

The YES WE CAN Community Agreement

*Creating
a New Public Story
for Mobile County*



Mobile Area Education Foundation

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On May 15, 2001, for the first time in over 40 years, the citizens of Mobile County said “**YES**” - YES to children, to the value of learning, to investing in our economic future, to growing as a community.

The **Yes We Can Initiative** is all about building on the energy of the **2001 VOTE YES** campaign to define a new direction for Mobile County and our schools by enlisting the help of citizens to articulate priorities and push for improvements.

In September 2001, the Mobile Area Education Foundation began a **3-year** project to build an informed coalition that will demand higher standards for and greater accountability from public education. Over the past year, the **Yes We Can Citizens Advisory Team**, comprised of some 20 parents, educators, and leaders from throughout the county, has spent over 50 hours together studying school reform success stories from across the country.

In late February 2002, Yes We Can initiated the largest

community engagement campaign ever attempted in Mobile County. Some 1,400 citizens took part in 48 different

Community Conversations held during a 14-week period in high school feeder-pattern meetings and in the following neighborhoods and towns: Plateau, Chickasaw, Citronelle, Grelot Road area, midtown Mobile, Orange Grove, N. Airport Blvd. area, Saraland, Maysville, Overlook/Forest Hill, Morningside/ Dauphin Island Pkwy. area, Tillman's Corner, Semmes, Toulminville, Prichard, W. Airport Blvd. area, Hollinger's Island, Satsuma, Bayou La Batre, Spring Hill, Mt. Vernon/Calcedeaver, University of South Alabama area, and Grand Bay.

The local hosts for these neighborhood meetings invited 12-15 friends and neighbors into their homes or to a nearby church or community center for the event. Five conversations – one in each school board district – were organized as public forums and publicized widely so that anyone who wanted to take part in the process could get involved.

On each occasion, participants spent 2 hours discussing the importance of the connection between schools and community, their common goals, and the challenges we face in getting what we want for Mobile County. Their conversations were meticulously recorded by MAEF staff, and the resulting notes were analyzed to identify common themes that emerged from each meeting.

Phase II of Yes We Can's community engagement efforts took place on 4 Thursday evenings during June - July 2002 as a panel of 50 demographically-representative citizens reviewed ideas gathered from the springtime conversations and refined those findings. Altogether, these civic-minded individuals spent over 12 hours together in dialogue and debate about the "realm of the possible" for our schools and community.

The goal of this Phase II panel study work was to help participants begin to crossover some of the boundaries that divide our community and ultimately to produce a

“Community Agreement” that would resonate with the hundreds of Mobile County citizens who had a voice in creating it.

During Fall 2002, the Citizens Advisory Team will conduct another round of community meetings to get feedback on the enclosed Agreement, and citizen-led action teams will begin an in-depth study of the issues that have been identified as our highest priorities.

Our ultimate objective by Year 3 is to organize a cohesive, well-informed coalition that will produce a “citizen-driven” plan for improving education – a “public voice”, that is focused, sustained, and compelling enough to drive the long-term changes needed to ensure high standards and high achievement for every child in Mobile County. And, then, to begin the ongoing work of providing the resources needed to accomplish our goals.

The Community Conversation process used throughout Mobile County during Spring – Summer 2002 was adapted from materials produced by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation.

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Preamble:

Here are our ideas for how to reconnect our community and public schools. These ideas are grounded in the notion that public schools play a vital role in our community and that the community must play a role in public schools.

part 1

The community we want:

- A strong economy with high employment
- More effective working relationships between community leaders, institutions, and organizations
- A stronger commitment to education
- A clean, safe environment
- A variety of quality recreational and arts-related facilities and activities
- A safe, caring, trusting community
- A common sense of direction throughout Mobile County
- Quality healthcare services for all
- Quality services from government at all levels
- More help to promote and support strong families

What we want for public schools:

- A learning climate in each school that is welcoming, caring, and resource-rich
- High-quality, caring, capable teachers
- More awareness of and

attention to diversity in our schools and in the system

- Greater involvement by citizens and volunteers in our schools
- A diverse curriculum with high standards in every school
- School leadership teams that demonstrate a commitment to working effectively with staff and community and who are allowed to remain in place over time
- Sound financial management and greater accountability by schools and the system
- A learning climate in which everyone – educators, parents, school staff, and community volunteers – does his/her part to support high student achievement
- More open, effective, two-way communications between schools, the school system, parents and the community
- More equitable distribution of school system resources
- Better recognition of and support for students' diverse learning styles and more options for measuring individual student achievement
- More parents who take responsibility for preparing their children for school and who remain actively involved in their learning

part 2

The situation we face:

