



# Mississippi Early Learning Alliance Annual Impact Report

*July 2023 - June 2024*

Published August 2024

# IN 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 use to drive progress toward that vision, and highlight emerging areas of work and collaboration. This report will cover the time period of July 2023 - June 2024 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 (now the SonEdna 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, Ms. Morgana Freeman. Ms. Morgana Freeman worked tirelessly to establish the Thrive by 3rd Advisory Committee which led to the groundwork for MELA.**

## THE MELA TEAM

*July 2023 - June 2024*



**BIZ HARRIS**  
Executive Director



**APRIL MAY**  
Coalition Building &  
Leadership Development  
Director



**ALEXIS HICKS**  
Advocacy &  
Policy  
Director



**MINDY PHILLIPS**  
Communications &  
Operations  
Director

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## CONTACT US

If you have questions or comments about this report, please contact Biz Harris at [Biz@MsEarlyLearning.org](mailto:Biz@MsEarlyLearning.org). For more information, about MELA,



[www.msearlylearning.org](http://www.msearlylearning.org)



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[@msearlylearningalliance](https://www.instagram.com/msearlylearningalliance)

# A LETTER FROM BIZ

Since we last shared our progress, MELA has undergone some BIG changes. First, in the middle of our fiscal year, we completed our initial strategic plan and began work on our new one. This means that this report straddles both sets of goals, making it challenging to decide when to report on what. We have done our best to show how we wrapped up our founding goals and how we've made progress toward our new ones in just a few months.

Additionally, our board helped clarify and distill our mission, vision, and strategies. Four years into our work, this clarity was hard-won and a bit overdue. Although the language is new, it is not a deviation from our original vision or mission but helps us focus more clearly on what we were founded to do - to build a coalition to ensure that Mississippi's babies, toddlers, and preschoolers have what they need to thrive.

The main revisions are related to our mission and strategies. The new mission highlights our role-building, strengthening, and supporting coalitions, as well as our focus on improving outcomes for both early learning and early childhood development. Looking back over the past four years, our board and staff were also able to zero in on the "how" of MELA's work. Again, these strategies are not new to MELA, but we were able to put them into words for the first time. The new language galvanizes us to work with our partners to design and advocate solutions that will positively impact Mississippi's young children.

Our clarified strategies now charge us, among other things, to

- Champion shared policies
- Elevate the voices and experiences of individuals who work in the field of early care and education and parents of Mississippi children most impacted by racial and economic inequality.

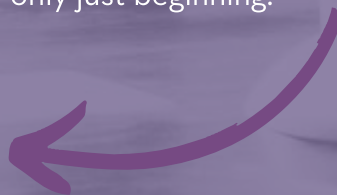
In the fall of 2023 and spring of 2024, we executed these strategies in big ways. In December of 2023 our second coalition working group, the Wages Working Group published their findings from a statewide survey about the working conditions of and compensation for childcare teachers, and the report is linked later in this annual report. Those findings led us to host breakfasts around the state for childcare directors and coalition partners to inform legislators and other leaders about the findings and possible solutions.

We spent a good portion of the spring helping childcare providers share their stories with legislators and other leaders and championing the need to increase childcare teacher wages in order to influence the state's labor force participation rate. While a childcare task force bill made it through the House of Representatives and was sent to the Senate Workforce Committee, it died there. We will continue to champion this work and will find more ways to uncover, collect, and amplify the stories of Mississippi early educators and parents of young children to move the needle further.

Another big change was welcoming two new members to the MELA staff. In September Mindy Phillips joined our team from the Arkansas Pharmacy Association as the new Director of Communications and Operations, and Alexis Hicks is our first Director of Advocacy and Policy, coming from Teen Health Mississippi. There is no way to express how glad April and I were to increase our capacity with these two talented women.

Functioning as a backbone for a statewide multi-issue coalition is not for the faint-of-heart, but the past nine months have proven that our new teammates are up to the task. If you are not already an official part of the Forum For the Future coalition, I hope you will [join us as a member](#) since our work for babies and toddlers in Mississippi is critical and only just beginning.

**JOIN FORUM  
FOR THE  
FUTURE!**



A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Elizabeth 'Biz' Harris".

Elizabeth "Biz" Harris  
MELA Executive Director

# 2024 - 2027 NEW STRATEGIC PLAN

This past year (June 2023 - July 2024), as we successfully wrapped up the first MELA strategic plan, the board and staff worked together to draft new goals for the next three years (2024-2027). These goals were developed from the Collective Impact Forum’s six common activities for backbone organizations.

## GOAL 1

MELA grows & enhances a diverse Forum For the Future coalition by guiding vision & strategy, supporting aligned activities, & establishing shared measurement practices

## GOAL 2

Forum For the Future, with MELA’s support, builds public will and media attention for 0-3 issues.

## GOAL 3

Forum For the Future advances policy as 0-3 policy changes are increasingly aligned to coalition goals & members’ recommendations

## GOAL 4

MELA mobilizes funding for Forum For the Future’s work

\*These are the topline goals, but each of these has specific measures of success that will allow us track progress toward them.

## OUR STORY

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

### NEW VISION

MELA envisions an equitable early childhood system where Mississippi children reach their full potential.

### NEW MISSION

MELA exists to build, strengthen, and support coalitions to advocate for systems change to improve early learning and child development outcomes in our state.



This report includes goals from our 2023 strategic plan as well as our 2027 strategic plan as we were in a transition year.

# OUR CLARIFIED STRATEGIES



We champion shared policies.



We promote innovative and evidence-based practices.

