerged 10 values or qualities that our parents and generations before them worked to foster in their children. In the absence of the “village” that many of us grew up in, our challenge is to ensure that our children don’t miss out on the benefits of the traditional values taught. The ten values identified by Ladner are:

- *A Sense of Identity*—Children need to have a sense of who they are their ancestry and Their connection to the past. Children gain a positive self-image when they are in a stable environment and loved and cared for by at least one adult. Creating a strong sense of identity also means teaching our children how to cope in difficult circumstances.
- *Faith in God*—We need to help young people sustain hope and faith that they can have a future.
- *Respect for Others* – Respect is a two-way street. You have to give respect to get respect. We need to teach our children what respect is and demonstrate what it means to be respectful so that they can see it in action.
- *Honesty and a Sense of Responsibility*– We should to teach our children that there are consequences for every action and decision that one makes in life. You must take responsibility for your actions and expect to be held accountable. Children need frequent

- reminders and demonstrations of responsible behavior in order to learn what it is. They need to experience duty and personal accountability in every day life. There is no room for excuses or to be a victim.
- *Self-Reliance and Respect for Hard Work*—Working is a means to an end. It doesn't matter the type of work you do as long as it is honest and makes you self-reliant. Children need to be taught to work hard and do their best no matter what the task.
 - *Resourcefulness* – Being resourceful means being a “creative doer”--as our ancestors would call it “making a way out of no way.” Children need to be taught how to be resourceful, skills for coping, and how to tap into the power within to get the job done.
 - *Belief in Education*—This value focuses on the belief that every child can learn—that everyone has potential. We have to help our children unlock their potential by unleashing a sense of purpose and vision for the future and providing the skills and support needed to achieve these goals.
 - *Resilience*—We need to teach our children how to bounce back from adversity, how to face life challenges with a “can do” spirit. Additionally, we need to create environments that mediate as many of the risk factors as possible.
 - *Courage*—Having courage means being willing to take risks, to stand by your beliefs, even if other people disagree with you and to do so even if you are afraid. Only those who will risk going too far can possibly discover how far they can go.
 - *Integrity*—Operating with integrity means keeping your word. Said another way, it means that “your word is your bond.” It means that you can be trusted. We need to operate with integrity before our children so that they see integrity in action.

Mychal Wynn, Opening Speaker

Mr. Wynn's framework for his speech was working with children who come from poverty. He challenged the participants to think about their responses to two fundamental questions: (1) What do we believe about the capacity of children living in poverty? and (2) What is our mission?

Key Learnings

- Must not feel sorry for children in poverty, but should make programs rigorous and relevant
- For many educators around the country, it is virtually impossible for them to put into their spirit that *it is possible* for children who grow up in poverty to go to college.
- We must believe that the same God who can do all things on Sunday, is the same on Monday when it comes to the success of children in poverty.

- Our children have far greater dreams than we have for them. We must begin to believe that every child is “college material”. While there is nothing wrong with being a plumber or electrician, or brick mason. We have never said that not every child can be a plumber, electrician or a brick mason.
- We should begin talking to children about college in the first and second grades. Our expectation should be that all of our children are going to college. A suggested strategy was to develop a wall highlighting all of the universities in Mississippi and the admission requirements. One can also be done for Ivy League Schools and another for HBCUs. The point is to get children to thinking about college.
- In our programs we need community collaboration and high expectations. Problems and business should be taken care of away from the children.
- Many of us were raised by old school parent, don't our children at least deserve what we got.
- We need to recapture the educational urgency that was once prevalent in our communities
- Once children show us their God-given gifts, we should use that as a vehicle to promote college and to push for literacy and language skills.
- Don't let negative data paralyze us but use it to strengthen our program strategies.
- We need to get children in our programs to believe in potential in their lives even when they don't believe it.
- Programs need to focus on the 3-Rs: Rigor, Relevance and Relationship
 - We need to create a culture where reading and literacy is a highly valued as the material things they desire.
 - We need to help children to make a better connections between what they want and how to get there
 - We need to foster positive and affirming relationships with both the parents and children.
- Three things we need to help parents and families with:
 - We need to help our kids identify with people who look like them and have been successful
 - We need to identify and create enrichment activities for our children, especially those who are interested in math and science.
 - We need to help families understand the importance of academically accelerated programs and how they relate to their child's academic future.