- Inadequate parent and citizen involvement in our schools
- Lack of information about our schools and the school system
- Lack of involvement by parents and citizens in decision-making about our schools
- Negative focus by the news media about our schools, the system and the school board
- Micro-management by the school board and a lack of trust between the school board and staff
- Mistrust of information provided by school system and the board
- Needs of all students and the entire community not being addressed
- Inconsistent curriculum from school to school
- Inadequate preparation in “the basics”
- Economic development hindered by poor public perception of schools

Why we face this situation (i.e., conditions):

- Poor communication between schools and community
- No sense of ownership in our schools by community
- Perception of competing self-interests hinders community cooperation and support for our schools
- Lack of trust at all levels
- Inequitable distribution of resources
- Lack of funding
- Low expectations of our students and schools
- Weak economy
- The Alabama State Constitution
- Unwillingness of state legislature to make changes to improve school funding

part 3

What needs to happen:

- The full community needs to assume ownership of our public schools.
- The community must define for itself the meaning of an “adequate” education.
- The schools, school system and Board must establish better communications with parents and with the community.
- The community’s presence in our schools must be enhanced.
- Effective, prepared leaders should be elected to the school board.
- The news media need to balance coverage of our schools and school system to include more positive news.
- The Alabama State Constitution must be reformed to provide opportunities for improvements in school funding.
- Teacher quality must be enhanced.

- The structure of the school board should be adjusted to reflect shorter terms and the addition of other seats.
- Adequate funding for public education must be established.
- Effective instructional leadership must be provided in all schools in order to deliver the same high standards of education across the school system.

What conditions need to exist:

- All citizens and government, business and civic entities must see themselves as partners in providing high quality public schools.
- The community’s definition of “adequate education” should include strategies for ensuring that:
 - All high school graduates are effectively prepared to live independently after graduation;
 - The day-to-day operation of schools and the system maintains a focus on academics as the top priority;

- Foreign languages, art, music, and computer proficiency are included as part of each school’s core curriculum.
- Information about the electoral process must be readily available for potential school board candidates.
- Efforts must be undertaken to establish a better working relationship with the news media in order to secure commitments to report more positive developments within our schools and the school system.
- Pressure must be applied to create the legislative will to remove constitutional barriers to adequate school funding.
- Improvements must be made to the teacher evaluation program to include higher quality professional development, master teacher mentors, and a merit-pay system.

part 4

How we plan to fulfill our aspirations:

- **Ask the citizens of Mobile County to endorse the Yes We Can Community Agreement** as a “Call to Action” for undertaking a long-term grassroots effort to identify, select, **and pursue strategies for improving public education in the following target areas** (as identified through six months of extensive community engagement work conducted during Feb. – July 2002):
 - **COMMUNICATIONS**
 - **EQUITY**
 - **PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**
 - **STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**
 - **SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE**
 - **TEACHER QUALITY**

- **Announce the completion of this Agreement** in a formal presentation to the Mobile County Board of School Commissioners.
- **Seek additional feedback** on and solicit support for the Agreement by conducting a third round of community engagement during Fall 2002.
- **Utilize this third round of community meetings to recruit volunteers interested in working as members of the Yes We Can Citizen Action Teams** that will study the key issues areas (listed on page 7) and develop strategies for improving our schools and our school system.
- **Effectively build support for the Yes We Can Initiative and this Community Agreement** by enlisting the following groups as active partners:
 - Elected officials (including school board members)
 - Business leaders
 - The faith community
 - Civic and professional organizations
 - The news media
 - Local school PTA's and PTO's
- **Work** continually with the school board and the

system **to promote greater accountability and to inspire public trust.**

- **Support reforms to the Alabama State Constitution** that will result in opportunities to improve local and state funding for public education.
- **Lobby members of the local and state boards of education to articulate a definition of “adequate education”** and to develop a legislative strategy to secure sufficient funding to achieve this goal.
- **Widely disseminate the findings from Citizen Action Teams** and rally support from all Yes We Can Initiative partners **to push for recommended changes.**
- **Establish a permanent, citizen-led structure for ensuring the long-term sustainability** of the reforms identified, undertaken, and instituted as a result of the Yes We Can Initiative.



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A Mobile Area Education Foundation Initiative

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