

FALL 2009
Little Rock
Arkansas

public policy WATCH


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PRIORITY ONE: CLOSING THE GAP

by Ashley Mathis

Every child deserves the opportunity to a world-class education regardless of race, income or region. Education is the foundation of democracy and opportunity. Sadly, Arkansas has one of the worst achievement gaps in the nation. Closing that gap to provide more opportunities to children is one of the top priorities of the Arkansas Public Policy Panel, the Citizens First Congress and many of our partner organizations. We are working at the local community level and the state policy level to close the gap.

The achievement gap is rooted in both race and income. Minority students perform about half as well as their white counterparts – even those with the same income, and low-income students perform about half as well as middle- and higher-income students. Over half of the students in Arkansas are either low-income or minority. There are some proven solutions that help close the gap when implemented (see the report on ARPanel.org). The biggest step we can make is getting involved to improve our schools. On the state level, Senators Elliott and Bryles, Representative Rainey and the Arkansas Citizens First Congress passed 4 key bills aimed at the gap.



Students from around the state at the Capitol lobby for education reforms with Governor Beebe. They pressed him to support the Dream Act to let all Arkansas high school graduates pay in-state college tuition regardless of immigration status.

The bills will: make it easier for the state to intervene in under-performing schools; help ensure that funds already designated to close the gap are spent effectively; make more information on school planning, expenditures, performance and services available to parents and students; and strengthen the Arkansas Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap.

At the local level, the Panel is focused on parental and student

involvement. Community leaders and Panel staff are traveling throughout South Arkansas to engage parents.

Staff and volunteers are conducting one-on-one surveys with hundreds of community members about their opinions on the quality of their school, leadership and communication, as well as the district's comprehensive improvement plan and parent involvement plan. The surveys are being used to create in-depth

CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS WORKS TOWARDS A BETTER ARKANSAS

When the 2009 Arkansas General Assembly convened, hundreds of Arkansans made the trip to Little Rock to lobby for the Citizens First Congress' Ten Priorities for a Better Arkansas. The coalition's biggest successes were its campaigns to:

- Close the education achievement gap,
- Improve energy policy to address global warming and save consumers money,
- Make sure workers' claims are heard when employers steal their wages, and
- Create conservation easements to help private landowners protect critical wetland habitats.



Juan Torres, Margarita Solarzano and Xochitl Delgado prepare for a Senate Education Committee hearing.

The stage is set for future progress on economic development and water policy. More progress needs to be made toward creating a fair tax system. The CFC is also

With the help of interns from Hendrix College, UALR and the Clinton School of Public Service, the CFC monitored all 2,285 bills filed during the 88-day session.

Many of those bills were summarized in the Community Guide to the 2009 Arkansas Legislative Session, published by the Citizens First Congress and available at CitizensFirst.org. The guide includes action on bills in each of the coalition's seven caucus areas and scores each legislator on his or her position on the 41 bills most important to the coalition members.

"Thanks to our efforts, Arkansas has important new education and energy policies, but we have a lot more work to do," said Rubye Emerson, co-chair of the coalition.

committed to advancing the Dream Act, strengthening civil rights laws, and improving HIV-AIDS prevention and treatment for minorities.

Citizens First Congress members did much more than lobby at the Capitol. Many got involved in hometown events, met with

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Rep. Butch Wilkins learned more about bills targeting the achievement gap from his constituent, Rosie Dunn of Wilmot.

THE CONGRESS STEERING COMMITTEE

Rubye Graham-Emerson, Co-Chair, McGehee Desha Alumni Community Center

Bruce Lockett, Co-Chair, BGACDC

Kate Althoff, Sierra Club

Kenneth Anderson, Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission

Rafael Arciga-Garcia, LULAC Council #761

Rick Collins, Future Builders Inc.

Daniel Diaz, Phi Iota Alpha

Debbie Doss, Arkansas Canoe Club

Earnest Nash, Gould Citizens Advisory Council

Ines Polonius, Delta E-Team

Randi Romo, Center for Artistic Revolution

Anthony Scott, Eastside Community Club of Dermott

Regina VonTungeln, Jenkins Memorial Childrens Center and Industries

Kathy Wesho-Bauer, Center for Artistic Revolution

Kara Wilkins, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

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their lawmakers, researched issues, sent e-mails to legislators and took action when they received a CFC alert. "Traffic on the CFC website quadrupled," said policy director Patty Barker. "People downloaded the fact sheets, watched our videos of committee hearings and signed up to stay involved. Over 70 organizations and 500 people

helped to build this agenda over the past year and supported our campaigns during the legislative session."