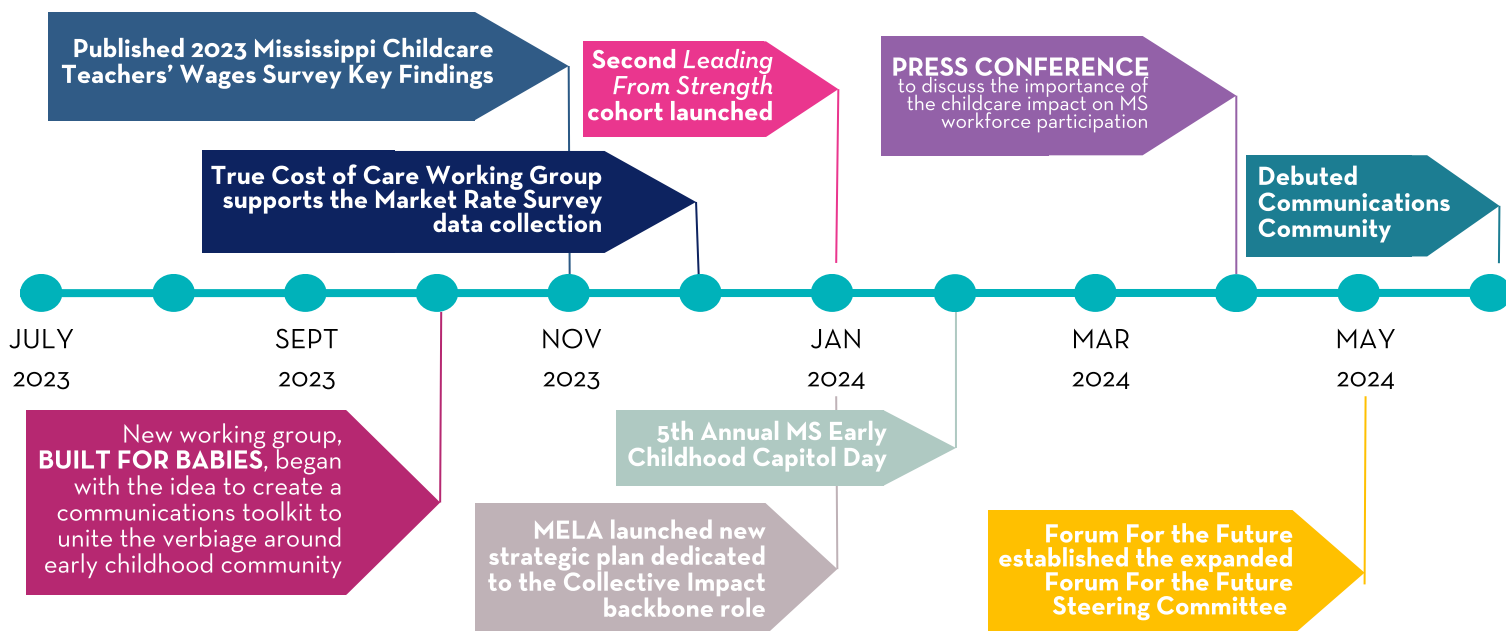


We support the collaborative design of solutions and collective action.



We elevate the voices and experiences of individuals who work in the field of early care and education and parents of Mississippi children most impacted by racial and economic inequality.

## MELA's YEAR AT A GLANCE



# 2020 - 2023

## STRATEGIC SUCCESSES



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

The statewide coalition, Forum For the Future, officially launched in 2021. Within the Forum For the Future, the first Forum for the Future Steering Committee was formed, “state of the art childcare” was defined, and four working groups (QSS Recommendations Team, Early Learning Collaborative, Childcare Teacher Wages, and True Cost of Childcare) came together to study and discuss ways to reach “state of the art” for the early learning community. The Forum For the Future coalition ended 2023 with 61 members, and now has 82.



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

MELA took on the task of creating an online presence and becoming an information hub for the Mississippi early childhood community. From our first posts on Facebook and Instagram, we have grown leaps and bounds. With more than 1,500 followers on Facebook and 280+ followers on Instagram. The MELA website receives thousands of unique visitors each year, while the Forum For the Future website, made public in Spring 2024, has gotten hundreds of visitors in a short time and serves as a place for our coalition to find and access information related to our shared work. Additionally, MELA hosts the Mississippi Early Learning resources website, our state’s shared services platform that allows us to build trusting relationships with childcare providers and share ways that they can grow their businesses and support children.



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

MELA could not continue this important work without the support from our partners and donors. Our primary funding source remains the SonEdna Foundation (formerly the Tallahatchie River Foundation) and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation via a grant from the Community Foundation For Mississippi. We have also recieved support from several Mississippi-based corporations to sustain the Leading From Strength program and our childcare-access awareness raising events.

