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CFC ADVOCATES FIGHT FOR BETTER ARKANSAS DURING HISTORIC LEGISLATIVE SESSION



Over 200 parents, teachers, administrators, grassroots advocates, and others attended a press conference at the Capitol in January to make a stand for REAL education reform that uses proven solutions to improve educational opportunities for ALL students. OTL leader Fannie Fields from Marvell joined Sen. Joyce Elliott, Richard Abernathy of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, and other speakers.

The stakes are high for all Arkansans as the 2013 General Assembly of the state legislature moves into full swing. Legislators' decisions over the next few months will have a huge impact on our schools, our health care system, our environment, and our future elections. Now is the time for Arkansans to speak up to ensure they have a voice in this process!

Landowners and advocates from the Fayetteville Shale area have

come to an agreement on a bill which will help protect landowners and their property by requiring companies to notify landowners of plans for natural gas operations on or near their property and to notify them within two days of any spills which violate state or federal regulations or permits.

"This is the result of over two years of hard work from many advocates and allies," said Debbie Doss, member of Arkansans

for Responsible Gas Development. "We feel confident about the success of this bill and we think it will have positive impacts for landowners and all Arkansans who have been affected by drilling in the Fayetteville Shale."

Energy leaders with the Arkansas Energy 2013 campaign have been developing legislation to promote energy efficiency and clean energy economic devel-

see **CFC Advocates**, pg 4

2012: A LANDMARK YEAR FOR ORGANIZING IN SOUTH ARKANSAS

In 2012, the Panel faced a tipping point for our organizing work in south Arkansas. Nine community groups have been making steady positive change for a number of years, becoming more and more effective and confident about the prospect for positive change.

South Arkansas residents have seen stirring successes in their efforts to improve their communities. They have been putting their city finances in order, building bridges to unite racially divided communities, holding their school boards accountable, cleaning up elections, repairing sewer systems, and opening community centers.

As improvements like these became more visible, the obstacles that community residents faced over the past few years exceeded our wildest imaginations.

Nowhere was this pushback to positive change and civic participation more felt than in Gould. The Gould Citizens Advisory Council's (GCAC) attempts to improve their community were being thwarted by the openly antagonistic city council, which had tried (illegally) to ban the group in 2011. GCAC members were fighting hard just to keep the

city alive, while some of the new city council members proposed that Gould give up its charter and become unincorporated.

"Things had gotten pretty bad," said Curtis Mangrum, who chairs GCAC. "We had gotten to a point where we knew that if we didn't do something about the direction of the city, we might not have a city anymore."

The group decided to take action, challenging council members who were illegally holding office and supporting candidates who were committed to taking charge of the city's finances and putting Gould back on the right track, but they continued to face obstacles from all directions.

"At the Panel, we were worried about whether the group would be able to sustain itself in the face of what seemed like obstruction from every level of county government from the election commission to the circuit court," said Panel Organizer Janice El-Amin, who works in Gould. "We knew that everything was riding on the 2012 election, and that if they didn't succeed here, it could have a discouraging effect on our other community groups."

But they did succeed, well beyond anyone's expectations. The illegitimate council members were removed by a judge in July, and in November, the new candidates won every seat on the city council plus the city treasurer, all in huge landslides. The news spread to all of our community groups, and everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Their progress and successes have helped to fuel other community groups to press forward. Six community groups held forums for residents to interact with candidates running for office and pose questions about important issues in their communities. Monticello hosted several forums, including one with over 100 people in attendance. In some towns their forums have been the first ever held there.

In Marvell, when the school board candidates didn't show up to the forum after committing to attend, the group challenged them in the newspaper, asking why they didn't participate, and pushing for them to show that they're committed to being accountable to residents.

In Huttig, the candidate forum set the stage for actual transformational change within the community. Tensions had begun building after the first African American was elected as mayor in 2011. When the new mayor fired the white police chief, a Ku Klux Klan chapter began organizing openly and threatened his life.

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A slate of candidates committed to accountability and financial responsibility were supported by the Gould Citizens Advisory Council; they won every race by two-to-one margins.