Linking to the Ties that Bind

Several values and themes highlighted in Dr. Ladner's book also emerged in Mr. Wynn's opening charge to the participants. The first one is the *power of the community to determine its future*. This principle or value resonated very strongly in that we are responsible for the success of every child in our community (making our programs strong, working with parents, not labeling children, planting the seeds of attending college). The value of *faith in God* was clearly evident in his repeated mentioning of the role faith and spirituality in helping us to do what needs to be done with children. Also he talked about our role in giving children hope "We need to get children in our programs to believe in our belief for their lives, even when they don't believe it themselves." Another value that emerged very strongly was *belief in education*. Mr. Wynn described it two ways: (1) returning to educational urgency that once existed in our communities and (2) his belief that every child has the potential and should go to college.

VOICES OF SCHOOL PARTNERS

Facilitator, Ms. Jo Thompson, Thompson & Associates

Panelists

Mr. Howard Hollins, Superintendent
West Tallahatchie School District

Ms. Katherine Tankston, Superintendent
South Delta School District

Dr. I. D. Thompson, Principal
JFK High School
Mound Bayou, MS

Guiding Questions:

- What are the values and principles that foster and support excellence and high achievement in Delta Children in the early years?
- What specific strategies does your school(s)/classroom use to instill a spirit of excellence in children and a strong education ethic in parents?
- How can parents, schools, organization and communities work more collaboratively to create a seamless and nurturing environment that supports high performance for all children?
- What are the untapped community strengths that if harnessed appropriately could create systemic educational change in the Mississippi Delta?

Intended Outcomes:

- Identification of school-specific principles and strategies that allows students to be high achievers.

- Building mutually supportive linkages among parents, schools, and communities that create a local culture of excellence in learning.

Key Learnings

- It is important for school, community and church to begin working together again for the benefit of educating children
- If you don't know how to you can assist schools, ask them. While schools are always in need of money, they can also capitalize on the human resources in the area.
- Never underestimate the power of faith and a spirit of empowerment in helping children become a success.
- We must believe in children and their families, no matter what that family structure looks like.
- Need to have these "front-porch" conversations everywhere we go so that education becomes important again.
- The community plays an important role in educating children. If children don't have the needed encouragement at home, members of the community can still push the children.
- We must believe that every child that we come in contact with has worth, has value and we must treat that way. We shouldn't counteract negative behavior with negative behavior. The only place that a negative plus a negative works is in a math class.
- Need to establish purposeful relationships.
- We must instill in our children at a very early age the importance of getting an education, the importance of going to school and the importance of putting forth their very best efforts using all of their God-given talent.
- As we focus on the children, we must remember that our teachers also need to be trained and nurtured.

Linking to the Ties that Bind

Values that emerged during this session include: faith in God, sense of responsibility, resourcefulness, belief in education and the power of community. Panelists discussed the power of faith and spirituality in lifting the spirits of children and creating a sense of hope. Also discussed that while schools always needed money, they are interested in utilizing the human capital available in a community (e.g. counselors to work in the schools). The belief in education and the role of the community in helping children to become successful was a recurrent theme.

VOICES OF DEMONSTRATED EXCELLENCE

Dr. Hilliard Lackey III, Facilitator

Dr. Albert Calvin, Retired Educator
Pastor, Mount Horeb Missionary Baptist Church

Dr. Stacy Jones, Director of Science and Mathematics
Northwest Mississippi

Pam Chatman, News Director
WABG

Guiding Questions:

- What are the family and school values and principles that were instilled in you as a child that influenced your pursuit of excellence?
- What aspects of your childhood experiences do you value most and wish to preserve in your children?
- During your early childhood, what practices did your parents/caregiver, teachers, or others in the community use to inspire and motivate you to excel?
- What can schools and communities in the Delta do at the early education level to place children on a pathway to academic excellence and success?

Intended Outcomes:

- Gain a deeper understanding of the antecedents to academic excellence.
- Identify protective factors that can be used by parents, schools and communities to increase the success of children in the Mississippi Delta.

