INTRODUCTION

On March 19, 2020, the state of Mississippi ordered its schools to close for the remainder of the academic year in response to the global novel coronavirus, commonly known as the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision affected approximately 483,150 Mississippi students across 1,066 K-12 public schools.

The global crisis forced American schools to grapple with a host of new challenges. Schools had to figure out how to provide education when families could not physically access school and when many students also lacked access to devices and the internet. Schools also had to provide clear and timely information to students and their families regarding school closures and reopenings as well as new protocols to prevent infection and keep students and staff safe. There was no roadmap for how districts were to approach these challenges or how to communicate about them. Districts were left to do the best they could at a time when even the nation’s foremost experts on health and education were unsure what decisions would prove correct.

One of the greatest needs we recognized over the last year was improving school district communications. In July 2020, Mississippi First released an online database which included a comprehensive list of public school districts across the state of Mississippi, their initial 2020-2021 reopening plans, and their social media channels. We updated this database through January 2021 to reflect any changes in reopening plans for the spring 2021 semester. This tool was a place for families and students to learn how their district would be operating throughout the school year. It also became a public resource for school districts, policymakers, and the Mississippi Department of Education to understand the reopening process across the state.

After our initial work to compile reopening plans, Mississippi First developed a one-pager of tips and best practices for district communications departments based on common problems we saw. Following this publication, we decided to study a sample of four school districts to better understand how Mississippi districts have navigated communicating important information such as school reopening plans. In early 2021, Mississippi First conducted research in four sample school districts on effective communications strategies for disseminating urgent information to parents and community members. From this research, we developed case studies of best practices and lessons learned for communicating in a crisis. The case studies also include sample materials that the Mississippi school districts used during the 2020-2021 school year. Finally, we developed resources for districts to use no matter what challenges they may face going forward. These resources include templates for school district communications professionals.
The four sampled districts are each unique in ways that we thought might provide valuable lessons. Each school district received and signed a memorandum of understanding to work with Mississippi First, completed a survey self-assessing the effectiveness of their reopening rollout strategy, and participated in a virtual interview via Zoom to discuss communications challenges, lessons learned, and best practices. We conducted interviews from February to March 2021 to determine the commonalities and unique characteristics across the districts that affected their communications. We completed follow-ups on an as-needed basis throughout spring 2021.
For this report, we used a qualitative research design that relied heavily on interviews, surveys, reviews of websites and materials, and our experience and expertise in communications. Although we sampled four school districts for in-depth case studies, we also reviewed websites for every single school district in Mississippi as a result of our school reopening tracker. For the districts selected for case studies, we sought to answer the following questions:

- What were communications like prior to the pandemic?
- What was the communications context, in terms of opportunities and barriers, for the district going into the pandemic?
- How did the district reopen for the 2020-2021 school year? Did their reopening strategy change from August 2020 to May 2021?
- How did the district make decisions regarding reopening?
- How did districts communicate decisions with stakeholders regarding reopening and other COVID-19 policies?
- What best practices and lessons learned can we glean from the experience of the districts?
- What sample communications tactics and tips could help other districts streamline stakeholder communication post-pandemic?
# School Districts

## 2020-2021 School Year

### Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District
Large, countywide school district; home of Mississippi State University; pre-K-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrollment*</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4,906</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male 51.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female 48.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics**

- African American/Black: 65.2%
- Caucasian/White: 29.9%
- Hispanic or Latino: 1.3%
- Other: 3.6%

### Mississippi Achievement School District
Statewide, stand-alone school district; rural; high-poverty; K-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3,652</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male 49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female 55.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics**

- African American/Black: 98.1%
- Caucasian/White: 0.97%
- Hispanic or Latino: 0.49%
- Other: 0.38%

### Jackson Public School District
The second-largest school district in Mississippi; high-poverty; pre-K-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20,401</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Male 50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female 49.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics**

- African American/Black: 95%
- Caucasian/White: 1.3%
- Hispanic or Latino: 2.4%
- Other: 1.2%

### Mississippi School of the Arts
Small, statewide, residential school district specializing in the arts; 11th-12th grade students only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrollment*</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female 80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics**

- African American/Black: 38%
- Caucasian/White: 55%
- Other/Unspecified: 7%

*We have noticed in some cases school district enrollment numbers for the 2020-2021 school year appear lower than previous years. Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District typically serves close to 5,100, but their enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year was 4,906. Similarly in a typical year, MSA has the capacity to enroll up to 120 students.*