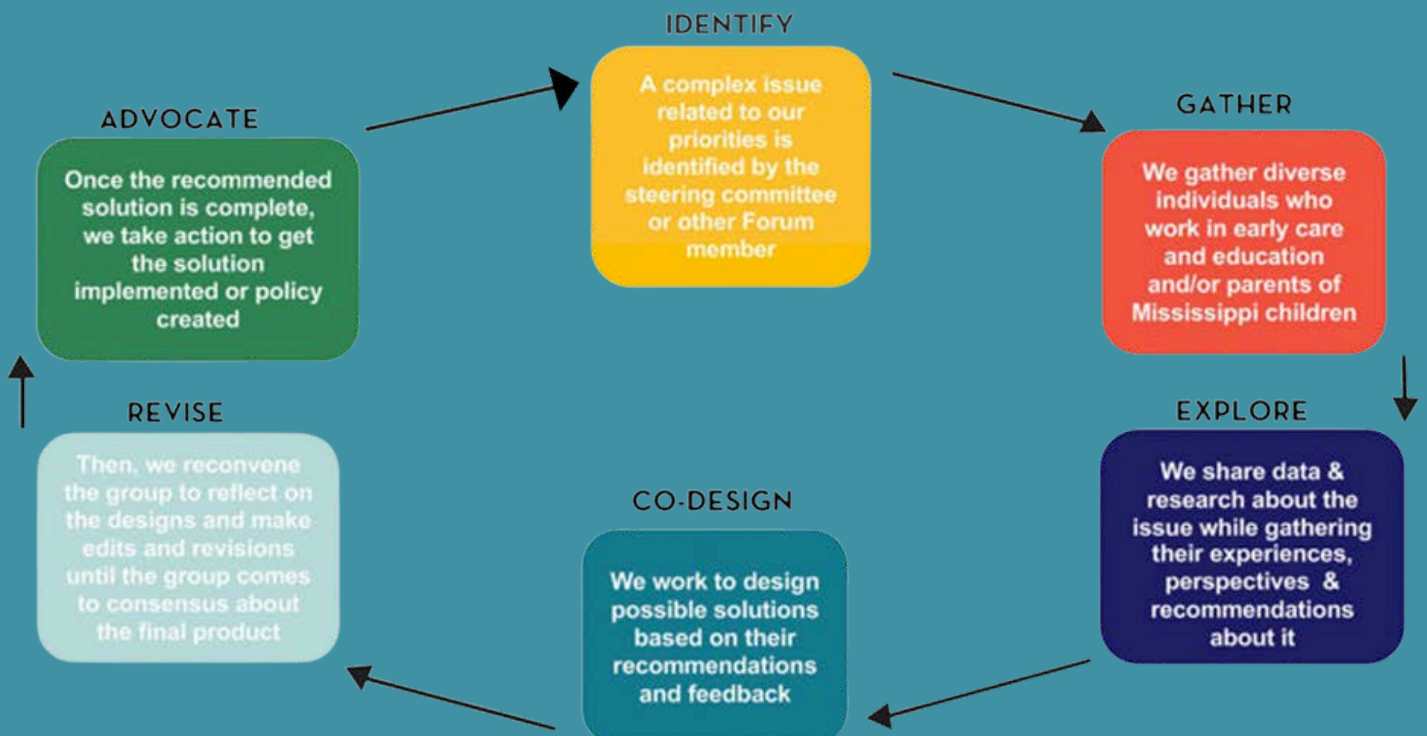


# MISSISSIPPI FORUM FOR THE FUTURE

As the Tallahatchie River Foundation (now, the Sonedna Foundation) made plans to launch MELA as a stand-alone organization, the vision was always: *Bring together a coalition that included early education, early childhood health, and family support.*

Just before MELA closed out the 2023-2024 fiscal year, our coalition - Forum For the Future - launched a revamped steering committee. While our first steering committee focused exclusively on early childhood education outcomes, specifically in the childcare sector, the 2024 steering committee has been charged to expand our 2030 goal to include infant and toddler health, development, and family wellbeing priorities. It is exciting that, in our fifth year of existence, we are beginning this important work of weaving the different early childhood disciplines and issue areas into one cohesive coalition.

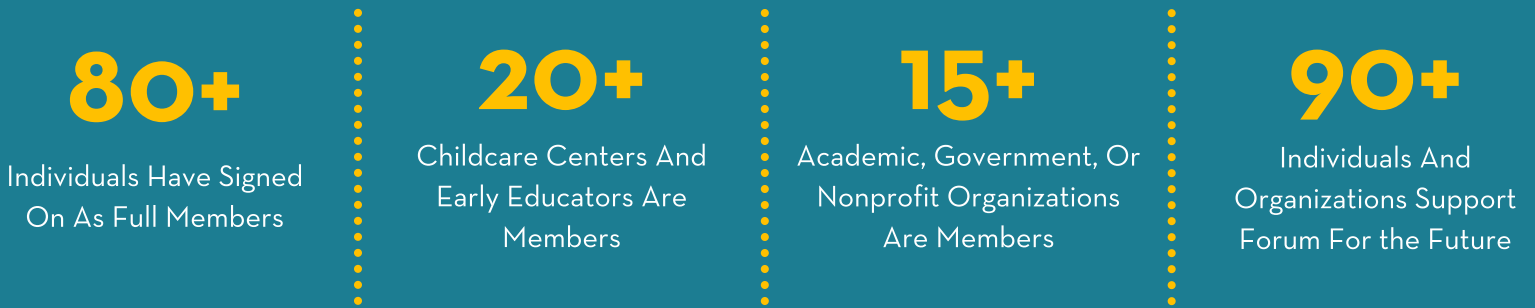
We will continue to champion our childcare-related priorities, but over the coming months, the Forum the Future steering committee will meet to prioritize additional objectives for our work. Together, the steering committee will develop a cross-sector common agenda for early childhood issues like maternal health and prenatal care, early childhood nutrition, access to pediatric healthcare and early intervention; and then, we will go through our process of sharing it with our partners for revisions and feedback.





# MEMBERSHIP

As our coalition grows, we are able to work together more effectively for Mississippi's children. Over the past year, Forum For the Future official membership has grown. To become a member of the Forum, interested parties may complete a virtual form that allows them to choose between full membership or supporting membership as well as joining as an organization or individual member.



