



CCAЕ
Community
Conversation
Organizing Report

Claiborne County
School District,
Port Gibson, MS

Transforming Schools through Dialogue

by Cory Wofford, NEA Organizational Specialist

Getting to a Plan

In spring 2014, during a series of initial meetings with educators from the Claiborne County School District, NEA Organizational Specialist Cory Wofford decided to begin the relationship-building process by communicating a vision for students, schools, and the teaching profession in Port Gibson. The conversations were framed around three questions*:

1. What are the schools Port Gibson children deserve?
2. Who are the teachers Port Gibson children deserve?
3. What is the profession those teachers deserve?

***These questions were adapted from the 2013-2015 Saint Paul Federation of Teachers Contract Campaign.**

From those conversations, the leadership team of the Claiborne County Association of Educators (CCAЕ) decided they would demonstrate that the Association could lead their profession and demonstrate to educators and the public that solutions to school transformation can and should come

from those who are in the schools and classrooms.

While the Claiborne County School District faces many issues, the leadership team decided that what would move their schools forward was a focus on improving literacy, student achievement, and graduation rates by involving parents and the community in schools. In fact, leadership decided that they wanted to help students and parents prepare for the state's 3rd grade literacy test that was passed in 2013 legislative session. The exam will require third graders scoring at the lowest level to be retained, unless they meet certain exemptions.

After a successful summer building the leadership team and training, CCAЕ kicked off its campaign with a back-to-school event that attracted dozens of students and parents. From that meeting, it was evident that parents, grandparents, and community members needed a space to talk and to share; they desired communication and conversation about what works.

CCAЕ applied for, and was awarded a grant from the National Education Association's Minority and Community Outreach, Organizing Department to host the conversation.



Building Capacity: Training

To build capacity and provide leadership opportunities for educators, a successful Community Conversation is contingent upon high-quality training for members and leaders to lead the process.

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Using Dialogue to Move Toward Solutions

NEA's Community Conversation model focuses on 3 approaches to improving public schools.

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Moderator and Facilitator Training

by Cory Wofford

The NEA Community Conversation is a four-step process to facilitating conversation about closing the achievement gaps in schools and solutions that mobilize and engage the entire school community.

The success of the conversation is dependent recruiting and training Moderators and Recorders. The training is always conducted prior to the conversation and was led by NEA staffer Brenda Vincent. There are three goals of the training are to:

- develop a clear understanding of the goals/content of the event called – **“Community Conversation on Closing Achievement Gaps”**
- understand the roles, responsibilities, and importance of the **Moderator and Recorder** in the context of the Community Conversation
- practice these roles

The training, as much as it prepares volunteers for the conversation, is also an opportunity to identify leaders and give them an opportunity to practice their leadership skills. For example, Glenn Savage, a district bus driver and paraprofessional studying to becoming a teacher, described the training as “fun and exciting”. Savage, who joined the Association during the training, told organizers that “I am glad I came. We needed this for our schools.”



Above: Education Support Professional (ESP) and new member Glenn Savage practices his skills as a recorder during moderator and recorders training. Pictured with Savage is NEA staffer Brenda Vincent.



Above: Educators and community members discuss their fears and anxieties about serving as moderators and facilitators during the training.

In Claiborne County, CCAE leaders successfully recruited **29 educators, parents, student members, and community leaders** to serve in these important roles.

CCAЕ’s recruitment plan was intentional and designed as an opportunity to provide opportunities to build capacity and identify coalition partners. Among those who completed the training were:

- Seven (7) college students from nearby Alcorn State University who are members of the Student Program
- The president of the Claiborne County Parent Teacher Association
- The program director from the local United Way
- Local community leaders who are working to support students in the Claiborne County
- Additionally, CCAE leader Lauren Dispenza successfully recruited two (2) members to join the Association during the training.



Above: Heidi Burrell of the United Way of Vicksburg shares with other participants about the power of using conversation to generate solutions for improving schools.

“Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining - or transforming - the realities in which we live.”

The World Café, 2005

CONVERSATION HIGHLIGHTS



Membership Recruitment

Glenn Savage (left) and Cassandra Wells (right) are two of the newest members to join CCAE. Both members are ESPs in the Transportation Department and are pictured with NEA Member Benefits Specialist Carolyn McClain Johnson about the programs and services designed to support educators. **In all, 4 new members joined over the course of the training and conversation.**



Engaging Parents as Partners

More than 100 parents and community partners participated in the community conversation. Picture above: a parent shares ideas and recommendations to group after the small individual conversations.

