ROOTS. RECLAIMING OUR

ORIGINS

STORY

THROUGH

The Story of the Sunflower County Systems Change Project



RECLAIMING OUR ORIGINS THROUGH STORY

The Story of the Sunflower County Systems Change Project





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Project Funders





Project Partners





Sunflower County Consolidated School District

Sunflower County Consolidated School District

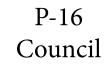


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This project gives hope to the hopeless,

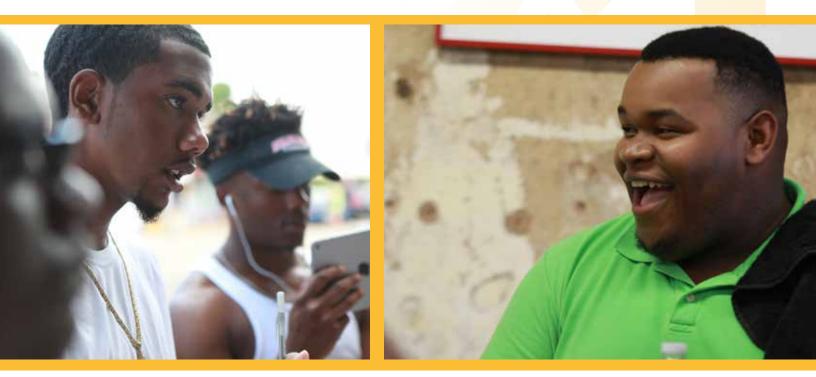
sight to those who are blind to their capabilities, smell to those who can't smell their destiny, and freedom to those who have been bound by poverty, shackled by oppression, and chained by low esteem.

l've become more confident

in who I am, a<mark>ware of</mark> my ab<mark>ilities</mark>,

and certain of my future through this program.

<mark>- K</mark>yle, Age 17



Sunflower County Systems Change Project Executive Summary

The Sunflower County Systems Change Project (SCSCP) is a partnership between the American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi (ACLU of MS), the Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ), the Sunflower County Consolidated School District (SCCSD) and the Sunflower County Consolidated School District Parental/Community Engagement Council (P-16 Council). The SCSCP partnership was born out of the need to proactively and positively engage the various systems that cause adverse outcomes and marginalize young men and boys of color (YMBOC). The project engages the school system, law enforcement/juvenile justice system, and the local media system and explores how the implementation of school discipline policies, youth court referrals, and media portrayal can unintentionally contribute to disparate and disproportionate outcomes for YMBOC.

Why Sunflower County, Mississippi?

In the 2011-2012 school year, Mississippi was number two in the nation for school disciplinary referrals and had the second highest rate of African American students receiving out of school suspensions (OSS).¹ During the 2014-2015 school year, Sunflower County was number two in the State for youth court referrals with a total of 123. Of the 123 youth referred to the juvenile justice system, 87 were young men and boys of color (YMBOC).² In addition, 93% of the youth court referrals were school related.³ Nationally, young male students of color are three times more likely to be subjected to school discipline and referred to the youth court system. This is not the result of students of color acting out more; rather, how adults respond to student behavior. When schools respond to student behavior with suspensions and expulsions, students are placed outside of the educational setting, making them more likely to repeat a grade and more likely to eventually drop out. Repeated contact with the juvenile justice system increases a student's chance of being a part of the criminal justice system. By addressing the systems that create these disparities, the Sunflower County Systems Change Project provides a mechanism for community to develop an approach that incorporates these systems in the solution, increasing the opportunity for sustainable positive outcomes.