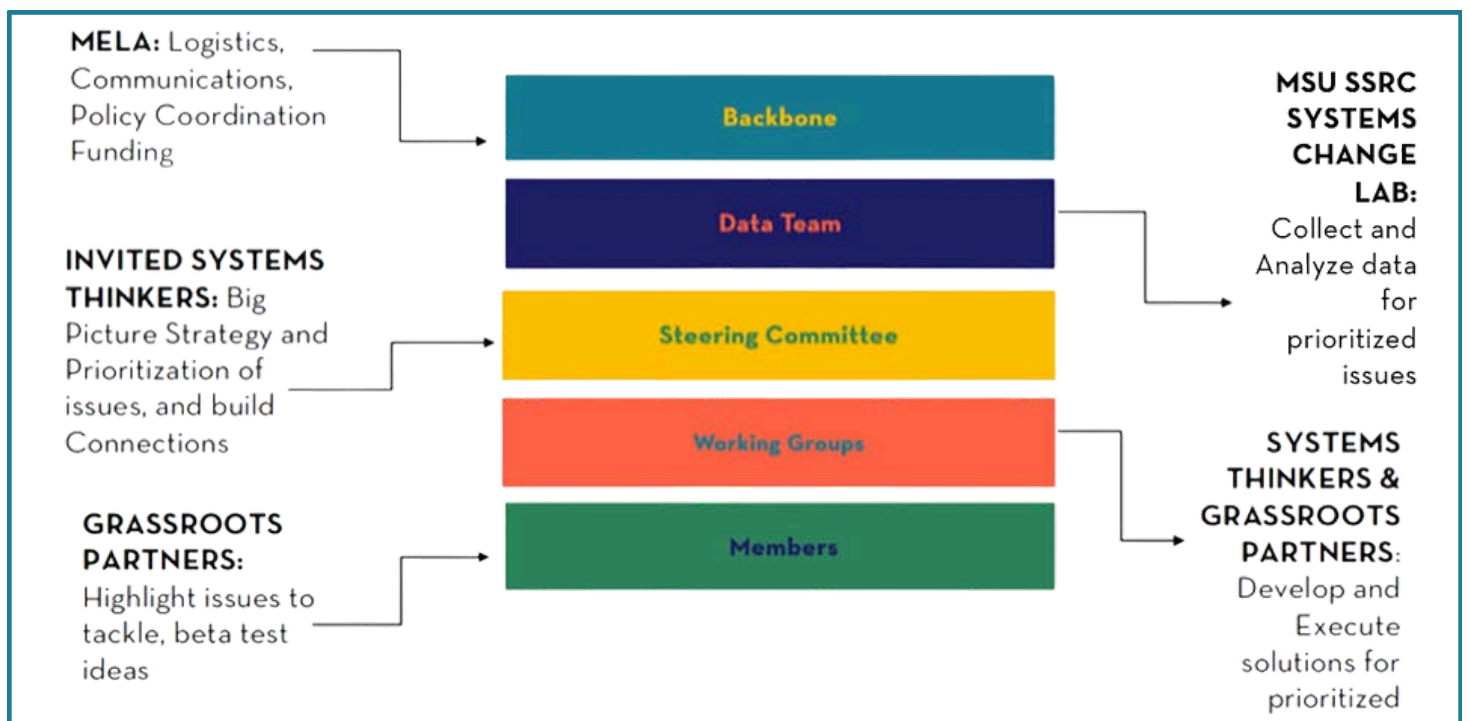
HAVE YOU JOINED FORUM FOR THE FUTURE? 

## WHO DOES WHAT?

**MELA uses the collective impact model** as our coalition's framework. Collective Impact is used to address complex social issues through coordinated, collaborative efforts among multiple stakeholders.

This structure ensures that various elements of the initiative are effectively coordinated, data-driven, and aligned with the shared goals of the collective impact effort.

**Here's a brief overview of our role and the roles of our partners within this structure:**



# OUR COALITION'S STEERING COMMITTEE

The importance of having dedicated steering committee members cannot be overstated. These individuals bring fresh perspectives, expertise, and energy that are crucial for achieving the ambitious goals of the Mississippi Forum For the Future. Their guidance will help us transform Mississippi's childcare system into a state-of-the-art model by 2030. This transformation will be fueled by robust data, resources, and cross-sector collaboration to meet the needs of all children and families in Mississippi.

Forum For the Future is a movement to transform the childcare system in Mississippi. More specifically, it's a collective impact initiative designed to help early childhood organizations, business leaders, and policymakers break down silos and leverage our combined efforts, resources, and expertise to build a state-of-the-art childcare system that meets the needs of all children and families in Mississippi.

The Forum For the Future Steering Committee fosters inclusivity and equity within the state's early childhood systems. Its primary mission is to ensure that the voices and perspectives of families and providers from diverse backgrounds are at the forefront of decision-making processes. We will actively seek ways to include topics such as healthy children, focusing on healthy birth weight, early intervention, physical health, and social-emotional/mental health. Additionally, we aim to support strong families through initiatives around economic security, maternal health, skilled and knowledgeable parenting, and home-visiting programs.

By deliberately incorporating regional, racial, and ethnic diversity into its composition, the committee aims to represent Mississippi's varied demographics authentically. This commitment to diversity acknowledges the richness of the state's cultural tapestry.

## MEET THE GROWING STEERING COMMITTEE

**The steering committee is responsible for helping refine the vision of Forum for the Future, track progress effectively, and expand the reach and impact of this movement. Members help define the scope of the overall initiative, provide strategic direction, determine measures of success, and champion our work to others.**

**Katie Cassidy**, University Mississippi Medical Center

**Marneshia Cathey**, West Point Christian Preschool

**Nadene Cattrell**, Mississippi Families for Kids

**Lesia Daniel-Hollingshead**, Fun Time Preschool

**Valencia (Kay) Davis**, Mississippi Department of Health

**Latasha Hadley**, Waterford.org

**Jessica Hubert**, Mississippi Early Childhood Early Intervention

**Robin Jackson**, MS Women's Black Roundtable

**Eric Lee**, St. Paul MB Church / Little Saints Academy

**Jeff Leffler**, Mississippi State University

**Nikki McCellis**, The United Way of the Capitol Area

**Brittney Mosley**, MS Department of Health

**Candice Pittman**, MS Headstart Association

**Chelsea Presley**, Diaper Bank of the Delta

**Martha Ravola**, Alcorn State University

**Melvin Robinson**, Save the Children

**Tamara Smith**, Midtown Partners

**Tonya Ware**, Ready Nation

**Kenya Wolfe**, The University of Mississippi

# CURRENT WORKING GROUPS

## 1. True Cost of Childcare

### Seeks to Answer These Key Questions

- From a financial and business perspective, what does it take to run a sustainable childcare program (including staffing needs and wages, realistic tuition, supplies, rent/mortgage, etc.).
- How do costs and business needs differ according to center type and setting (i.e. urban vs. rural, home-based vs. center based)?
- What are critical issues within the childcare business model?



### Goal

Industry leaders, childcare providers, and economic analysts will consider the comprehensive cost of providing quality childcare services. Together, they will identify and, if possible, begin implementing solutions to help childcare providers maintain financially stable programs and increase worker salaries. Over the past year, the group has contributed to the data collection for the Mississippi Department of Human Services [2024 Market Rate Survey](#) and encouraged providers to participate in the Cost of Care Analysis that was being done by P-3 Fiscal Strategies. This data will be used to determine next steps.

### Progress

The True Cost of Care working group will be leveraging data from the [Market Rate Survey 2024 Report](#) and the [Narrow Cost Analysis Report](#) that were published in June 2024 to develop tailored budgets for childcare centers, ensuring efficient operation and high standards of care.