THE BRAVE STEPS TAKEN BY GRASSROOTS LEADERS ACROSS ARKANSAS ARE INSPIRING TO ALL OF US AT THE PANEL. WE HOPE YOU'LL CONSIDER A DONATION TO HELP US WITH TRAINING, INFORMATION, SUPPORT, AND RESOURCES FOR THESE GROUPS.

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The group decided to help ease tensions by holding a public forum for candidates for office. Both white and black Panel staff members helped facilitate the process. When a number of white residents attended, the group included them in a follow-up community survey.

Panel Organizer Shirley Renix also began stopping by the business of a white businesswoman who was the mayor's harshest and most vocal critic. As a result of their outreach, their end-of-year holiday party drew a mixed crowd of black and white residents. Several people – including the businesswoman – stood up and testified that they were committed to working together for the good of the community. It's a huge step forward for a town that was nearly totally racially polarized earlier this year.

Both white and black residents across Arkansas are aware of what's been happening in these communities, and we believe it's having an impact on how they see the future of civic participation in their communities.

They know they have a voice, and that their vote counts, and they are voting more knowledgeably. Before, they didn't think these things were important, or even possible, but now, they know they can challenge institutional systems that are run unfairly, and that rather than waiting for someone to lead their community out of economic and political turmoil, they can become those leaders themselves.

2012 Opportunity to Learn Summit

Leaders working together at the second Arkansas OTL Summit, strengthening connections, attending workshops, sharing meals, and discussing better solutions for our schools. (See full article p. 7)



CFC ADVOCATES | continued from page 1 |

opment, creating thousands of jobs and helping the environment. "We're supporting most of the recommendations of Governor Beebe's energy plan plus a few additions of our own," said Keaton Smith from Fayetteville. Those additions include SB340 (Guaranteed Energy Cost Savings) and HB1390 (the Distributed Generation Act).

Additionally, advocates met with the Citizens First Congress South Arkansas Caucus on January 26th to discuss how the energy package would help low-income residents. "We're excited to hear about the work being done to improve energy efficiency and save consumers money," said William El-Amin, Co-Chair of the CFC Steering Committee and member of the South Arkansas Caucus. "Energy is a big issue in South Arkansas and all over the state."

Energy leaders came to the Capitol for an Advocacy Day on February 7 and February 21st.

Education leaders held a highly successful press conference on January 30 to stand for real education reform, advocating that Arkansas must build on recent progress in areas such as pre-K, after-school and summer programs, effective spending of poverty funding, parent involvement, teacher development, and fair and effective discipline policies.

The press conference included grassroots parent groups from the Opportunity to Learn Campaign (OTL), statewide advocacy organizations, and teacher, administrator, and school board representatives, as well as State Senator Joyce Elliott and Department of Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell.

"It is absolutely critical that we



Energy advocates Sharmel Roussel, Brian Broussard and Ryan Denham at the Capitol in February to speak with legislators about clean energy and energy efficiency, which would create new jobs and help reduce harm to the environment.

continue the progress we've made on education and not allow our momentum to be derailed by distractions," said Fannie Fields, an OTL leader from Marvell, who spoke at the event. "Our children need solutions that are proven to work, not an extreme agenda that threatens the principles of equal and excellent public education."

The group's proposals were laid out in contrast to the exclusively pro-privatization agenda that has been pushed by wealthy business interests and resulted in several bills being filed such as the controversial HB 1040, which would remove authority from the state to hold charter schools accountable.

The CFC Steering Committee voted unanimously to oppose HB 1040 and SB 65, which would remove restrictions on school transfers and potentially leave some districts with

dwindling resources to deal with the most economically distressed and struggling students.

"One of the CFC's top priorities is to ensure that ALL students in Arkansas have an equal opportunity to learn. These bills would be damaging to equity in education and could create a tiered system of schools that places thousands of students at a clear disadvantage," said CFC co-chair Mark Robertson.

HB 1040 appears to be dead as of now, but it could resurface in an altered form, and other bills will likely be filed which could threaten the viability of our school system.

OTL leaders worked with Panel organizers to coordinate an Education Advocacy Day on February 20th, turning out 200 people to the Capitol to advocate for their proactive agenda and oppose legislation that

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removes accountability and endangers equity in our public schools.