The Project Components

This report provides a brief summary of the critical components of the SCSCP that any community needs to consider when engaging in a systems change approach towards dismantling the school to prison pipeline. The overall goals and objectives for the SCSCP project include:

I. Assess attitudes and perceptions of YMBOC

II. Increase awareness and understanding of current discipline issues in the district

III. Engage media and community in social narrative change and perceptions of YMBOC

IV. Assess current district data and discipline policy to uncover elements that contribute to student push-out

V. Increase community engagement across multiple sectors

VI. Increase knowledge and understanding of evidence-based models and best practices

VII. Promote positive interaction between students, school resource officers and local law enforcement

VIII. Reduce suspensions and expulsions and lessen the contact of YMBOC with the juvenile justice system, thus interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline

IX. Develop a statewide model for implementation of a community driven systems change approach

Achieving these objectives requires the combination of a positive and supportive learning environment, restorative approaches to behavior and discipline, and a partnership between the schools, courts, police, and community committed to eliminating the use of harsh discipline practices and referrals to the juvenile justice system for minor school-based offenses. Equally important to the goals of the project is spurring a cultural shift that changes the way communities engage YMBOC. This report details the steps the SCSCP took to spark systemic change, and it also

¹ United States Department of Education. Office of Civil Rights. Civil Rights Data Collection Division: <u>http:/acrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Estimations</u> 2011 12 2 Mississippi Administrative Office of Courts. 2014-2014 Aggregated Sunflower County School District Data

³ Mississippi Administrative Office of Courts. 2014-2015 Aggregated Sunflower County School District Data



shows the power of story in the narrative change work of the R.O.O.T.S. project. This report can be used to mirror similar change in communities and also draw inspiration from the stories of those in Sunflower County, inspiring communities abroad to challenge the negative narratives of YMBOC and encourage them to reclaim their true narrative through story.

Stakeholder Investment

The SCSCP includes an agreement between the community, school system and juvenile justice system to convene, reflect, learn and change how school discipline and youth court referrals impact the lives of YMBOC in Sunflower County. The SCSCP convened school administrators, teachers, police officers, parents, and youth from across the county to create an advisory council that developed innovative recommendations to change the culture and climate of adult response to student behavior.

This data report is the product of a collaborative effort of a community committed to changing systems that funnel children out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice system. The dedication of youth advocates, parents, community members, educators, school administrators and law enforcement officers has resulted in the establishment of a foundation upon which change in Sunflower County can be built. This community's willingness to take a close look at itself, to listen to its youth and learn from them the impact of zero-tolerance policies, to embrace new models and thought patterns, to extensively review and revise its policies, to participate in meaningful solution-oriented discussions and to vigorously work to change narratives and practices that push students out of the learning environment is evident in this report.

Education/Awareness and Professional Development

The SCSCP advisory council explored evidenced based, best practices that have resulted in positive school climates and have demonstrated affirmative change for students who are routinely impacted by poor practices. To reinforce the community approach to changing the engagement and interaction with young men and boys of color, the school administration, school resource officers and advisory council participated in professional development to increase their knowledge base and implement best models.

Policy Change

The SCSCP, through its advisory council, presented extensive policy recommendations that meet the needs of both youth and educators while addressing student behavior in a manner that does not criminalize the student and implement restorative practices in place of punitive punishment.

Narrative Change

The SCSCP engages these systems around innovative processes that address the need for an authentic paradigm shift in how YMBOC are perceived within the community as a whole. The narrative change component of this project grew out of the need to change the perceptions of YMBOC in the Sunflower community, while providing the space to connect internal bias with interaction. SCSCP paired the power of youth voices with a framework that encouraged systemic change through a partnership with Story For All. This organization brought the power of storytelling to the Sunflower County community by way of listening to stories and uplifting voices. 19 YMBOC learned about oral history methodology and intergenerational interviewing, while simultaneously experiencing an increase in respect and unity throughout the Sunflower County community. When the project convened, the YMBOC, using their ingenuity, named the program R.O.O.T.S. (Reclaiming Our Origins Through Story). R.O.O.T.S. provided an outlet for these young men to build self-confidence and self-esteem, improve communication, literacy, and writing skills, and become in tune with their inner self and the rich history of Sunflower County from the interviews of community stakeholders, parents, teachers, administrators, and entrepreneurs.

