

AFTER THE BELL- City of Biloxi Community Conversation



12/4/2008

Our Community and Our Children – What We Want From Afterschool Programs & Activities in Biloxi, MS

On December 4, 2008 over 60 youth, parents, grandparents, citizens, youth workers, school representatives, and civic and business community members gathered at Gorenflo Elementary School in Biloxi, MS to hold the first of what we hope will be many Community Conversations around afterschool programs and activities for children ages 5 to 18 along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

AFTER THE BELL

OUR COMMUNITY AND OUR CHILDREN – WHAT WE WANT FROM AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS & ACTIVITIES IN BILOXI, MS

The **Mississippi Gulf Coast Youth Development Coalition** formed after Hurricane Katrina to cooperatively address long term health problems and other effects of the storm for coast children. Youth organizations that provide activities for school age children during the out of school hours recognized the need to collaborate and work with schools, churches, families, the business community and others to improve outcomes for children using the community asset building approach.

While the individual youth development afterschool and out of school programs and activities are both essential and effective, meeting the wishes of the community requires a collaborative approach and plan that will result in a variety of safe and asset rich environments where children thrive and build skills essential to healthy growth and successful adulthood.

Since its formation, the **Mississippi Gulf Coast Youth Development Coalition** has worked to strengthen relationships and communication among its members, establishing the **University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast** as an intermediary. In 2008, in partnership with the city of Biloxi, the Coalition began working with the **National League of Cities**, the **National Education Association**, and **Public Agenda** to organize the first Community Conversation around afterschool programs and activities in the **City of Biloxi**.

City of Biloxi

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2007 American Community Survey

General Statistics

Total persons 42,311
 Persons Per Household 2.42
 Median Household Income \$44,528
 Median Age 36.9
 High School Graduates 81.9%
 Bachelors Degree or Higher 19.2%

Population

White 72.7%
 Black 20.1%
 Asian 5.7%
 Hispanic or Latino 5.9%

Labor Force Status

Total Labor Force 22,482
 Civilian Labor Force 20,374
 Armed Forces 2,108

Housing Unit Characteristics

Total Housing Units 22,147
 Owner Occupied 9,632
 Renter Occupied 9,987
 Average Purchase Value \$130,008
 Median Gross Rent \$736

Per Capita Income

Biloxi \$25,590
 Below poverty level 10.8%
 Single Parent Household below poverty level 20.6%

Child/Youth Statistics

Under 5 years 2,402
 5-9 years 2,049
 10-14 years 3,034
 15-19 years 3,571



PARTICIPANTS (LEFT TO RIGHT) DR. ALFRED MCNAIR, DR. CAROL JONES (WILLIAM CAREY COLLEGE), TOM MOORE (BGGC NEW HOPE), BILL RAYMOND (CITY OF BILOXI)



PARTICIPANTS (LEFT TO RIGHT) SARA WALKER (VISIONS OF HOPE), WINDY SWETMAN III (HARRISON COUNTY SUPERVISOR), RENE DAVIS (WEED & SEED), MARIE LEONARD (USM)



SUPERINTENDENT DR. PAUL TISDALE OF BILOXI PUBLIC SCHOOLS LISTENING TO THE DISCUSSION IN THE BREAKOUT GROUPS

THE CONVERSATION

On December 4, 2008 over 60 youth, parents, grandparents, citizens, youth workers, school representatives, and civic and business community members gathered at Gorenflo Elementary School in Biloxi to hold the first of what we hope will be many Community Conversations around afterschool programs and activities for children ages 5 to 18 along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The **Biloxi Community Conversation** was sponsored by the Mississippi Gulf Coast Youth Development Coalition, the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Gulf Coast, Biloxi Public Schools, Harrison County School District, the Mississippi Gulf Coast YMCA Safe & Drug Free Communities Program, the National League of Cities, the National Education Association, United Way of South Mississippi, and the East Biloxi/D'Iberville Weed & Seed.

The primary goal of the **Biloxi Community Conversation** was to create a productive dialogue among a diverse group of community members to open up lines of communication between families, schools, afterschool service providers and the community; share ideas and perspectives about how best to improve afterschool programming and help more students access and benefit from such programs; and brainstorm and prioritize the ways in which the school district and the community can best work together on these goals. Additional goals of the process included having the opinions and ideas of the community and local youth that would have impact on the design of new and existing programs and services, and to test how engaging the community in the decision making process could add benefit to our overall work.

Given that resources for afterschool programs are limited, and no single program can be all things to all people, the community needed to make decisions about what kinds of afterschool programs they wanted to invest in. Small, diverse dialogue groups from the local community along with trained moderators and recorders from the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast discussed three distinct approaches to afterschool programs, based on different ideas about how afterschool time is best used. Should afterschool programs and activities be designed to:

- **Approach #1 - Keep Children Off The Street And On The Right Path? Or**
- **Approach #2 - Give Children Better Learning Opportunities? Or**
- **Approach #3 - Broaden Children's Horizons By Exposing Them To New Cultural Experiences?**

Initially each group discussed the three approaches and decided which was closest to their own thinking and why. The results varied by person and whether that person was a parent, an educator, a non-educator, a youth worker, or a teen. With the participants thinking and talking together, each group worked specifically to identify areas of common ground, clarify concerns or disagreements, and identify outstanding questions, create priorities for action, and report their findings back to the group as a whole.