Key Learnings

- When children don't have what they need at home, the community can be that support system.
- Never let someone else steal your dream by telling you you can't do something—Believe in yourself even if no one else does.
- Negative pronouncements of failure can often serve as a motivator to success.
- Can you make it in the Delta? The answer is yes.

- We need to tell every child we come in contact with that they can be anything they want to be.
- Children need to be given hope.
- Staying in the Delta is a way of giving back to the community. When children see someone who looks just like them being successful, it helps them to know that they too can be successful.
- We need to make sure that people in the church, in the home, in the community understand that education is important. A community can only be as good as the education of its citizenry.

Linking to the Ties that Bind

Values that were threaded throughout the discussion were the *power of community, self identity, faith in God, resilience, courage and a belief in education*. Panelist described how they overcame significant odds to be successful and how their faith in God gave them hope and the courage to press forward even in adversity. Two of the panelist discussed in detail the important role that the community played in their ability to realize their dreams.

VOICES OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Dr. Bettye Ward Fletcher, Facilitator

Ms. Carol Burnett, Executive Director
Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative

Beverly Courtney, Areas ECD and Health Services Director
Washington County Opportunities, Inc.

Delores Davis
Washington County Opportunities, Inc.

Carla James, Director
Baby Steps, Inc.

Jerlean Osborne, Trainer
Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative.

Guiding Questions:

- What are the values and principles that under gird your work with children in the Mississippi Delta?

- What are some of the specific successful strategies that your organization uses to create increased community-wide support for a spirit of excellence and success for all children in the Delta?
- How can organizations with shared goals and commitments to the early development and education of children share their best practices with each other and thereby create a culture of interdependence and communalism?
- What community partners must be at the table to effect educational change in the Delta?

Intended Outcomes:

- Identification of best practices used by community-based organizations to strengthen early development and education of children in the Mississippi Delta.
- Identification of organizations with a demonstrated successful track record of working with children.

Key Learnings

- It is important to use the resources that community-based organizations offer.
- Quality childcare for low-income parents is important and a lot of that hinges on the quality of the child care teachers.
- Educational programs in child care centers should take into account the diversity of the students as it relates to classroom environment, activities and other services provided.
- For those parents who provide in-home care for their children, particularly young mothers, it is important to provide them with educationally stimulating activities for their child. The goal is to keep them from falling behind their counterparts in public early child care settings.
- Working parents need a safe place for their children to go, grow, play and learn in a nurture environment where they receive the appropriate messages that will allow them to grow up to be responsible adults.
- Head Start and public schools are willing to allow daycare centers and MDCP staff attend training sponsored by Head start or the school district.

Linking to Ties that Bind

The two values that most clearly emerged were *belief in education*, particularly early childhood education and being *resourceful*. Another theme was the importance of helping children to form a positive self-identity through valuing their culture and the learning strategies used in early childhood educational settings. Early childhood educational organizations in the Mississippi Delta are willing to share resources in the form of training.

Wrap-Up Session

Facilitator: Gloria Billingsley

Panelist: Sister Liz Brown, Executive Director
Excel, Inc.

Guiding Questions

- How should the “learnings” shared today be used to strengthen the Partnership?
- Who is not at the table that should be involved?
- What are the specific next steps for the Partnership?

Intended Outcome:

- Development of a preliminary programmatic action plan

Key Learnings

- The learning community cements all of various parts together for the good of the whole community.
- We need to debunk two myths: (1) myth of money--that you need a pot of gold before we can do anything. If we are about the right thing, the money will come (2) that volunteers are hard to get. We have to honor the talents that people have and their willingness to offer them.
- It is important to actively engage as many persons as possible in the activities of the learning community from mission development to the actual implementation of strategies.
- There is a desire to establish a learning community in the Mississippi Delta where Head Start, child care centers, after school programs and school systems come together to develop strategies to better serve children.
- The conversation needs to continue on how the learning community would be structured, what are the unifying issue(s) that the learning community should be organized around.