The stories and models for change offered throughout this report come from the community and demonstrate an appreciation for the correlation of a changed narrative about young men of color, improved school climate, tailored school-police partnerships, and ultimately a reduction in the exclusion of students from the learning environment which makes them less likely to face engagement with the juvenile justice system.

Acknowledgments

The Sunflower County Systems Change Project engaged the entire community. Although each and every person cannot be thanked individually, some special thanks must be given.

Thank you to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for its commitment to keeping children at the center, demonstrated by its generous investment in this project. Thank you to the Mississippi Humanities Council for its generous investment in the R.O.O.T.S. (Reclaiming Our Origins Through Story) Project and assisting in the development of narrative change in Sunflower County.

Special thanks to Kimberly Jones Merchant, Managing Attorney and Director of Educational Opportunities at the Indianola, MS office of the Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ) and to Jennifer Riley-Collins, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi (ACLU of MS) for envisioning this community-based systems change approach that addresses school discipline, juvenile justice and media narrative of young men and boys of color (YMBOC). Also thanks to Aisha Carson, Advocacy Coordinator (ACLU of MS) and Jacorius Liner, Advocacy Coordinator (MCJ) who tirelessly spearheaded the efforts of this project.

We would like to extend our gratitude to Angela Zusman and the Story For All organization and team for their commitment to the R.O.O.T.S. project and telling the story of the Sunflower County community. Their narrative change vision provided the framework for the R.O.O.T.S. project and they curated this data report, the accompanying exhibit, and documentary.

Special thanks to the photographers Andre Lambertson and Suzi Altman for capturing the amazing optics; and James Heckman, Suzanne Lucas and Cheryl Crawford of Story For All for designing the report.

This project could not have been as successful without the full cooperation of the Sunflower County Consolidated School District (SCCDS). Special thanks to Dr. Debra Dace, former Superintendent, who took the bold and courageous step of agreeing to partner with the ACLU of MS and MCJ; Miskia Davis, who continued to work alongside us and changed prior programmed professional development to ensure we could introduce restorative practice approaches to the educators in the district; Markricus Hibbler, SCCSD Chief of Police, who demonstrated an intentional desire to reach and not exclude students; and, William Murphy, SCSCP/SCCSD Discipline Coordinator, who saw the vision of better outcomes from students and worked tirelessly to align the district with evidence-based practices and to establish a uniform data collection system and supportive measures, instead of punitive policies.

Special thanks to our community volunteers who agreed to serve on the advisory council including, William Murphy, SCSCP/SCCSD Discipline Coordinator; Chief Markricus Hibbler, Chief SCCSD Resource Officer; Dr. Adrian Brown, Brown & Associates, LLC; Betty Petty, Sunflower County Parents and Student Organization; Gloria Dickerson, We 2gether Creating Change and Sunflower County Supervisor; Chief Edrick Hall, Indianola Police Department; Jesse Cooper, Ruleville Middle School Spanish instructor; Liz Johnson, Mid-Delta Home Health and community activist; Shequite Johnson, Sunflower County Consolidated School District Parent; Kenya Cole, Sunflower County School District Parent; Kyle Purnell, Gentry High School 10th grade student; and Cornivion Bracey, Ruleville Central High School 12th grade student.

To all of the members of the SCCSD P-16 Council, especially, Dr. Adrian Brown and the other members of the community who provided their input and insights reflected in this report, we are grateful. To the Sunflower County Freedom School staff who allowed us to use their facility and Karen Farrow of Karen's Kitchen who provided her delicious home cooking to both our youth participants and the advisory council.