### Co-Chairs

Dr. Jeff Leffler, Assistant Professor & Interim Head in the Meridian Division of Education at MSU  
Tamara Smith, Director of Early Childhood at Midtown Partners, Inc.

## 2. Built for Babies

### Seeks to Answer These Key Questions

- What shared values do Mississippi decisionmakers hold?
- How do those values relate to Infant and Toddler policy issues?
- What framing and stories should advocates use to educate decisionmakers about infant and toddler issues?



### Goal

Through support from the national organization Zero To Three's "Built For Babies" technical assistance and grant, a group of advocates and leaders are meeting to design a messaging toolkit that our coalition can use to inform Mississippi decisionmakers and policymakers about the importance of early childhood issues.

### Progress

The Built for Babies working group has developed our target audience, target users, and explored the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers Archetypes documents to begin drafting original Mississippi-focused messages. The goal is for the toolkit to be complete by December 2024.

### Co-Chairs

Biz Harris, Executive Director of MELA  
Christy Stanton, Sr. Technical Assistance Specialist, Zero to Three

# COMPLETED WORKING GROUP

## CHILDCARE TEACHERS' WAGES

### Sought to Answer These Key Questions

- What are the challenges and opportunities Mississippi childcare teachers face?
- What kind of infrastructure needs to be in place to provide higher wages and professional development to childcare workers?
- How much funding would be needed?
- How do health or retirement benefits factor into this equation?
- What would be needed to ensure that funding is sustained?

### 2023 MS childcare Teachers' Wages Report

The Childcare Teachers' Wages Working Group conducted an in-depth survey to harness a better understanding of the actual compensation and workforce challenges of Mississippi childcare teachers.

### Co-Chairs

Connie Clay, Co-Director of the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning

Cathy Grace, Education and Training Specialist, Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning

**The survey and report were completed due to the hard work of the Forum For the Future Data team members from the Systems Change Lab of the Mississippi State University Social Sciences Research Center:**

Laure Bell

Bradley Long

Dr. Heather Hanna

Callie Poole



**More than 650 MS early childhood teachers completed the survey!**

Use the QR code or [click here](#) to view the full report.



**UNDERSTANDING CHILD CARE:  
THE WORKFORCE  
BEHIND THE WORKFORCE**  
2023 Mississippi Child Care Teachers'  
Wages Survey Key Findings



## KEY REPORT FINDINGS

- **Responding childcare teachers reported being overworked and underprepared.**
- **Current childcare teacher pay in Mississippi is below “survival wages.”**
- **The Mississippi childcare workforce is not stable.**
- **Higher wages and benefits are needed to stabilize the Mississippi childcare workforce, incentivize educational advancement, and retain teachers.**



# LEADING FROM STRENGTH

*MELA's Empowerment Network for Women of Color*

## THE SECOND COHORT

A'Kendra Lewis  
 Rosalind Hammond  
 Yolanda Freeman  
 Anshika Singh  
 Sheena Guice  
 Patricia Sidney  
 Me'Shayla Sandifer

Jasmine Dedrick  
 Daffeyn Cobbins  
 Catherine Gates  
 Annie Crudrup  
 TaKisha Bishop  
 Jasmine Andrews  
 Lajuna Ivory



April May  
 Coalition & Programs  
 Director

The Leading From Strength initiative has expanded into its second cohort, featuring 14 women of color childcare directors throughout Mississippi. This report highlights the progress made by this new cohort and outlines the plans for the next five months. The initiative aims to empower women of color, strengthen their leadership roles, and foster equitable systems within their professional environments.

### BACKGROUND

Women of color in leadership face unique challenges that hinder their professional growth and effectiveness. Systemic barriers like discriminatory hiring practices, limited mentorship, and restricted network access limit their leadership opportunities. They are underrepresented in leadership roles, often feeling isolated and burdened as token representatives. They frequently encounter bias and discrimination, such as micro-aggressions and unequal pay, and must navigate societal and cultural expectations that add pressure to conform. The lack of support systems and mentorship impedes their career development, making it difficult to advance and thrive in their roles.

**From early discussions where members spoke about the filters they felt necessary in their interactions, the cohort has shown growth in self-empowerment and equitable partnerships. This has contributed to a thriving community within the Leading from Strength Cohort, with positive impacts extending into statewide systems.**

### CONCLUSION

The Leading From Strength Second Cohort has demonstrated the power of mutual support and equitable partnerships among women of color in leadership roles. Their ongoing efforts are pivotal in shifting systems and fostering a culture of equity and quality for all children in Mississippi. As the cohort grows and strengthens, their impact is expected to extend further, driving meaningful change in their professional and community contexts.

### NEXT STEPS

1. Strengthening Networks: Continuing to build and maintain networks of equitable relationships.
2. Empowerment and Advocacy Training: Providing additional training on self-empowerment, advocacy, and navigating professional systems.
3. Impact Assessment: Further surveys and interviews will be conducted to measure the cohort's impact on their organizations and communities.
4. Resource Allocation: Ensuring members can access the necessary resources to thrive and implement their learnings.
5. Statewide Engagement: Expanding the reach of the cohort's work into broader statewide systems, influencing policies and practices.



"Here in Mississippi, our systems are built in a way that a lot of people of color are not a part of the systems that make the decisions, but the communities that we serve look like us. That's a hard space to be in and talk about. Still, this network is about growth and helping each other think about how you navigate the system - positively navigating the system but in a way that you can still be confident to have those hard conversations."

- LFS Member



Alexis Hicks  
Advocacy & Policy  
Director

# Advocacy & Policy

In 2023, MELA created a new role on our team to help advance early childhood issues and build shared voices for advocacy. This is particularly relevant for early childhood professionals, as well as others invested in early learning and development issues. Early childhood professionals are often on the front lines, directly experiencing the challenges and limitations within the current early childhood education system. Research consistently shows that educators are one of the most crucial elements in providing quality outcomes for babies and children; however, low pay and low morale are causing many childcare teachers to leave this essential field for better-paying jobs in other sectors. Engaging in advocacy opportunities equips early childhood professionals with the skills needed to address systemic issues and ensure that their voices are the loudest when decision-makers seek to solve issues and challenges related to the childcare sector.