FAST FACTS

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2011-2012 NCLB Accountability Status Rating for Claiborne County Schools

86.4

2011-2012, 5-year graduation rate for Claiborne County Schools

175

Number of participants in the 2014 CCAE Community Conversation



Left: CCAE President Woodrow Price and CCAE Vice President Sarai Johnson open the community conversation with a discussion about achievement gaps and district-specific data about student performance in Claiborne County.

The Community Conversation

by Cory Wofford

The NEA Community Conversation model is a facilitated conversation designed to bring together a cross-section of leaders from the school community. According to the NEA MCOP Department (2014), during the conversation, organizers hope to:

- **“Clarify** the areas of common ground among the participants, as well as their disagreements, questions and concerns.”
- **“Demonstrate** that positive, productive broad-based conversations about helping all students succeed can take place.”
- **“Build** the local community’s capacity to hold these conversations on an ongoing basis leading to greater community understanding and effective action.”
- **“Help** participants explore how the community can work together more effectively on behalf of all students.”

The actual conversation begins with a discussion about achievement gaps, at the national and local level, followed by a discussion about the impact achievement gaps have on students and the entire community. What makes the conversation rich is the diverse number of stakeholders who are present and who actively bring their voice into the discussion. After an initial overview, participants are divided into smaller groups. These groups are led by members of the Organizing Committee for the event, all of whom have been trained prior to the conversation.

Thanks to a robust social media push, press release, and conversations, 105 adults and 70 students and children attended the event.

Following the small group conversations, attendees return to here common themes and action items for the Organizing Committee to consider. In Claiborne County the conversations were fruitful. Some of the themes that emerged included:

- increased communication from the school to parents;
- monthly community conversations
- additional resources for school, such as technology infrastructure, textbooks, and up-to-date facilities for students and teachers

The CCAE Organizing Committee for the Community Conversation now has the task of analyzing what they heard, solidifying their coalition partners and bringing them back together for a follow-up planning session. Several community partners have already pledged their support including the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA), members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, and the United Way. Next up, the Organizing Committee will schedule a second conversation, tentatively scheduled for January 2015 to develop a plan with concrete steps to close achievement gaps.

More About the Turnout...

This turnout was significant for Port Gibson. As a small, rural community in the Southwest portion of Mississippi, many of the jobs have left the town. As agriculture became more mechanized, and the few manufacturing jobs left the county, residents were left with few options. With few opportunities to move into middle class, a dwindling population and tax base, schools in Claiborne County suffered. Parental involvement and community support for educators and the schools has been an issue. However, CCAE leadership is hoping to reverse this trend.

2013 Accountability Results for Claiborne County Schools*

DISTRICT	SCHOOL	LETTER GRADE	QDI	GROWTH	5-YEAR GRADUATION RATE	DIFFERENTIATED ACCOUNTABILITY LEVEL
Claiborne County	AW Watson ES	D	160	NOT MET		APPROACHING TARGET
Claiborne County	Port Gibson High	D	117	NOT MET	84.9	FOCUS SCHOOL
Claiborne County	Port Gibson Middle	F	129	NOT MET		PRIORITY SCHOOL

*MS Department of Education, 2014

Eggs and Literacy

You might wonder what do eggs have to do with literacy. Well, the Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE) recently wrapped up its statewide competition to encourage students to read by offering tickets to the Egg Bowl football game between Ole Miss and Mississippi State University. As it turns out, Tilden Young, a teacher at A.W. Watson Elementary School in Claiborne County, was selected as a winner for his creative door decoration and for the way in which he was able to use the competition to blend a language arts and a lesson to include history about the two universities.



Above: CCAE member Tilden Young receives a check for \$250.00 from the MS Association of Educators as a part of the affiliate's "Read Your Way to the Egg Bowl" Literacy Campaign. Young was awarded the prize. Pictured with Young are MAE UniServ Director Sheila Washington and Antwan Reeves, member and principal at A.W. Watson Elementary School; A.W. Watson was the host site for the community conversation.