Interestingly about half of the participants initially favored Approach 3, while the remainder was roughly split between Approach 1 and 2. However, most thought all three approaches were necessary to build skills. Several noted that all of the approaches go together and they could not see separating them believing educating the whole child prepares them for society. However, some key areas of common ground emerged.

APPROACHES

Participants favoring **APPROACH #1** felt:

- **SAFETY** – Afterschool programs should provide a safe environment when most parents are working and their children would have to be home with no supervision. Children need to be engaged in positive activities and “off the streets” where they can be drawn into non-productive and even criminal activities. Most children have no place to go.
- **CARING** – Children need structure and nurturing.
- **AVOIDING RISKY BEHAVIOR** – Afterschool programs are a key in helping children make the right decisions about drugs, alcohol, and premature sexual activity as well as teaching essential elements of respect and conflict resolution.
- **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** – Afterschool programs need to focus on exercise, health and sports.
- **LIFE SKILLS** – Programs should include career exploration and teach life skills including service to the community.

APPROACH #2:

- **HOMEWORK** – Afterschool programs should help children with homework to allow for more family time at home especially for those parents who get off late.
- **KNOWLEDGE RETENTION** – Children need every opportunity to learn and programs should reinforce learning so they don’t lose it. Programs should provide hands on workshops that can help children apply knowledge learned in school.
- **TUTORING** – Individual tutoring helps children more. There is a chance to do more in group settings, but individual tutoring is more beneficial. Getting older youth to help with the younger provides leadership opportunities they normally do not receive. A lot of children don’t work as quickly in the classroom, if their class performance lacks then afterschool programs can give children a voice that is not normally heard.

APPROACH #3:

- **VISUAL & CULTURAL EXPERIENCES** – Programs should provide opportunities that wouldn’t be available otherwise to make children well-rounded, including field trips and exposure to local history.
- **INCLUSIVENESS** – After school programs are essential to future understanding of diversity. Children should learn about other cultures locally and around the world. Programs should include all children from all backgrounds.
- **THE ARTS** – Projects in art, music, and science interest children more and programs should provide creative opportunities not always afforded in school.



YOUTH PARTICIPANT, MARK TRAN (HOPE CDAYOUTH PROGRAM), JESSE WEBER (HANDS ON) AND WADE HAWK (BOOMTOWN CASINO)

CONCERN AND DISAGREEMENT

While there was common ground around the approaches there were also many areas of concern and disagreement.

- **PARTICIPATION** – While significant numbers of younger children attend after school programs, as they enter the teen years, older children tend to drop out of programs because they feel the programs are for little ones. There need to be more conversations with youth to see what they want in programs. Most think older children are not being served well in afterschool programs. Transportation to programs is often difficult and there are not enough sites. Activities need to be fun.
- **COMMUNICATION** – In reality little is known about available programs in the local communities, efforts are needed to make parents and youth aware of available programs. Also, there is not enough communication between the schools, youth programs, museums, and churches to partner and maximize children's exposure to a variety of settings, people, and programs. Each has something to offer.
- **SPECIAL NEEDS YOUTH** – Afterschool programs are not equipped to provide services to children with special needs including those with physical disabilities and behavioral problems. Consider and address the problems children face in various areas of the community including crime, poverty, language barriers. What about those children in the alternative schools or who have dropped out, they also need to be engaged to get back on track.
- **STAFF** – Staff need training to apply behavior plans that are consistent and balance between structure and freedom. Many are concerned about adequate staff training and making sure thorough background checks are completed. Staff also need to be diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity to reach all children.
- **PARENTS** – Parents need to be more involved with the programs and the staff and volunteer when possible. Parents are ultimately responsible for the behavior for their children in school and in the programs. However, parents may need skills training themselves. More parents need to be part of these conversations. Providers should concentrate on the family and not just the child and reach out to the parents.
- **FUNDING** – More funding and volunteerism is needed to support programs. Ideas are great but how will these ideas be funded? Community leaders need to be more informed about the importance of afterschool activities for all children in their communities and support those efforts.

Of those who completed surveys after the conversation, about three-quarters of respondents reported feeling that the Community Conversation was very beneficial and a motivation to move forward. The remainder reported feeling that the conversation had been “somewhat helpful” but would like to see results.



