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ARKANSAS EDUCATION LEADERS FIRED UP FOR OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN SUMMIT

Advocates from all corners of Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana will gather at the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Summit in Little Rock November 30 to share experiences, learn about ways they can help improve schools, and kick off their education reform efforts at the Capitol. With successes under their belt from the 2011 legislature, and growing momentum for progress at the local level, they are ready

to expand opportunities for all Arkansas students.

“We’re making progress, but we must do more to ensure that all of our students have a true opportunity to learn,” said Regina Von Tungeln, OTL Co-Chair.

The story of OTL has been an unlikely one. In 2010, the very idea of a summit that placed 200 parents, students, teachers, administrators, policy advocates,

and activists in the same room together looked risky. It could have been a disastrous weekend of arguments and finger-pointing, or just another conference full of big ideas with no action.

But the 2010 Summit proved that the OTL Campaign was going to be something new, something different. Grassroots community groups and established advocacy organizations laid a foundation for successful collaboration.

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ARKANSAS CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS CAMPAIGNS BUILDING STEAM

As the countdown to the 2013 legislative session continues, Citizens First Congress leaders are laying the groundwork building momentum of campaigns for their Ten Priorities for a Better Arkansas. 50 CFC leaders met at the Capitol on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in October to report on progress, develop campaign plans and press kits, and strengthen connections between allies.

"It's the first time we've had a formal meeting with multiple caucuses in the fall like this," said CFC Co-Chair William El-Amin. "Bringing all of our issue groups together enables us to have stronger campaigns ready to go once the legislative session starts."

Civil Rights and Election Reform Caucus leaders worked on a packed agenda of four policy initiatives. Two recently released reports, one on the Economic Status of Women in Arkansas, and another from the Arkansas Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, will help build momentum for the Equal Rights Amendment and Civil Rights Commission campaigns.

Energy leaders reviewed their efforts to ensure that high standards for renewable energy, energy efficiency, and green jobs are implemented in the new state energy plan being developed by the Arkansas Energy Office.

"Arkansas's Energy Future must be approached as a nonpartisan issue because the prosperity of our state and the well-being of our citizens are at stake," said Mark Robertson, CFC Co-chair. "We are committed to advancing Governor Beebe's



Marsha and Jeremiah Nash from southeast Arkansas, Mikel Lolley and Joanna Pollock from northwest Arkansas and 50 other CFC members came together to plan campaigns for the Ten Priorities for a Better Arkansas.

energy ideas while working with legislators from all parties to move forward on energy efficiency, renewable energy and a diverse advanced energy economy."

Arkansas education leaders fleshed out their campaigns and made plans to convene later this month at the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Summit (see full article p. 1).

Susana O'Daniel of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families spoke to all the leaders about the upcoming Medicaid shortfall and its potential impacts on the CFC agenda. "With a looming budget shortfall, services – including Medicaid – face severe cuts," she said. "Our new state legislature faces

a difficult choice of either cutting back on the progress we've made in areas like health care and education or finding new tax revenue to make sure Arkansas continues to move forward."

CFC leaders are already talking to legislators and drafting bills to bring before the General Assembly. New Policy Director and CFC Lobbyist John Whiteside said, "I'm excited to be on board with these great campaigns to move Arkansas forward. It's going to be a tough session, but we have a good chance of making progress at the Capitol in 2013."

A NEW DAY IN GOULD: SLATE OF CANDIDATES ELECTED ON PLATFORM OF ACCOUNTABILITY, FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Residents in Gould celebrated last night after a two-year battle for their city's future was decided by the will of the voters. The slate of candidates endorsed by the Gould Citizens Advisory Council won every race, sweeping all of the entrenched opposition from office by margins of two-to-one or more.

"I'm so glad that the people of Gould saw the choices in front of them, and made the right one," said newly elected Council Member Retha Spencer. "We won because we committed to going through training, holding regular meetings, conducting an independent financial audit of the city, and paying our bills," she said. "Now it's up to us to fulfill our obligations and get Gould back on track."

Gould has seen more than its fair share of election irregularities. They had two ineligible candidates elected to office in 2010, who were eventually removed by

a judge. This year, another convicted felon was certified on the ballot and there were many rumors of election misconduct.

Yet, the people of Gould prevailed in spite of all that, and because of the hard work of trained poll watchers who monitored the polls and ensured a fair election in Gould. Now GCAC and their supporters across the state are breathing a sigh of relief.

Little Rock attorneys Bruce McMath and Hank Bates had represented residents in their efforts to ensure accountable government. "It's great to hear that Gould has decided to show elected officials that there are consequences for their behavior," said McMath.

"This is the start of a new day," said GCAC president Curtis Mangrum. "We've certainly been fighting long enough, and I know we'll see things through and make sure Gould's future stays bright."