A number of advisors also committed extensive time and expertise through their facilitation of community change. We acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Dwayne Patterson, the Sixth Group, who provided great insight and facilitated the advisory council meetings; Dwanna Nicole of the Advancement Project, who helped us conduct a rigorous review of policies; Fernando Martinez with the Dignity in Schools Campaign, who facilitated the development of a model discipline code; Dr. Joseph Youngblood of Thomas Edison State University, who provided training on the proper role of School Resource Officers; and Tom Zolot and Troi Bechet with the Center for Restorative Approaches, who worked with us and this community to build problem-solving and decision-making skills that result in better connections, less conflict, and a healthier community; LeKesha Perry with Key Concepts, LLC for providing her knowledge and expertise in the evaluation and measurement of success for the project; Micah Gilmer and Emily Hylton with Frontline Solutions for providing technical assistance and coordinating trainings as needed; Chris Chatmon with the African American Male Achievement Office, for inviting and welcoming us to Oakland, California while we explored the Manhood Development Program; Broward County School Officials with the Broward County School District for sharing their experiences in developing and implementing their district-wide task force on school discipline; Power U organizers for providing an overview of their advocacy work in Miami, as students gave accounts of Success Centers, the campaign for restorative justice, and the importance of youth voice in organizing around school discipline.

We would like to extend our greatest gratitude to the many community members that were interviewed by the R.O.O.T.S. participants and gave their personal story to narrative change in the Sunflower County community. Also, special thanks to Shaka Senghor, The Peace Poets from New York City, and Charles McLaurin for lending their stories.

How can people use this data report?

This data report reflects specific stories of the Sunflower County community and the different components that make up the Sunflower County Systems Change Project. However, it is important to note that this report can be used by other communities as a guide to engage systems in order to create better outcomes for YMBOC and their individual community.

There are three ways that this report will be most useful.

- It can provide similar communities with the inspiration necessary to commit to systems and narrative change in their own community. The purpose of this data report and accompanying documentary and exhibit is to introduce the world to the authentic narrative of YMBOC in Sunflower County. Their stories are not only to amplify youth voice but also to add narrative to the realities of their community, and, most importantly, to demonstrate the importance of story and how it can be used to change false, negative perceptions of YMBOC.
- 2. This report can be used as an example of a community based systems change approach to creating positive outcomes for YMBOC. This report provides insight into what steps are imperative for effective systems change and how community based models help to engage the entire community.
- 3. This report is necessary for continuing the conversation and narrative change not only in the Sunflower County community, but across the nation. The steps taken to initiate change in Sunflower County can be mirrored in other places as a tool to create positivity around YMBOC. Through the continuity of the SCSCP, this report will incessantly be used to center stakeholders around the common theme of creating positive outcomes for YMBOC.

The Road to Systems Change

The Sunflower County Systems Change Project (SCSCP) is a bold, innovative, and ambitious endeavor piloted in Sunflower County, Mississippi, the crown of the Mississippi Delta. The ultimate objective for the project is to improve outcomes for young men and boys of color (YMBOC) by improving systems impacting YMBOC to create sustainable change, which can be mirrored in any community. The systems the SCSCP focuses on are the school system, the youth court and juvenile justice system, and the media or narrative change component as a system. The following road map provides a guide of how the SCSCP introduced systems change to the Sunflower community, sparked narrative change with the help of Story For All, and the actions taken at each step to reach the ultimate goal of creating better outcomes for YMBOC.

Establishing the Baseline

Systems change cannot happen without the buy-in and participation of community you want to impact. Critical to step one is engaging the community around the problem, the suggested solution, and the potential steps to reach the end goal. We began by engaging community stakeholders, such as school board members, elected officials, community advocates, parents, students and police officers. This creates community buy-in and engages critical stakeholders. We then surveyed these stakeholders in an effort to answer some critical questions. What are the current trends in school discipline and the engagement of YMBOC? What are the current narratives and perceptions of YMBOC in the community? These questions formed the basis of the most important task: the establishment of baseline data to increase the understanding of the current discipline climate affecting YMBOC, and also to increase awareness of the impact that unvielding discipline policies can have on students funneled through the school to prison pipeline (STPP).

The project team collected qualitative and quantitative data by submitting public records requests to the school district and youth court; conducted focus groups; and, administered surveys amongst teachers, students, parents, and community advocates.