In June, the CFC convened to review progress and make new plans, followed by a reception to celebrate ten "champion" legislators who sponsored bills for the coalition: Representatives Kathy Webb, Joan Cash, David Rainey,

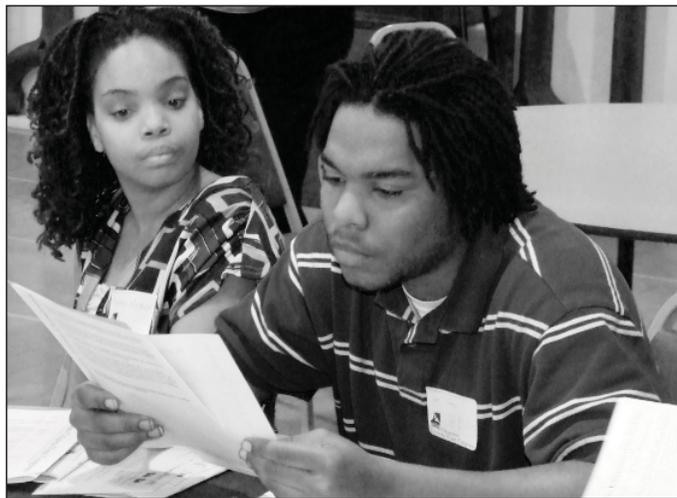
Allen Maxwell, Uvalde Lindsey, Lindsley Smith and John Edwards; and Senators Joyce Elliott, Steve Bryles and Shane Broadway.

In August, the coalition's Steering Committee began planning the year ahead. The CFC will host caucus meetings throughout the spring of 2010, leading up to a convention on June 25 and 26 to set the 2011 legislative agenda and launch the new campaigns.



COMMUNITY GUIDE
TO THE
2009 ARKANSAS
LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Visit CitizensFirst.org for your copy of the CFC's Scorecard.



Loretha Walker and Jovon O'Neal joined hundreds of other Arkansans who studied the issues and lobbied their legislators for the CFC's Ten Priorities for a Better Arkansas.

In Memory of E.J. Miller



All of us are standing on the shoulders of giants who helped us become who we are. Some of them are personal giants, some are societal giants. E.J. Miller was both.

We — along with his family, colleagues and friends — lost E.J. when he passed away in July. An International Representative for the IUE-CWA, he was also co-Chair of the Arkansas Public Policy Panel Board for almost 10 years, and a founder of our coalition, the Arkansas Citizens First Congress.

E.J. kept us focused. Whenever we faced a hard issue that threatened to split the Citizens First Congress, E.J. would be the first to say, "We all need to remember that the only thing that really matters is that we came in here as a coalition and we need to leave here as a coalition. The minute we splinter you might as well forget whatever issue you came here about, because the big guys get over their disagreements—and they are waiting to pounce."

E.J. was our biggest cheerleader. He bought the Panel staff shirts emblazoned with the Panel's logo, "So people won't think you're from the Tony Alamo church or the IRS."

E.J. was our mentor and friend.

He believed in leaving a legacy. He told us all the time, "It's not just about the people you organize today, it's the foundation you're laying so that the Panel will still be organizing people 50 years from now."

Thanks, E.J.

YOUTH ORGANIZING PROJECTS JUMPSTARTED AT REGIONAL SUMMITS

by James Szenher

Over 100 youth from across South Arkansas gathered this summer to learn valuable information about getting involved in their communities. The Gould Citizens Advisory Council (GCAC) hosted the Southeast Arkansas Youth Summit on July 25th in Gould, and the Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission (SAGG) hosted the Southwest Arkansas Youth Summit on September 12th in Camden. At these summits, youth attended workshops on financial planning, college loans and applications, political awareness, and healthy living. They also brainstormed issues that affect youth in their community and made plans to address them.

There were over 40 youth in attendance at the Southwest Summit, and over 70 at the Southeast Summit. Carlisha Cox, 17, of Chidester, who attended the Southwest Youth Summit, said she was inspired by all the youth who attended. "We saw that there were other students who were excited about the community, and I learned that you don't have to be an adult to get involved," she said.

Those who attended also enjoyed



The Gould Youth Committee organized a spelling bee for younger members of the community.



At a Youth Summit in Camden, teens brainstormed about issues that affect youth, then organized a regional Youth Committee.

breakfast and lunch, catered by local residents and businesses. A talent show was held after each summit for those who participated in the workshops. "It was more about fun than competition," said Jazzmin Nash, 15, who attended the Southeast Youth Summit and Talent Show. "It was good for the youth, it helps us get more involved in the community, and we get more involved when we're having fun." Workshops, food and prizes were funded with the help of grants awarded to SAGG and GCAC by Catholic Charities of Arkansas.