DR. CASEY MAUGH (USM) WITH SUPERINTENDENT PAUL TISDALE



USM STUDENT MODERATOR AND RECORDER

OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS

Several outstanding questions remained for participants:

- **INVOLVEMENT** – How do we get everyone involved in this effort including school administrators, superintendents, principals and teachers; the school board; city council members, mayors, state government representatives; NAACP; leaders of all youth organizations; parents; faith-based & pastors; law enforcement; local business leaders and volunteers; news media i.e. TV, newspaper, radio; mentors; and senior citizens?
- **FUNDING** – How will any of this be funded? Whose responsibility is it to fund this? Has anyone assessed the needs of the communities?
- **NEXT STEPS** – Who will be responsible for the next step to move this forward? Many people have great ideas but do not have the abilities or time.
- **OUTCOMES** – Who is monitoring what is happening in these programs and how effective are they?
- **FACILITIES/TRANSPORTATION** – Are there any plans for transportation or more facilities? Why aren't the schools used as community centers?
- **VOLUNTEERS** – How do programs engage more volunteers and make sure the volunteers are trained? Parents should volunteer and reach out to other parents to do the same.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

The key challenge, then, is for providers of all types of youth activities, schools, churches, parents, youth and community as a whole to join in a coordinated network that works to provide a full continuum of youth development opportunities that are easily accessed and appeal to all types of youth in the community. While this is an enormous but necessary undertaking, the participants listed several priorities for action:

- **DISCUSSIONS** - Broaden discussions throughout the community to local businesses, community leaders, civic groups, churches, media outlets. This discussion should be more widespread to more people.
- **YOUTH** - Develop a Youth Council. Have discussions with the youth to see what they want in the community. Make sure they included in all efforts.
- **MAPPING** - Begin the process of community asset mapping including information about all youth activities in the area.
- **RELATIONSHIPS** – Get schools and youth organizations meeting and working together. Both groups need to be proactive in forging new community relationships and strengthen existing partnerships
- **TRAINING** - Provide ongoing training for those who work with children, make sure they have appropriate background checks completed.
- **ROLES** - Further refine the role everyone plays in strengthening our community by supporting young people's personal growth including the youth themselves and their parents as well as the community at large.
- **INFORM** - Stay informed about and involved in the issues and help drive new solutions through community youth development in afterschool programs and activities and in relevant policy at the city and state level, and engage others in the dialogue.

NEXT STEPS

Based upon the conversation it is clear that there is community wide interest in issues that affect young people during the afterschool hours. To sustain participation in the effort a three phase action plan has been developed to begin taking action around some of the issues that have been identified.

PHASE ONE:

1. **REPORT** – Report the outcomes of the conversation back to the community through a website, the newspaper and other media outlets. Get the information into the hands of community leaders and others to build support for efforts already in place and for developing new programs.
2. **LEADERSHIP** – Define the leadership of the effort going forward and who will organize the next steps.
3. **UNITED WAY** - Strengthen the role of **UNITED WAY OF SOUTH MISSISSIPPI** in the effort as a neutral party to broaden the conversation beyond the initial youth serving groups.
4. **TASK FORCE** - Invite the original participants and additional strategically selected individuals and groups to a second conversation to develop and title a task force to build upon the results of the original conversation.
5. **VOLUNTEER CENTER** - Provide information about **VOLUNTEER GULF COAST** for people who want to get involved with various youth serving organizations.
6. **MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST YOUTH DEVELOPMENT COALITION** – Continue work with Biloxi youth serving groups to combine efforts around the action items.

PHASE TWO

1. **FUNDING** - Secure ongoing funding to support the efforts of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Youth Development Coalition, the task force, schools, and youth serving groups to improve and provide a variety of afterschool programs and activities for Biloxi youth.
2. **YOUTH** - Ensure there is youth participation on all task force committees and develop an overall youth council that includes participation from all areas of the city.
3. **ACTION** - Ensure the task force is meeting regularly and making progress on action items.
4. **SCHOOLS** - Ensure there is strong communication and mutual goals between the schools and youth serving groups.

PHASE THREE

1. **MAPPING** - Map community assets including information about the youth profile in Biloxi and current youth activities in the area, and then expand the asset mapping initiative across the Mississippi Gulf Coast communities.
2. **CONVERSATIONS** - Enlist the assistance and expertise of Public Agenda to host additional community conversations in the cities along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.
3. **POLICY** - Drive changes in relevant policy and practice at the city and county levels and continue to engage others in the dialogue.
4. **INTERMEDIARY** - Work the University Of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast to provide training expertise and other support mechanisms to create a wider strategic vision for youth development in the area.

We want to thank those who participated in our first community conversation and we will continue to communicate with you about our efforts to provide youth with more inspiring and resource rich after school environments to ensure their success now, to engage them in the community process, and to prepare them as the next generation in the City of Biloxi and on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Planning Team Member Organizations:

- Biloxi Public Schools
- Boys & Girls Clubs of the Gulf Coast
- East Biloxi/D'Iberville Weed & Seed.
- Harrison County School District
- Mississippi Gulf Coast YMCA Safe & Drug Free Communities Program
- Mississippi Gulf Coast Youth Development Coalition
- National League of Cities
- National Education Association
- United Way of South Mississippi
- University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast

Resources:

- BGCYC is hosting the report for the coalition and it can be accessed at
- To find out about volunteer opportunities call Volunteer Gulf Coast at (228) 896-0073
- For questions about this report or to receive additional copies contact Sue Reed at sureed1@cableone.net or (228) 343-5646