Ultimately, these advocacy opportunities enable early childhood professionals to connect with others who share their passion, work together, and enhance their collective efforts for children and the childcare sector. By supporting these professionals to advocate effectively, we can help secure the resources and support needed to provide high-quality early learning experiences, benefiting children's development and contributing to broader growth for the state of Mississippi.

In September 2023, MELA welcomed a new Advocacy & Policy Director - Alexis Hicks - to the team.

## Advocacy Workshops

MELA consistently seeks to elevate the voices and perspectives of people caring for and educating young children. Between March and May 2024, MELA hosted advocacy trainings to guide childcare workers, early childhood advocates and parents in effectively advocating for themselves.

### INTRODUCTORY LEVEL

This workshop is designed for those new to advocacy or looking to enhance their foundational skills.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Understanding What Advocacy Is & Why It's Important
- Identifying Key Issues
- Developing Compelling Messages
- Elevating Your Voice Through Coalitions

Participants completed this workshop equipped with practical tools and strategies to effectively advocate for their causes and engage with policymakers.

### INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Building on foundational skills, this workshop focuses on the crucial aspect of relationship building with policymakers.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Finding & Learning About Legislators
- Framing Issues for Legislative Response
- Contacting Legislators
- Strategies for Keeping Your Issues Front & Center

Participants completed this workshop equipped with practical tools and strategies to effectively build and maintain relationships with policymakers, enhancing their advocacy efforts and influencing policy decisions.

### ADVANCED LEVEL

For experienced advocates, this workshop delves into the complexities of advancing for systemic change.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Comprehensive Policy Analysis
- Navigating Political Systems
- Effective Communications for Systemic Change
- Engaging & Mobilizing Communities
- Sustainable Impact & Long-term Advocacy

Participants completed this workshop with the expertise and tools necessary to advocate for systemic change, equipped to lead transformative initiatives and drive meaningful, long-term policy reforms.

# 2024 EARLY CHILDHOOD CAPITOL DAY

Every year, MELA partners with other early childhood organizations to host an Early Childhood Capitol Day. During this reporting period, Capitol Day was held on February 6, 2024 and was an in-person event. This year's Capitol Day brought together early childhood professionals, advocates, parents, legislators and business leaders to advance critical public-policy priorities for early childhood education and welfare. The attendees gathered at the Walter Sillers Building - across from the Mississippi Capitol Building - for a panel discussion with early childhood industry leaders and state legislators.

## KEY FOCUS AREAS FOR 2024

**Increased State Investments in Childcare Teacher Wages**

Advocating for improved compensation to retain skilled childcare professionals and enhance the quality of early childhood education.

**Enhanced Support for Early Intervention Programs**

Encouraging investments and policy recommendations to strengthen early intervention services.

## OUR 5TH ANNUAL CAPITOL DAY BY THE NUMBERS

**+60** gathered at the Capitol to represent the early childhood community

**+15** went to visit Legislators in person to discuss the Key Focus areas



Use the QR code or [click here](#) to view the Capitol Day One-Pager.



# Mississippi Power Early Childhood Breakfasts

## Boosting Mississippi's Workforce: Roundtable Discussions

In the fall of 2023, Mississippi Power sponsored breakfasts across the state to discuss the importance of addressing issues of childcare access and affordability as a way to boost Mississippi's economy. The breakfasts - funded by Mississippi Power - held at Toyota Mississippi in Blue Springs, The East Mississippi Community College Communiversity Campus in Columbus, and the Jones College Advanced Technology Center, in Ellisville - gathered early childhood champions and community leaders to discuss ways the state and communities can work together to increase access and affordability. Each event included legislators, local elected officials, workforce and economic development leaders, early childhood educators, and childcare providers.

Mississippi Power's support of these breakfasts allowed us to raise awareness about this critical issue in three different communities across the state and laid the foundation for annual or bi-annual events.



## LEGISLATIVE SESSION UPDATES



As we reflect on this legislative session, we're pleased to report progress in elevating childcare as a crucial component of Mississippi's workforce and economic development. This year, we successfully garnered support from both Republican and Democratic legislators to advance House Bill 907. Although the bill did not pass, our focused advocacy has fostered new relationships and highlighted the importance of early childhood education.

The original bill aimed to increase childcare teacher pay but was altered in the House committee to establish a task force on childcare's role in workforce participation. While this change was not ideal, it was a step toward recognizing the essential role of childcare providers.

Despite passing the House, House Bill 907 did not progress through the Senate's Economic Development and Workforce Committee. While this outcome is not what we initially hoped for, it was a sign that our coalition is building relationships across both parties and raising awareness about childcare as a workforce issue in our state.



# Workforce Development Press Conference

On April 2, 2024, MELA and the Forum for the Future hosted a crucial press conference addressing the intersection of quality childcare and workforce development. The event brought together Mississippi business leaders, early childhood educators, and parents to discuss how affordable and accessible childcare is essential for a robust workforce.

Speakers highlighted the significant financial disparity between what families can afford and what childcare providers must charge, emphasizing the challenges faced by providers working to meet the needs of children and families. The conference also explored the broader impact on Mississippi businesses, including issues related to absenteeism and turnover.

The event aimed to engage the general public and policymakers in identifying actionable steps to support parents and caregivers, enhance the early education workforce, and ensure that quality childcare remains accessible and affordable for all families in Mississippi. The discussions underscored the urgent need for policy solutions to address these pressing challenges effectively.



Members of the Ready Nation Mississippi Early Childhood Investment Council, Forum For the Future, and MELA at the Capitol.

## THANK YOU TO EACH OF THE AMAZING SPEAKERS!

**Wade Broyles**, Regional Vice President, Oracle Cloud Infrastructure

**Lesia Daniel-Hollingshead**, Co-Owner/Director, Funtime Preschool/Afterschool of Clinton

**Willie Jones**, President & CEO, Dependable Source Corporation

**Rep. Clay Mansell**, Mississippi House of Representatives District 56

**Debra McGee**, Senior Vice President & Director of Minority Business Development, BankPlus



Use the QR code or [click here](#) to view the press coverage.