Following these summits, Youth Committees have formed in Camden and Gould. SAGG's Camden Youth Committee is currently planning more workshops and projects focused on financial planning and entrepreneurship. They are excited to learn how to start making and saving money, as well as how economics and business can benefit the community. GCAC's Youth Committee hosted a spelling bee and drawing contest to raise

**"YOU DON'T HAVE
TO BE AN ADULT
TO GET INVOLVED."**

money and boost awareness and is currently planning a project where youth will interview adults in Gould about the history of the community and its residents.

Groups in Stamps and Marvell are forming Youth Committees as well. Earlier in the summer, the Marvell Concerned Citizens hosted a community clean-up, where youth and adults worked together to pick up trash and help beautify the streets in Marvell. In the future, we hope to have local and regional youth committees in all of the communities where the Panel is organizing.

If you would like more information on forming a Youth Committee in your community, contact the Panel today!

James Szenher is a VISTA Youth Organizing Apprentice at the Panel.

GAP | continued from page 1 |

reports for each community and will be compiled into a comprehensive report on attitudes towards schools in South Arkansas. "This is a first for most communities," said education organizer Ana Phakhin.

Loretha Walker, education committee chairperson of the Queen City Watchmen in Camden, said she thought the surveys would show how parents view the school district. "It gives people a voice in the community and a chance to speak out...without being judged," said Walker. Marshall Nash, of the Gould Citizens Advisory Council's education committee, shared the same sentiments. "The surveys are important so the school district can be aware of parents' feelings," Nash said. "It will get the parents, teachers and principals talking more."

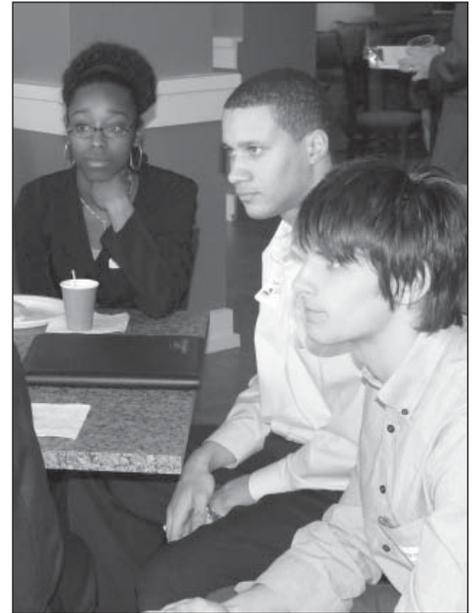
Walker commented that these surveys might serve as a catalyst for change. "We are finding what people dislike so we can make changes," she said. One Camden community member taking the survey commented, "If this survey doesn't do anything else, it makes me aware of the things that I don't know."



In April, young people gathered in Little Rock to study the legislative process, then set off for the Capitol to lobby their legislators on education issues.

THE PANEL BOARD

- Alejandro Aviles**, Little Rock
- Linda Carnahan**, Chair, Russellville
- Rev. Howard Gordon**, Little Rock
- Barry Haas**, Little Rock
- Perry Hayes**, Pettigrew
- Basil Kyriakakis**, Parks
- Curtis Mangrum**, Gould
- Rev. J.C. Owens**, Bearden
- Rev. Mary Purifoy**, Chidester
- Margarita Solorzano**, Springdale



The surveys are not only raising awareness and documenting attitudes, they are also recruiting people to get involved in strengthening their schools and communities. Surveyors are personally asking community members to participate in parental involvement meetings, join with other community members to make a positive change and take part in the decision-making process.

Ana Phakhin said that this is a great opportunity to bring everyone to the table to discuss issues. She hopes that people who are not normally involved in the decision-making process will get involved. "When people come together and share their experiences, we can start drawing connections to see that it is not just a Gould issue or a Camden issue, but it is something that a lot of communities in south Arkansas

face," she said. "We see that this is something we can work on and really make an impact on the local, regional, and state levels."

Patty Barker, the Panel's Policy Director sees the connection between the local organizing and the state policy changes. "I'm encouraged by the enthusiasm of the new Achievement Gap Commission members to find innovative ways to narrow the gap and I'm pleased they will be holding some future meetings in affected school districts. All of our work starts at the local level with parents, students and community members making changes in their own communities and driving our efforts to make state policy better for everyone."

Ashley Mathis is a VISTA Education and Economic Development Organizing Apprentice at the Panel.

After being surveyed by Panel staff and volunteers about their school, parents in Stamps met to discuss school issues.

CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS ISSUE UPDATES

As usual, the Panel and Congress are hard at work on a number of issues important to Arkansas communities.

ARKANSAS HIV/AIDS MINORITY TASK FORCE

The task force is working closely with the CFC, the Panel and the Arkansas Minority Health Commission to develop a state-wide strategy to address the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS among women and minorities. The task force will partner with the State Healthcare Access Research Project at Harvard Law School to create a report outlining the status of treatment and prevention programs in Arkansas. They will then work with area health organizations, state agencies, UAMS and policy leaders to advocate for improved access to HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention and education.