Above left, counter-clockwise: Student NEA members from Alcorn State University pose for picture after completing the moderator and facilitator training. Left: One of the conversation's smallest participants enjoys activities through the free child care services provided by local volunteers. Right: Parent and Claiborne County Supervisor Allen Burks made a heartfelt plea to parents to prepare students for school at home.



Member Benefits is Member Organizing

Many times members and staff might see NEA Member Benefits as a 'soft sell' to membership. Actually, NEA Member Benefits can be and remains a vital tool to organizing members and helping them feel empowered.

Aside from the programs and services offered by NEA Member Benefits, campaigns and organizing activities like the Claiborne County Community Conversation are richer with the participation of MB staff like Carolyn McClain Johnson. As an organizer and former UniServ Director, McClain Johnson is skilled at having one-to-one conversations with members and helping leaders think strategically about how to leverage the resources – including print and online resources like the NEA Academy – to help advance campaigns that are designed to help educators lead their profession. Many of the MB programs and services are also of use to parents – the Association's most powerful allies.

In Claiborne County, where the median household income is \$25,230, helping Association leaders figure out how to utilize Member Benefits to improve the quality of their personal and professional lives goes a long way toward increasing the value of the Association and building member loyalty.

One local leader captures the power of the program. Like many ESPs, Mattie Barnes works two jobs. During the week she works as a paraeducator. "I like to focus on reading and writing. If a student cannot master these skills in elementary, they won't be successful," says Barnes. On the weekends, despite a grueling work and association schedule, Barnes travels to Vicksburg to work as a dealer at the casino. Barnes, like many other ESPs, has also faced a pay cut in the last year, so Member Benefits can really make a difference.

Likewise, as in many past community conversations, Member Benefits has branched out to offer trainings for parents and community members. For example, McClain Johnson's credit repair training session is one of the most popular and well-attended session. The presence and participation of NEA Member Benefits adds to the campaign.



Above: CCAE members stop by the membership recruitment and Member Benefits table to receive their member gift.



Above: Ann Norals, who joined the Association during the community conversation, talks with NEA Member Benefits Specialist Carolyn McClain Johnson about the benefits of belonging to the Association.



COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED? HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED? WHAT CAN WE DO AS A COMMUNITY?



JOIN US FOR A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION
ABOUT CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN CLAIBORNE COUNTY

*We are having a Community Conversation to address the achievement gap in Claiborne County Public School District and seek solutions to the problem. Let's talk about what we can do as parents, educators, and community members to make sure all of our students have the tools they need to succeed in school. **Let's make a difference!***

November 19, 2014
A. W. Watson Elementary School
5:30pm
CONTACT WOODROW PRICE 601.642.7190

The Achievement Gap

SPONSORED BY the Claiborne County Association of Educators, Mississippi Association of Educators, and the National Education Association.

SOCIAL MEDIA (47 LIKES)



School visits before and during American Education Week (AEW) with cake and punch

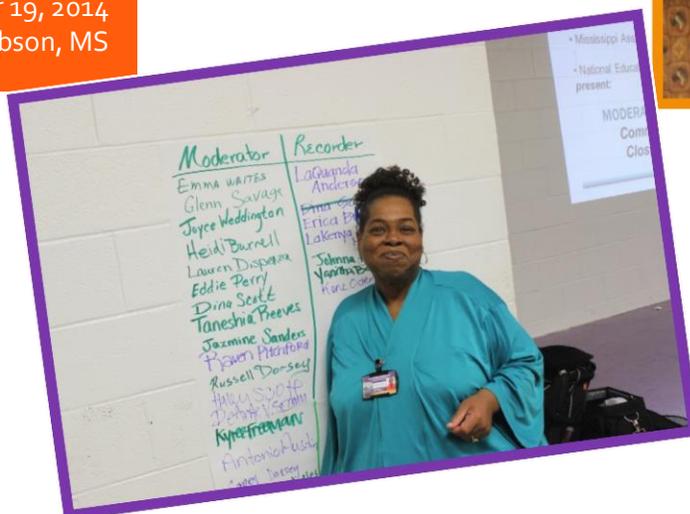


Left: Glenn Savage (left) and Cassandra Wells (right) are excited about getting involved with the Claiborne County Association of Educators. Pictured (centered) with Savage and Wells is NEA Member Benefits Specialist Carolyn McClain Johnson.



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November 19, 2014
Port Gibson, MS



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- Parents, students, and community of Claiborne County

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