### WOMEN, CHILDREN, & FAMILIES STUDY GROUP

Created in 2022  
Chair: Sen. Nicole Boyd

This group will focus on legislation affecting families and children from birth to age three.

### LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION STUDY GROUP

Created in 2024  
Chair: Sen. Daniel Sparks

This group will focus on making legislative recommendations to increase Mississippi's workforce & enhance skills among the unemployed or underemployed and addressing the state's labor force participation rate.

## Upcoming 2024 Legislative Hearings

As we prepare for the upcoming legislative session in 2025, we are closely following recent Senate hearings and legislative initiatives announced by Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann. In June of 2024, Lieutenant Governor Hosemann also announced the appointment of State Senator Daniel Sparks as the chair of the new Labor Force Participation Study Group, tasked with making legislative recommendations to increase Mississippi's workforce and enhance skills among the unemployed or underemployed, addressing the state's labor force participation rate, which was 53.7 percent in April 2024, significantly below the national average. Additionally, Lt. Governor Hosemann reinstated the Study Group on Women, Children, and Families, originally created in 2022 and chaired by Sen.

Nicole Boyd. This group will focus on legislation affecting families and children from birth to age three, building on their previous work and addressing new issues. This is particularly exciting since, in the last session, the Forum For the Future Coalition, supported by MELA, worked hard to help make the connection between childcare access, teacher wages, and the labor force participation rate. Both study groups' announcements signify that our advocacy paid off. Now, we get to continue this important work and make the case for childcare teacher wages as a critical workforce issue!

Both study groups will hold public hearings in late summer or early fall of 2024 to gather testimony from state agencies, experts, and the public. Lt. Governor Hosemann emphasized the legislature's role in examining state laws and appropriations to foster positive growth and prosperity, highlighting the potential impact on economic development, tourism, health outcomes, and educational attainment. These initiatives ensure that Mississippi's children have access to quality early childhood education and that families receive the necessary support to thrive. Look out for ways to engage with these hearings and join us in the coming weeks as we plan how best to share the priorities and recommendations of the Forum.

# Communications Hub

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



Mindy Phillips  
Communications &  
Operations Director

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 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.

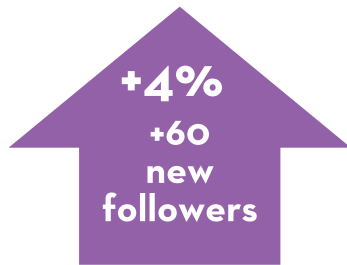
In September 2023, MELA welcomed a new Communications & Operations Director - Mindy Phillips - to the team.



## FACEBOOK

as of June 30, 2024

**Followers: 1,524**



**Reach: 10,185**



**Best Post**



## TOP PERFORMING POSTS

1. Call out to Childcare teachers to take the Wages Survey - Jul. 18, 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=587919983492652&set=pb.100068239669479.-2207520000&type=3>

2. Current childcare teacher pay in Mississippi is below “survival wages” - Dec. 19, 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=665734835711166&set=pb.100068239669479.-2207520000&type=3>

3. Market Rate Survey Call to Action - Feb. 29, 2024

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=705485345069448&set=pb.100068239669479.-2207520000&type=3>

4. MELA’s announcement of two new teammates: Alexis Hicks and Mindy Phillips - Sept. 14, 2023

Shared from the website - <https://www.msearlylearning.org/new-teammates/>

5. Join MELA’s team at the Zero to Three LEARN conference in Minneapolis - Sept. 19, 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=618803803737603&set=pb.100068239669479.-2207520000&type=3>



# INSTAGRAM

as of June 30, 2024

Followers: 283

Avg. Reach

Best Post

+13%

+100%

53

+32  
new  
followers

84  
views

reached  
organically

## EMAIL CAMPAIGNS

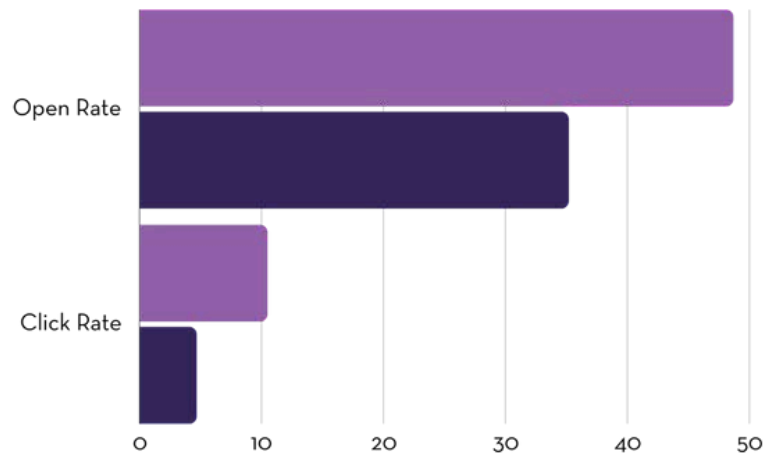
as of June 30, 2024



MELA currently has a total of **1,894** email campaign subscribers. We sent out **37** email campaigns via MailChimp during this time period.

### Mailchimp Campaign Data

MELA Average Nonprofit



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).

## MSEarlyLearning.org

In February 2024, MELA introduced a new Google Analytics reporting tool. The data provided covers the period from February to June 2024.

**MSEarlyLearning.org received 1,238 unique visitors with an engagement rate of 58.79% which - according to Google Analytics - is above the nonprofit industry standard.**

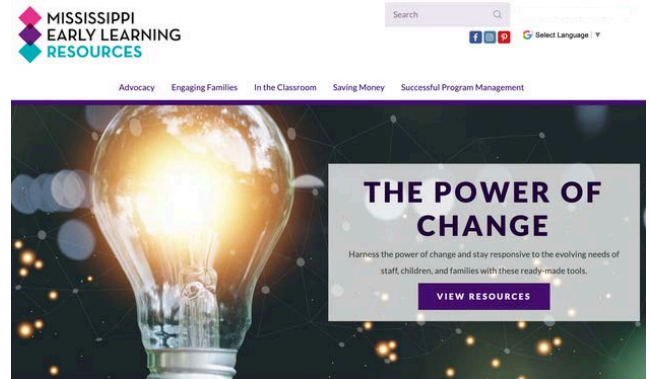


# MS Early Learning Resources

## Shared Services Platform Overview

[MSEarlyLearningResources.org](http://MSEarlyLearningResources.org)

The Mississippi Early Learning Resources platform is a comprehensive shared services resource designed to support early childhood professionals across the state. With over 1,300 early childhood professionals accessing the website, the platform is vital for discovering valuable resources across several key areas, including saving money, enhancing classroom experiences, and adopting sustainable business practices.