WATER QUALITY

The Panel is partnering with Audubon Arkansas and The Nature Conservancy to hold public forums around the state to hear from local citizens and water-policy leaders about their water quality concerns. These forums also educate citizens about protecting their watershed and help ensure that best management practices are followed by natural gas drillers, developers and others who impact the watershed. Information from the forums will be used to advocate for a new state water plan. In addition, the Water Source Protection Task Force, which includes several Panel-supported leaders, will study ways to protect the quality of our drinking-water lakes.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Leaders recommended by the Panel are serving on the new Alternative Energy Commission, which is identifying ways the state can utilize alternative fuels. Many members of the Governor's Commission on Global Warming, chaired by Representative Kathy Webb, continue to push for better energy efficiency and renewable energy policies to lower consumer bills, create jobs and help the environment. Many of the CFC's goals on energy efficiency are also under consideration at the Public Service Commission. Audubon Arkansas is pressing the PSC to enact stronger efficiency provisions.



Flanked by Sen. Shane Broadway, Rep. Kathy Webb and Arkansas environmentalists, Gov. Mike Beebe signs legislation to make schools and government buildings more energy efficient.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The Arkansas Achievement Gap Commission, renewed by CFC-supported legislation in the 2009 session, is hard at work determining the best way to narrow the academic achievement gap among Arkansas students. Subcommittees are focusing on math and literacy programs, district-level task force progress, and the effectiveness of scholastic audits and early intervention programs for low-achieving students.

POVERTY TASK FORCE

Created by legislation sponsored by Senator Joyce Elliott, the task force is made up of individuals living in poverty, lawmakers, religious leaders, government officials and advocacy organizations including the Panel, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, and the Hunger Relief Alliance. It is charged with developing a roadmap for reducing poverty and promoting economic opportunity for our most vulnerable citizens. Contact us for more info on the next meeting.

FUNDRAISING AND THE PANEL: YOUR MONEY AT WORK

DELTA ENDOWMENT CREATES \$60,000 IN ANNUAL GRANTS

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation recently awarded the Arkansas Community Foundation \$1.3 million to provide an estimated \$60,000 annually to fund grants to benefit communities in 26 counties in the Delta region of Arkansas.

Much of the grant's groundwork was developed by the Arkansas Design Work Group, made up of Arkansans working as part of Kellogg's Mid-South Delta Initiative to lay plans for revitalizing the Arkansas Delta.

Information about applying for a grant from the Arkansas Delta Endowment for Building Community will be available at www.arcf.org in the first quarter of 2010.

A BIG THANK YOU...

to the 62 people and organizations who paid off the CFC's remaining bills from the legislative session. These donors gave \$4,540 to sponsor a reception where we honored our Champion Legislators and the voters who backed them up. Read more about our legislative victories on page 2.



Ruby Emerson presents Sen. Steve Bryles with one of the CFC's ten Champion Legislator Awards.

ENSURING THE WORK OF FUTURE GENERATIONS



The Panel received a bequest from the estate of Miriam Ella Alford, longtime donor and friend of the Panel who passed away in 2006. The Panel was one of many progressive organizations that Ella generously supported. As a young mother, Ella became acquainted with the Panel at a time when it was mobilizing young mothers to visit civic organizations to encourage peaceful school integration. Ella leaves behind a legacy of support that helps organizations like the Panel to flourish.

Our thanks to Ella's gracious family.

THE PANEL STAFF

Beth Ardapple, Bass
Patty Barker, Little Rock
Bernadette Devone, Pine Bluff
Bill Kopsky, Little Rock
Celestine Wesley, Little Rock
Rosemary Brown, Monticello
Fay Knox, Deer
Brett Miracle, Little Rock
Ana Phakhin, Little Rock
VISTA Volunteers:
Greg Cooper, Little Rock
Francile LaGrone, Stamps
Ashley Mathis, Little Rock
Shirley Renix, Camden
James Szenher, Little Rock
Janice Tillman, Gould

YOUTH—EDUCATION—ENERGY

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Donate to the Panel

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— or —

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—Donations to the Panel are tax deductible.—



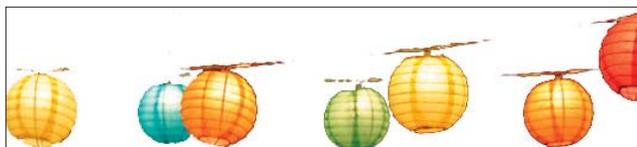
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Annual Holiday Party and Open House

At the Progressive House
(Arkansas Public Policy Panel offices)

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SAVE THE DATE!

Citizens First Congress Convention
June 25 and 26, 2010

Join us to launch new campaigns
for a better Arkansas!