More information about the data collected can be found at www.sunflowercountysystemschange.com

Uplifting Community Voice

Community buy-in is a great first step, but community input is even more vital. The SCSCP team assembled people from a cross section of the community to form the Sunflower County Systems Change Advisory Council. These community voices provided their collective experiences and perspectives. Among the council members were teachers, students, community members and advocates, the discipline coordinator from the school district, and police chiefs from both the school district and the local municipality. Bringing together a cross section of the community also encourages clear communication channels between systems.

The council's purpose was to review district-wide discipline data; review and assess alternatives to discipline through best practice models nationwide; and help shape school district discipline policy reform with a restorative approach.

Narrative change is the force that undergirds the SCSCP efforts to improve outcomes for YMBOC. It is critical to understanding how perceptions impact how teachers, administrators, policemen, and other community stakeholders engage YMBOC. Uncovering the authentic story of YMBOC in the Sunflower County community rejects the negative narratives and seeks to help YMBOC define themselves positively, while also allowing the community do the same. As a partner in the SCSCP narrative change efforts, Story For All provided the framework for utilizing positive narratives as a policy tool and helping YMBOC to tell their story. The SCSCP project team assembled a group of 19 young men in Sunflower and Story for All created an oral history curriculum that gave them the tools and space to tell their own story and gather stories from people in their community. This component of the SCSCP became known as the R.O.O.T.S. (Reclaiming Our Origins Through Story) of Sunflower County. Their worked produced an oral history archive, the accompanying data report, a traveling museum exhibit, and short documentary.

From Theory to Practice

A critical part of creating change within systems was increasing their capacity for change by providing best practices and successful models. The Dignity in Schools' (DIS) Model Code, coupled with the Advancement Project's experience with mitigating the presence of zero tolerance policies helped to focus our efforts on the Student Code of Conduct for revision. With the assistance of these organizations, the Advisory Council formed clear discipline policy recommendations for the school district. The code of conduct consisted of an infraction and consequence guide that overwhelmingly excluded students for minor offenses and criminalized student behavior. SCSCP facilitated an inclusive process of revising the code with the Advisory Council, noting specific recommendations from the DIS model code. As a result, a multi-tiered infraction guide was created with alternatives to exclusion. Our collaborative efforts sparked a cultural shift in discipline perspectives and assigned consequences that teach student accountability, but more importantly keep them in the classroom.

The Center for Restorative Approaches introduced the school district to restorative justice as an alternative to suspension. All district counselors and several designated staff members received training in conducting restorative justice and community building circles. The SCSCP team also created Memorandums of Understanding between systems that outlined best practices when engaging each other and the youth in the community. These steps created a culture shift within systems and expanded the project from theory to practice in moving the school district from punitive to restorative.

The ultimate objective for the project is to improve outcomes for young men and boys of color (YMBOC) by improving systems impacting YMBOC to create sustainable change, which can be mirrored in any community.

The R.O.O.T.S. Project



On June 20, 2016, a group of 19 young men from all corners of Sunflower County gathered in the meeting room of the Mississippi Center for Justice in Indianola for their first day of Story Camp, the kick-off of a year-long project to lift up youth and community voices.

Over the course of the week, Angela Zusman and Andre Lambertson of Story For All led the youth through a series of storytelling activities, from telling their own stories, to learning how to conduct and record interviews, to reflecting on how negative stereotypes of young black men affect their perceptions and their lives.

Through listening to the stories of their elders and community members, these young men deepened their understanding of the rich cultural history and modern-day relevance of Sunflower County. On the final day of Story Camp, they were invited to create a name for this project. They decided on: R.O.O.T.S.—Reclaiming Our Origins Through Story.

Over the course of the year, facilitators Aisha Carson of the ACLU of MS and Jacorius Liner of the MS Center for Justice supported the youth in recording more than 50 interviews with students, educators, parents, elders, and leaders from around Sunflower County. This

wisdom has been curated into this report, a documentary video, and an exhibit, which will travel throughout the state of Mississippi.