DAY 2
December 9, 2006

OPENING SESSION

Facilitator, Ivy Lovelady

The focus of Day 2 was on parents and children. The Learning Community opened with the youth of the Mississippi Delta Children Partnership demonstrating excellence and learning through presentations. These presentations also reflected values described in *The Ties that Bind*. Children from the Anguilla Children's Village "Something inside So Strong" speaks to *courage* and *resilience*. The children from Mayersville "I am Somebody highlighted the value of *positive self-identity*. A youth from Cary Children's Village recited "Excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr. Speech." This presentation focus on *the power of the past to influence the future*. Children from Webb performed "Don't Laugh At Me," with a strong message of *respect for others*. A Child from Glen Allan read a story, that focus on being *resourceful and a sense of responsibility* in removing negative slurs from the walls on a building in her community. Children from the Marks Children's Village did a presentation on "Then and Now" which also focused on *the power of the past to influence the future*.

VOICES OF THE PARENTS

Facilitator: Gloria Billingsley

Panelist:

Pamela Brown, Anguilla Children's Village
Shaterica Cartlidge, Mayersville Children's Village
Cynthia Jones, Marks Children's Village
Linda McGee, Cary Children's Village
Larry Edwards, Glen Allan Children Village
Sandra Wilbourn, Marks Children's Village

Guiding Questions:

- What are the core values that you seek to instill in your children?
- What aspects of your childhood experiences do you value most and wish to preserve in your children?
- How can schools and communities support you in the pursuit of excellence for your children?

Intended Outcomes:

- Identification of the core values important to parents in their child rearing practices
- Identification of the generational values of parents in the Mississippi Delta
- Potential strategies for working with parents in the Mississippi Delta

Key Learnings

- Try to instill in children the importance of spirituality, importance of education, self- esteem and self respect.
- Parents need to support their children in their activities
- Parents need the community to work with them in raising their children instead of criticizing them.
- We need to recognize the importance of men in the lives of their children. Women need to “step back” and allow men to take some responsibility for their children.
- Parents need to understand the importance of discipline in the lives of their children.
- We need to teach our children how to have the courage to say no. They need the skills to be able to stand alone.
- Parents still appreciate the need for instilling a strong work ethic in their children although this is an area that needs improvement.
- Need more community-based and faith-based programs to work with children who may not be getting the guidance they need or there is a parent absent in the home
- Need to develop strategy to bring parents and children together to address the problem of anger that is manifesting itself in the schools and community.

Linking to The Ties that Bind

The following themes are evident in the discussion with parents: *faith in God, belief in education, power of the community, courage & resilience, and a strong work ethic*. These values were specifically identified and threaded throughout the panel discussion.

VOICES OF THE CHILDREN

Dr. Ivy Lovelady, Facilitator

Panelists

Dominique Cotton, Anguilla Children's Village
Barry Franklin, Glen Allan Children's Village
Jakiyah Green, Mayersville Children's Village
Erica Griffin, Mark's Children's Village
Shantaya Howard, Mayersville Children's Village
Frank Johnson, Webb Children's Village
Romeo Johnson, Cary Children's Village

Guiding Questions:

- What does it mean to you to live in the Mississippi Delta?
- What are the principles and values (from parents, schools and community) that helps to keep you on the right track toward success?
- What do you enjoy about being a child?
- What do you enjoy about school or learning?

Intended Outcomes:

- Understanding of what currently works for young people in the Mississippi Delta.
- Determining critical components of successful programming for young children

Key Learnings

- Growing up in the Mississippi Delta means that everybody knows everyone. It also means a close-knit community.
- The Delta Children Partnership is giving them something to do and helping them improve their reading and math skills.
- Being with family and friends is what most children enjoy about being a child.
- The importance of family and church are key values
- The community can help by providing more activities for children as well as helping to get supplies for the schools.
- The children enjoy the learning environment provided by the children villages because they are a place where they feel loved and supported.

Linking to Ties that Bind

The values that emerged from the children were the *power of the community, faith in God and the power of family*. The children appeared to have the greatest appreciation for role that the Delta Children Villages were playing in their communities

A CELEBRATION OF THE TIES THAT BIND

Children from Adhiambo School performed at the closing of the Learning Community Conference. Their performances reflected all of the values described in Dr. Ladner's book, *The Ties that Bind*. From the beating of the drums, to the African Dance, to the Orations and the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa, the values of self-identity, extended-family, power of community, power of the past, faith in God, respect for others, honesty and a personal responsibility, self-reliance and respect for hard work, resourcefulness, belief in education, resilience, courage and integrity resonated throughout the performance. The audience experiences were affirmed and hope renewed.