The Mississippi Early Learning Resources platform has been effectively introduced and utilized across various initiatives. In the Wonder School Graduations, 80 new providers from four cohorts were given a comprehensive website walkthrough, encouraging them to become active members. Business Advisors from the Division of Early Care and Development at the Mississippi Department of Human Services used the platform to supplement lessons on budgets, human resources, and administrative topics, resulting in hundreds of interactions over 10 months with 25 upcoming directors. Additionally, professional development sessions hosted by Business Advisors introduced over 100 providers to the platform's features. Through a partnership with Excel by 5, the platform was showcased via a video presentation during community meetings, highlighting its benefits and increasing awareness among participants.

### Some ways these partnerships have increased engagement

Introduced to MELR Platform at Wonderschool Graduations



Over the course of the CDA program



### IN PROVIDERS' OWN WORDS...

I can't adequately continue to provide quality care without the shared resources platform. I'm spoiled! When I devise or revise resources, I check shared services to ensure that I have the latest and greatest. I also look for discounts in the savings portal before I shop... It's my 'go-to site.'

The valuable information and resources made available to us as...professionals... [is] so helpful in Mississippi. We are grateful!

As a new business owner, I did not know this resource was available. It provides beneficial support to early childhood business owners. It is very easy to navigate.



**Groups.io**

In June of 2024, MELA introduced the *Early Childhood News* on a new email platform,

Groups.IO in order to increase the communication reach of all early childhood organizations and agencies across all prenatal to three disciplines- education, health, development, maternal health, and more. Currently, there are **20 members** and **10 organizations** represented.

Use the QR code or click here to subscribe



### Groups.io is a new way for MELA to

Connecting and supporting all disciplines in the early childhood landscape.

Increase coordination and awareness of Early childhood related events, opportunities, and research in Mississippi.

Become a trusted source for early childhood communications efforts.

## Early Childhood Meetings & Events Calendar



After seeing a need in the early childhood community, MELA created a shared calendar, released on the MS Forum For the Future website, where all early childhood meetings & events are in one location. Spanning across all disciplines, parents, educators, advocates, and medical professionals can find meetings to attend or find open dates to host events.

**15+ requests in the first 2 months**

To view the calendar or submit a request, visit <https://msforumforthefuture.org/resources>



MELA created a community of early childhood communications practitioners to thought partner, encourage one another, and grow a larger audiences for their work by sharing ideas and resources.



The first meeting was June 12, 2024 with 11 attendees and 9 organizations represented. At this meeting, we introduced Groups.IO and the Early Childhood Meetings & Events Calendar. The responses from the attendees were all positive with multiple attendees saying, "We have needed this for a long time." MELA hopes to use this Communications Community as a start to knocking down the silos that divide the early childhood community.



Use the QR code or click here to join the Community

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR MELA?

If we can change the first five years for Mississippi's children, we can change **EVERYTHING**.

This idea is at the root of the work MELA has been doing and will be accomplishing over the coming months.

As we begin the new fiscal year, we have some big plans to move the needle for Mississippi's young children. We have some new initiatives and will also be deepening and expanding other projects.

- The expanded steering committee's work over the coming months to develop early childhood health, development, and family wellbeing priorities allows the Forum For the Future to TRULY bring together Mississippi's entire early childhood system and community under a shared agenda. This is a critical step forward.
- Thanks to a new formalized partnership Southern Education Foundation, MELA will be one of six states to bring an early childhood education advocacy council to life. This council will formalize the way we champion shared policies and help us support the leadership of additional childcare providers and parents of young children. Look for additional details on this major workstream soon!
- With support from the national organization Zero to Three, and future Technical Assistance from the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers, our Built For Babies working group is developing a toolkit to help our coalition members communicate more persuasively with our elected leaders. Together, the group is developing talking points and collecting stories that we hope will resonate across the political aisle, but especially with those coming from conservative backgrounds. We think this messaging is a critical step in moving our collective work for babies and toddlers forward.

## THERE ARE OTHER BIG PLANS IN THE WORKS.





## 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 Chair
- Mr. Ross Weems, Board Treasurer
- Dr. Jameshya Ballard
- Mr. Corey Hinshaw
- Dr. Richard Long
- Mr. Alex Martin
- Mrs. Mandy Mahoney
- Dr. Suzette Matthews
- Dr. Alexander Washington
- Dr. Andrew Wilhelm
- Mrs. Kimberly LeRoy Washington
- Mr. Casey Butts
- Rev. Neil Tullos
- Ms. Jennifer Buster
- Mrs. Morgana Freeman, Advisor

The Mississippi Early Learning Alliance could not exist without the generosity of the SonEdna Foundation. Mrs. Morgana Freeman and her father, Mr. Morgan Freeman, began working within the early learning community to ensure students have opportunities and resources to “thrive by third grade.” From this dream to see the children in Mississippi advance scholastically, the creation of MELA was born. The team at MELA works diligently on becoming a coalition builder and authentic collaborator in the Mississippi early childhood community.



It was always our founder’s vision that MELA would expand across all of the early childhood domains. While the focus from the beginning of MELA in 2019 was early learning, MELA is currently working to include all disciplines within the early childhood landscape, including infant and toddler health, development, and maternal health. MELA strives to put collaboration at the forefront of its work, and the team is excited to collaborate with professionals, educators, and advocates pushing the common agenda forward for the betterment of the early childhood community.

MELA is eternally grateful for the vision and support that the Freeman family has provided for MELA, and as a result, for Mississippi, and we look forward to continued partnership to make Mississippi the best place in the nation to have and raise a family.