Communities hosted candidate forums in Huttig, Gould, Prescott and Stamps.



EDUCATION |continued from page 1|



Parents, students, administrators and teachers began working out solutions that they could agree on.

“At that first summit, I began to see that education reform was a real possibility in Arkansas,” said Von Tungeln. “With this year’s summit I hope we can raise the bar even higher.”

Turning the idea of a broad-based campaign into a reality was a huge accomplishment in itself, but then the OTL members quickly followed up with an impressive set of legislative victories in the 2011 General Assembly.

Their advocacy efforts helped to expand access to Pre-K, pass the Positive Youth Development Act expanding after school and summer school programs, improve training opportunities for teachers, and create regulations to ensure that districts spend NSLA funding on programs that boost student achievement.

“The progress we made in 2011 energized this movement and boosted

collaboration between different groups to a level that’s truly unprecedented,” said Jay Barth, Hendrix College professor and member of the State Board of Education.

For the 2013 legislative session, the OTL campaign created a new set of policy goals (right sidebar). “Together, we’ve developed priorities that will do the most to expand opportunities for our kids,” said OTL Co-Chair Richard Hutchinson, who works at Arkansas Education Association, the state teacher’s union. “We’ve succeeded in bringing different perspectives to the table, developing a common agenda, and holding the coalition together,” he said. “That gives me hope that while our agenda is bold, it’s achievable.”

One of the keys to OTL’s success is its multi-layered approach. While advocates fight for expanded opportunities for students at the legislature, they also work to achieve their goals through their local school boards.

“We’ve been building relationships with the board and superintendent here for over a year now,” said Gloria Majors of the Concerned Citizens of Prescott. “It took some time to gain their trust and respect, but now they listen to what parents in our district have to say. They are more accountable to us, and to the students.”

This strategy translates into better policies and better educators who are working to meet students’ and parents’ needs.

Involving students is another key to OTL’s success. OTL members know that students have a uniquely important perspective on how to improve our schools, but they aren’t often given a chance to voice their opinions, so the campaign has reached out to include more of them.

“The first Summit was where I really started to get involved as an advocate; it inspired me to want to do more in my community and around the state to improve our schools.”

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PRIORITIES.”**

— Juan Mendez

said Jazzmin Nash, a high school Junior in Gould who has served as a key OTL leader.

Latino students working on The DREAM Act are bringing more energy and excitement to the campaign. “We’re thrilled that OTL has made it a priority for Arkansas to expand access to higher education,” said Juan Mendez of Arkansas Natural DREAMers. “When we support each other’s issues and work together, we’re stronger and more prepared for making progress on all the OTL priorities.”

The story of OTL is one of hope. A parent from Pine Bluff, a college professor from Little Rock, a latino activist from Springdale, a state teacher’s union leader, a grassroots leader from Prescott, a high school student from Gould: they all believe they can work together to build a better education system.

The 2012 Arkansas OTL Summit will be held November 30 and December 1 at First United Methodist Church, 723 Center St., Little Rock.

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN GOALS

- 1. Increase access to high quality pre-K**
All students need access to transportation to pre-k and their parents must be well informed about availability of programs.
- 2. Expand after school and summer programs**
It’s time to fund the Positive Youth Development Act by providing \$5 million to fund quality after school programs that enable struggling students to excel.
- 3. Improve teacher/administer preparation and development**
Educational opportunities for students are dependent upon skilled, well-trained, and well-prepared teachers. We need to raise standards for teacher preparation and professional development.
- 4. Pass the Arkansas DREAM Act**
Passing the DREAM Act will ensure that all Arkansas students have affordable access to Arkansas colleges and universities. College graduates have higher incomes, better health, and contribute more to the well-being of Arkansas.
- 5. Increase parent, student, community, and school partnerships**
Research shows that schools improve when parents, students, teachers, administrators, and business leaders are genuinely collaborating to create better schools in their communities.
- 6. Modernize career and technical education**
For students to acquire the specialized technical knowledge needed for careers in the modern job market, we need to offer quality programs with high standards.
- 7. Use existing poverty funding more effectively to boost learning**
We must make sure districts are focusing these resources on programs that expand opportunities to learn for low-income students.



CELEBRATING OUR HISTORY WITH PANEL FOUNDING MEMBER PAT YOUNGDAHL

With the Panel's 50th Anniversary next year, we are doing a series of interviews with our founders, on their efforts to ease integration tensions in Arkansas.

We began by asking Pat Youngdahl to help tell the Panel's story.

"We're talking about 1963 here," she says. "It's hard for people who weren't there to realize that black citizens couldn't use the library. They couldn't use the same water fountains as whites, and they couldn't sit down at the same restaurant to have a soda. It was a totally different kind of life."

