

## CASE STUDY

# Accomplices in Action:

## Early Childhood Collaboration to Build More Equitable Support Systems for School Readiness in Mississippi

### Mississippi Early Childhood Collaboration (ECC) Team Members:

Mississippi's ECC team included representatives from the [Title V Maternal and Child Health Program](#); Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program; and [Mississippi Thrive! Child Health Development Project](#).

### Background:

Mississippi's Title V, MIECHV, and Mississippi Thrive! programs are housed within separate agencies and organizations. The Title V program is administered by the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH), which is an independent state health agency governed by an 11-member Board appointed for staggered terms by the Governor. The MIECHV program sits within the Mississippi Department of Human Services, which is an executive branch agency of the Mississippi State Government. Funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration, Mississippi Thrive! is a partnership between the University of Mississippi Medical Center's pediatrics arm, Children's of Mississippi, and Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center.

### Journey to Accelerate Improvements in Early Childhood Outcomes through Enhanced Collaboration

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mississippi ECC team completed the entire intensive technical assistance opportunity virtually. To be mindful of online meeting fatigue, the "first stop" was split into a series of three, two-and-a-half hour meetings.

### Deciding on a shared destination (priority).

While the three programs have a history of partnering individually on various initiatives, the members of the Mississippi ECC team embraced this journey to begin collaborative opportunities as a group. The team identified several common priorities across the three programs and came to a consensus on a shared priority to improve school readiness for young children and early learners. The team also wanted to explore ways to coordinate their individual efforts to provide training and professional development to staff, providers, and partners on cultural competence, cultural humility, understanding implicit bias, and health equity. Therefore, the Mississippi team decided to specifically focus their priority on increasing the state's early childhood services and programs' ability to address real-time needs of families and deliver trauma-informed care to ensure school readiness. The team underscored that school readiness meant "ready children *and* ready schools." It is critical to ensure that both children are healthy and ready to learn, and that schools are trained in trauma-informed practices to meet the needs of diverse children and families.

### Identifying and mapping the early childhood system actors.

Once the Mississippi ECC team decided to focus their priority on improving school readiness, they plotted the network of the state's early childhood stakeholders with a focus on that priority. After completing the exercise, the Mississippi ECC team noted opportunities to develop partnerships that could inform their action plans. For example, they sought to build upon their existing partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education to reach teachers and engage early intervention providers.

## Assessing the internal and external conditions for systems change.

On the final day of the “first stop” series, the Mississippi ECC team critically assessed the conditions in the systems that contribute to the disconnect between services, providers, and families. This process allowed them to identify what would need to change to address what families need in real time to increase their children’s school readiness. The team identified the three conditions cementing this “disconnect” in place: resource flows, relationships and connections, and power dynamics. The team then discussed conditions that contributed to:

- A lack of connections and coordination across programs, including lack of trust from certain organizations based on past experiences
- The lack of resources available to families due to gaps in neighborhood resources, the frequency of changes in service providers, and other challenges for families experiencing poverty
- The lack of resources and time for programs to focus on systems building and connections
- The need for diverse leadership and emphasis on health equity, as well as more accomplices (defined below) that promote equity in this work.



### Fueling up for Action Planning.

The concept of being an **accomplice in health equity** as an approach to action planning resonated with the Mississippi ECC Team. The team wanted to unpack what it means to be an “accomplice” and how that approach can instill a shared sense of responsibility towards achieving their shared priority. AMCHP staff collaborated with Christy Pruitt-Haynes from *Our Truths* to provide the Mississippi team a “Moving from Ally to Accomplice” training session to prepare for their action planning. The training focused on how an accomplice can fuel teamwork, trust, and confidence among individuals that make up a collaboration, particularly when tackling issues related to inequities. The training helped the Mississippi team consider which actions to take as individuals and with their programs’ resources as they collaborate to improve the realities of their colleagues, clients, and Mississippi children and families.

### Where the Rubber Meets the Road—Action Planning for Next Steps.

The Mississippi team then began to build a concrete action plan to increase their collaboration around the shared priority. Before drafting the action plan, the team identified their individual commitments (grounded in their recent training) for how they will show up at the team as an accomplice. These commitments and understanding of the accomplice concept framed the approach they would apply to their action plan. Throughout the action planning process, the team discussed resources available within their individual programs to review which individuals and organizations should lead and which should support each of the drafted activities. Team members also determined the work must focus on systems-level change. They referred to the previous assessment of the systems conditions during the “first stop” series as framing for their action planning.

