

OUR STORY

Rachel Canter and Sanford Johnson met riding the school bus in elementary school over 25 years ago. They formed a friendship that would last beyond their years as public school students in Starkville, Mississippi. After graduating high school, their paths continued to cross. They both became teachers in the Mississippi Delta, and both later went to school to study public policy--Rachel at the Harvard Kennedy School and Sanford at the Clinton School of Public Service. While they share many experiences, their strongest commonality is that they have a deep desire to improve education in their home state. This desire led Rachel and Sanford to launch Mississippi First in 2008 as a non-partisan, non-profit dedicated to excellence in education.



MISSION

Mississippi First champions transformative policy solutions ensuring educational excellence for every Mississippi child. Mississippi First is a leading voice for **state-funded pre-K, high-quality public charter schools, rigorous state learning standards, and commonsense testing policies.**



Research and Publications

We research and recommend policy solutions for Mississippi's challenges in education. Our reports provide in-depth analysis of problems and solutions.



Issue Education

We inform stakeholders, policy-makers, and the general public how policy solutions can impact children in Mississippi public schools.



Advocacy

We influence education decision-makers to do what is best for kids in Mississippi based on the findings of our research.



Policy Implementation

Once policy is adopted, we ensure new policies are implemented correctly.

MISSISSIPPI FIRST TEAM



RACHEL CANTER
Executive Director

A Starkville native and Starkville High School graduate, Rachel holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree in public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. After college, Rachel was a certified teacher in Greenville, Mississippi, through Teach For America. In 2008, Rachel co-founded Mississippi First with her childhood friend and fellow education advocate, Sanford Johnson. Rachel played a prominent role in drafting and passing the *Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013* after five years of developing the concept and advocating for it. She was also heavily involved in drafting and passing the *Mississippi Charter Schools Act of 2013*. In 2013, Mississippi First was named Game Changer of the Year for the Policy Innovators in Education Network for this work. Rachel is on the national board of the Policy Innovators in Education Network and was named one of the *Clarion Ledger's* Top 35 and Under Politicos in 2018. As Executive Director of Mississippi First, Rachel leads all policy research and advocacy initiatives. She works with the Board of Directors to ensure Mississippi First is functioning according to our mission and goals and operating within our budget and funding restrictions.

Rachel lives in Jackson with her husband Andrew and their daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine.



SANFORD JOHNSON
Deputy Director of
Engagement

A Starkville native and Starkville High School graduate, Sanford holds a bachelor's degree from Auburn University and a master's degree from the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service. After college, Sanford was a certified teacher in Coahoma County, Mississippi, through Teach For America. He also held a teaching position at the KIPP Delta High School in Helena, Arkansas. Sanford co-founded Mississippi First with his childhood friend and fellow education advocate, Rachel Canter. Beginning in 2010, Sanford coordinated the school district advocacy strategy for the Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens (CHART) Initiative, which led the school districts with the highest teen birth rates to adopt evidence-based sex education programs. As Deputy Director of Engagement, Sanford works with communities, parents, teachers, and students to help them understand policy problems and advocate for solutions. Sanford is still involved with teen health, both as a board member of Teen Health Mississippi—which will spin-off from Mississippi First in 2018—and as a member of the Mississippi Sex Ed Training Cadre.

He lives in Clarksdale with his wife Amanda and their daughters, Lorelei and Ava.



MACKENZIE HINES
Director of Operations &
Communications

A resident of Greenville, Mississippi, MacKenzie holds a bachelor's degree in Visual Arts from Elon University. While attending Elon University, MacKenzie was an assistant at the Alamance Arts Council; worked for a photography gallery in London, England; completed a conservation internship at the Tucson Museum of Art; and spent a summer working at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City where she focused on federal, state, and foundation grant writing for upcoming exhibitions. After college, MacKenzie was a certified teacher in Quitman County, Mississippi, with Teach For America. She then held university development roles before becoming the Executive Director of the Greenville (Mississippi) Arts Council and E.E. Bass Foundation. In her communications role for Mississippi First, MacKenzie has designed Mississippi First's publications and campaigns as well as Teen Health Mississippi's branding and publications. She leads the staff in planning and executing Mississippi First's communications strategy each year.

MacKenzie lives in Greenville with her husband Warren.