Pat moved to Little Rock with her husband and three small children in 1959. "My husband was a labor lawyer, and we had friends in Little Rock who were interested in social justice issues, so that's where I met Sarah Murphy and Brownie Ledbetter. I was aware of the problems of inequality between different schools. My mother was a teacher who believed very strongly in education and felt that everyone deserved a good education and an equal opportunity," she said.

She explained that Sara Murphy had learned of an organization called the Panel of American Women that was operating out of Kansas City, MO in the aftermath of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, where women from different racial and religious backgrounds traveled to churches and civic clubs to help ease tensions around integration by sharing their personal stories and their desire for an equitable public school system. Murphy, seeing an opportunity in the wake of the 1957 Little Rock Central High crisis and

the end of the Women's Emergency Committee, decided to form a branch in Little Rock.

"This was a personal experience, not a political one. It was unique because it focused on meeting another human being, a woman like yourself, so you could hear how she felt, hear her talk about how much she cares about her children too," Pat says. "It wasn't about judging people or preaching at them about right and wrong. We wanted to humanize the issue so that people could begin to see the similarities between all of us, and to see part of themselves in the different panelists."

Pat got involved with the Panel of American Women, mostly as a moderator, making sure all the Panelists got a chance to speak and fielding questions appropriately. "It was scary sometimes," she said, "we were not always sure about how we would be welcomed. Generally people were not hostile, but there were some communities where the Panel wasn't welcomed in public places because we had African Americans with us. Some people would say, 'Why can't these people just be happy staying in their own community?'"

One of the more enthusiastic members of the Panel, Pat explained, was Brownie Ledbetter. As integration gradually took place,



Brownie saw a need for the Panel to help students fight discrimination and provide human relations training for teachers. Eventually, through Brownie's leadership, the Panel of American Women merged with the Arkansas Public Policy Project to form the Arkansas Public Policy Panel and lay the foundation for the organization we have today.

"I think it's incredible how much the Panel does today and I love how it's still focused on using community-building efforts to address critical issues like education," Pat says. "The need for people working together in a constructive way is still there as much as it was in 1963, and I'm always excited to hear about things like parents getting involved in school reform [through the Opportunity to Learn Campaign]."

Pat has supported the Panel through all of its various incarnations and projects, and we are proud to have had such an amazing individual with us along the way. "The issues today are very much the same, and they require the same devotion and purpose as they did then," she says.



THE NEW ARKANSAS LEGISLATURE: WHAT IT MEANS FOR PROGRESSIVES

As people across the country celebrate the reelection of President Obama, Arkansas has seen a historic shift in the state legislature, where Republicans now control a majority in both houses.

For Arkansas progressives, the strategy coming out of this election is twofold: work with moderates to build bipartisan legislative consensus, and hold lawmakers with extreme views accountable when they try to pass legislation that would harm our state.

"The most important voices in the legislature this session are going to be the problem-solving moderates," said Dr. Jay Barth, Hendrix College Politics Professor.

Progressive advocates and activists are going to need to work across

the aisle to seek out moderates in both parties who can find common ground on critical issues. "Whether we're Democrats or Republicans, we all need better schools, we all need clean water, and we all need protection of our basic rights," said Panel Executive Director Bill Kopsky.

Arkansas has a history of bipartisan cooperation, as does the Citizens First Congress. The CFC had the support of Republican Governor Mike Huckabee and Republican legislators in the CFC campaigns for minimum wage increase, expanding early voting, and the creation of the Arkansas Department of Agriculture.

It's important to note that Loy Mauch, Jon Hubbard, and Charlie Fuqua, the three members of the House of Representatives who received a great deal of media attention for their extreme views lost their races.

"The defeat of the most extreme candidates shows that Arkansas is still a fundamentally moderate state," said Barth. "Undeniably, progressives will have to play defense on social issues, but the Governor's veto power should create opportunities to stop extremism."

Welcome!

To the Panel's new
Policy Director,
John Whiteside.



THE PANEL STAFF

Beth Ardapple, Bass
Bernadette Devone, Pine Bluff
Bill Kopsky, Little Rock
Celestine Wesley, Little Rock
John Whiteside, Little Rock
Rosemary Brown, Monticello
Janice El-Amin, Gould
Fay Knox, Deer
Brett Miracle Huie, Little Rock
Ana Phakhin, Little Rock
Peyton Rose, Damascus
James Szenher, Little Rock

VISTA Volunteers:

Shirley Renix, Camden
Pamela Dawkins, Strong

Panel Board – www.ARPANEL.org

CFC Steering Committee – www.CitizensFirst.org

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at our annual Holiday Party
December 7th, 5:00-8:00**