The CFC Election Reform Caucus is introducing a bill that would increase the number of election monitors, require training for all poll workers, and mandate background checks for candidates at all levels of public office. This bill would address real election reform issues, as opposed to the recently filed Voter ID Bill, SB2, which is an expensive solution to a problem that does not exist, and would disenfranchise legal Arkansas voters, especially the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

As advocates press on these fronts, the Medicaid shortfall and expansion issues loom overhead, with far-reaching implications for all state policy.

"The benefits to the state are clear, the numbers have been crunched. Expansion would provide health coverage for up to 250,000 currently uninsured adults, many of whom are working in low wage jobs but can't afford coverage," said Rich Huddleston of Arkansas Ad-

vocates for Children and Families. "We need to take action now to avoid massive cuts to economically strapped hospitals and the health care services and jobs they provide throughout the state, especially in small towns and rural areas."

New estimates show that Medicaid expansion would provide enough funds to cover the potential shortfall and leave the state with a small surplus.

Meanwhile, immigration leaders remain ready to oppose any anti-immigrant bills, though it appears there's been an agreement to hold back on any such legislation this session. New legislation is in the works to prevent wage theft, and advocates are building momentum and political will around civil rights and women's rights issues.

With so much at stake this session, it's absolutely essential for more Arkansans to get involved by contacting their legislators, coming up to the Capitol to attend an Advocacy Day, and telling friends and family members to get involved as well.

The CFC is a great resource for Arkansans looking to get involved in the public policy process. The CFC tracks bills, develops talking points for and against bills which the steering committee votes to support or oppose, and sends out weekly alerts regarding legislation pertinent to the 10 Priorities for a Better Arkansas as well as other significant bills.

To get involved, sign up for weekly alerts, and see bills the CFC is tracking, go to www.citizensfirst.org!

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**See the Panel Board and Staff
at www.arpanel.org**



Joanna Pollock, Sarah Dillard, Keaton Smith, and Norvell Dixon at a meeting of the Citizens First Congress South Arkansas Caucus, where energy leaders spoke about the impact of new energy policies.

EXPLORING THE PANEL'S INVOLVEMENT IN DESEGREGATION WITH FOUNDING MEMBER

JOYCE WILLIAMS

We continue our series of interviews for our 50th Anniversary with Joyce Williams about her personal experience with the Panel's foray into working in public schools in the late 60s and early 70s.

"With the original Panel of American Women, all we did was share personal experiences and interact with the audience. It wasn't lecturing or judgmental, but it was the first step of raising awareness. Even that was seen by many as a radical move," Joyce Williams tells us.

Joyce was born in Little Rock in 1936, and she experienced enough racism to know that it would take that 'radical' idea of sharing experiences and putting a human face on the segregation issue for things to get any better.

"I grew up in a time and place when segregation was rampant and extreme. Physical, emotional, mental, and verbal abuse was standard practice, in addition to denial of opportunities. My mother was blind for most of her life because of bad medical treatment. Back then it was hard for blacks to see the doctor. You'd have to wait until the end of the day and by then they might have forgotten you were waiting. Once she was pushed off the bus because she got on in front of a white woman, but this was just one of many similar incidents."

Joyce's strong sense of justice runs in the family; she inherited her activist streak from her father who was a pioneer for civil rights in the state.

"My father, he was president of Arkansas Democratic Voter's Association which helped blacks get voting rights through the early part

of the century. He worked to get the poll tax removed. He received constant threats of physical violence and even death."

She took classes at Arkansas AM&N College in Pine Bluff (now UAPB), and was around to witness the Central High integration crisis in 1957.

"I lived in the community and knew the children and families of the Little Rock Nine. I was there to see how many of the adults in the schools failed those children. There were a few in the schools who were teaching and helping the black students. There were many who were sympathetic but were too scared to act, but there were also those who were hateful and joined in with the mistreatment of the students. If anyone retaliated, they were thrown out. There was no system of justice there."

Joyce eventually landed a job teaching in the Little Rock School District in 1959 and started teaching at the still segregated black schools. During this time she got involved with Brownie Ledbetter and the other founding members of the Panel of American Women.