**The major areas of the action plan include:**

- **Streamline Title V, MIECHV, and Mississippi Thrive! efforts through asset mapping, alignment, and enhanced communication.** This step aims to map out what each program is doing to contribute to progress on the shared priority. The objective was to review specific program activities, partnerships, resources, and how each program interfaces with parents, early childhood providers, and health care providers to educate, identify, and treat trauma in children and other family members. This will help identify ways to achieve better alignment across programs. Activities for this area of the action plan include:

  - Creating a visual asset map
  - Establishing regular, streamlined communication processes to share updates across the collaborative
  - Elevating the voices of those with lived experience by inviting parents to local advisory board meetings
  - Looking for joint funding opportunities (such as requests for proposals) the group can respond to in order to increase alignment
  - Establishing memorandums of understanding among the programs for data sharing and analysis
- **Build trusting relationships for collaboration.** In this step, the team identified and uses tools to prioritize equity and continues to build internal relationships and serve as accomplices for each other. These actions help solve trust and equity issues and they organically build time to foster personal connections.
- **Identify opportunities to convene partners.** This step includes building upon the asset mapping activity to identify existing partnerships with communities to support gaps in resources for families, children, and schools. It also involves reaching out to new community partners to determine services and resources they provide for families and young children.

**Maintaining the Collaborative Momentum.**

During the action planning meeting, the Mississippi ECC team also identified action steps to manage their continued collaboration and ensure effectiveness. (See table 1.)

Table 1. Action Steps for Continuing Collaboration

Establish regular meetings (at least monthly) of the core team and additional people identified in their action plan.	Align the action plan with the regular duties of those people identified to carry out tasks.	Continue to learn and practice using systems building tools.	Schedule regular learning sessions to review what has been done, where the team is going, and what adjustments need to be made.
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### In the 30 days after drafting the action plan, the Mississippi team:

- Recruited additional Mississippi Thrive! staff to manage the logistics of the collaboration, develop outreach activities for relationship building among the group, and conduct the asset mapping.
- Held an internal Mississippi Thrive! meeting to discuss these roles.
- All three groups met to discuss next steps.
- Recruited additional members of the Title V MCH Program to join the collaboration.
- Created a collaboration timeline and will focus upcoming workgroup meetings on relationship building/prioritizing equity; and developing a streamlined communication system.

### Eighteen months after drafting the action plan, the Mississippi team has:

- Held several meetings with MS Thrive, MIECHV, & Title V team members in the 12 months since action planning. Transitions in staff across programs has created a road bump in continued meetings, but the team is working on reconnecting with new staff.
- Regularly discussed and prioritized goals and shared resources on equity, engaged in relationship-building exercises, and decided to meet monthly in a virtual setting. The team rotated who was responsible for facilitation and administrative roles.
- Created a summary of the collaboration to-date and a visualization of the team's overarching goals and commonalities. These documents are used to inform the work of team and to communicate about our group with others.
- Compiled data on kindergarten readiness at the county level that included relevant resources in each county. The data has been passed on to [Mississippi Early Learning Alliance](#), which is working toward the goal to achieve a state of the art childcare system in MS by 2030.
- Invited the Mississippi Early Learning Alliance (MELA) members to attend a meeting to discuss how the work of MS Thrive aligned with theirs and to collaborate on possible next steps.
- Began collaborating with staff from the Part C IDEA program.

### What's next?

Members of the team are working to connect with new staff in each of the programs that have undergone staff transitions. The MS team has documented a summary of their progress towards collaboration and will lean on those resources to bring new staff up to speed.

## STATE PERSPECTIVE:

### The Value of Collaboration.

Having stronger relationships with other groups promoting early childhood in Mississippi moves the state closer to the broader integrated-system collaboration model all partners know is needed. Team members provided the following feedback on the collaboration:

- "I enjoyed spending time with lovely people I might not have otherwise gotten a chance to know."
- "The collaboration opens up new opportunities for all involved."
- "We can have a broader reach [and] larger impact [by aligning] multiple groups."
- "A broader range of perspectives in planning will improve the quality of the work."