"Brownie was one of the few people I've met who sincerely understood the unfairness of what was going on back then. She understood that the political, judicial, education, and economic systems were created and run by whites for whites. She'd always had the spunk to speak out



Joyce Williams, original member of the Panel of American Women and lifetime advocate for social justice

about what was fair, what was just, what needed to be done."

After the first decade of activities of the Panel of American Women, Brownie, Joyce, and others shifted focus from sharing experiences to direct action when they decided to start working directly to facilitate desegregation in the schools.

"I became a staff development coordinator when I was working with Brownie and the Panel. The federal government passed the Emergency School Aid Act to help ease districts who were undergoing desegregation. They were giving grants to school districts and community groups to do work with teachers and conduct what we'd call 'cultural competence' or racial sensitivity training today."

"One effective district staff development class exercise would be to videotape teachers in their classrooms. Every teacher would say, *cont.* →

'I don't treat black children differently.' But the tape would show otherwise. We would analyze everything using an objective system and observations, looking at how they treated different kids differently, trying to make teachers aware of their prejudices so that they could have the chance to change their attitudes and their behaviors."

Joyce Williams stayed with the Panel as the organization continued to grow and expand its reach through other programs which aimed to facilitate segregation and counteract prejudice through awareness.

"You can't change what you don't acknowledge. Acknowledging racism is the only way to affect it. And sure, just because people become aware, it doesn't automatically mean change, but at least at that point it becomes a possibility."



Youth Essay Contest winners Zipporah Bell, Salonica Turner and Zaria McCants inspired everyone at the OTL Summit with their answers to "What an opportunity to learn means to me." Read their essays at ArkansasOTL.org.

LEADERS DEVELOP CONNECTIONS, LEARN ABOUT ISSUES, PREPARE FOR ACTION AT 2ND ARKANSAS OTL SUMMIT

With a mission to unite and prepare for the legislative session, the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign (OTL) brought together over 200 Arkansas education reformers to the second Arkansas OTL Summit on November 30 and December 1 at First United Methodist Church in Little Rock.

"It was wonderful to have so many different parents, students, teachers, advocates, and other leaders working together on these issues," said OTL Co-Chair Regina Von Tungeln, a parent from Pine Bluff. "We're building momentum on the progress we've made and we expect to see more positive reforms this year."

They led and participated in workshops on the priority issues of the OTL campaign, deepened their

understanding of the issues, heard from policy makers about the opportunities and barriers to progress, developed relationships with a diverse set of stakeholder allies and shared their ideas about what reforms are needed to expand opportunities to learn for all Arkansas students.

"We are committed to our platform for real, research-based education reform," said Jazzmin Nash, OTL member and chair of the Citizens First Congress Education Caucus. "It's so important that we continue to expand Pre-K and afterschool programs, get more parents and students involved, spend poverty funds more effectively, pass the DREAM act, ensure that we have the best and most highly prepared teachers, and enact more fair and effective

discipline policies."

The Summit also provided an impromptu vehicle for a news conference responding to the surprise Supreme Court Ruling of November 28. The court ruled that individual school districts could keep all the funds from local millage taxes, meaning that the State loses its ability to distribute those funds to other districts.

"I'm glad that parents and other education leaders had a chance at the Summit to go over some of these important issues," said Richard Hutchinson, OTL Co-Chair. "If we can ensure that everyone stays informed, we'll have a better chance of influencing policy that will ensure equitable education for all students."

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panel participants: Mrs. Gordon, Mrs. Bomar, Mrs. Murphy, Mrs. Phillips, Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Griffin.

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SATURDAY, JUNE 15TH
5:00 RECEPTION, 6:00 DINNER
PHILANDER SMITH COLLEGE

*In 1963, a diverse group of mothers traveled the state together as the **Panel of American Women**, helping facilitate integration in the schools. Over the next few decades they built the Arkansas Public*

Policy Panel. Through their advocacy, they came to know that what holds Arkansas back is the fact that there simply aren't enough people working together to improve our communities and hold our government accountable.

Changing that has been our mission ever since.

Find out more about the Panel's history at www.arpanel.org.