The objective of this ROOTS project is two-fold. This was an opportunity for the young men to learn new skills, collect data and gain wisdom about their history and community, and begin the process of emerging as the next generation of leaders. In addition, community members were able to witness the young men listening and displaying a sense of obligation to their community emanating both their talents and diversity as allies in the ongoing quest to rebuild a thriving Sunflower County. When hard questions are asked and answers are thoroughly analyzed, there is a concerted effort made to dig more deeply into the true reality of Sunflower County and the potential and challenges that are on the horizon for YMBOC. YMBOC are empowered to contribute meaningfully to their communities when time is committed to listening to their authentic voices—voices that are often left unheard. An acknowledgment of their greatness and creation of space is formed for youth to thrive when negative stereotypes are replaced with authentic affirmations.

This is the promise of narrative change.









Project facilitators Jacorius Liner, Aisha Carson and Angela Zusman.

Talking to other people and having them tell their story really **changed the way I think and how I feel towards others.** Now, I appreciate everything people do for me and I try my best to help others.

- Markevion



By replacing negative stereotypes with authentic affirmations, **WE ACKNOWLEDGE GREATNESS** and create the space for **OUR YOUTH TO THRIVE.**

This is the promise of narrative change.



Introducing the R.O.O.T.S. Team



Nicholas, Age 17



My'Angelo, Age 18



When I graduate high school, I plan to attend Penn State, not the State Pen.

Jawaski, Age 15



Johnny, Age 18



"Young black men are trying to be successful and trying to do good things and help their community."



" I will **never** give up."

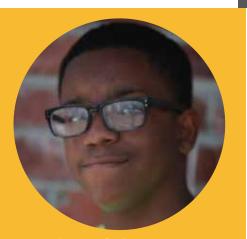
Fred, Age 17



"I'm a great young man." Jadan, Age 15









"I want the world to know that not all young black men fall into stereotypes. We can be productive citizens too."

Theon, Age 17



"I am wonderfully made, unique, one-of-a-kind, powerful and prestigious. I will be someone that others will look up to. I am an ambassador and God loves me." Kyle, Age 17



Nathan, Age 17







Markevion, Age 17







Cornivion, Age 17



"Nothing is given. You have to earn it." **Calvin, Age 17**



"I am a young African-American male who is very intelligent and respectful. I love to read and write."





"It isn't about the environment. It's about the mindset."

Vonkerius, Age 16

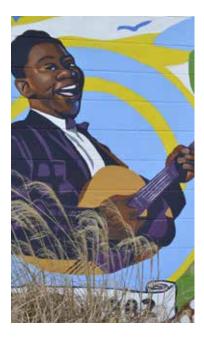
Sunflower County

What do you like about **Sunflower County?**

As a young person I think one of the things that you should know about Sunflower County is that Sunflower County is at the heart—the vibration—of how the Mississippi constitution was framed.

Dominant authors of the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 are from Sunflower County. The lady that Emmett Till whistled at and lost his life, she and her family are from Indianola, Sunflower County. Fannie Lou Hamer is from Sunflower County. So the civil rights [movement] in Sunflower County is prevalent. I encourage all young people to learn more about Sunflower County and the historical context, and that will explain why situations are the way they are today.

- Dr. Adrian Brown, community member







Well, honestly I really just enjoy being in the atmosphere of young people. We have a lot of young people here who are very talented. And just being around this culture really motivates me to continue to do the work that I do. – Shaketta Davis, parent

> Sunflower county is my home. I like the people. I like the hospitality. I like the culture. I've been here all my life and I just LOVE it.

16.7% **People**

- Carolyn Hamilton, elected official

I like the people. The people, the quality of life, the environment – it's a nice place to raise your kids. I would much rather raise my kids in a slow-paced environment than in an urban, metropolitan city. – Dr. Adrian Brown, community member

Sunflower County is a very welcoming county that has a lot of potential and opportunity that's lying before us – Dr. Deborah Moore, Indianola Promise Community

What are the big issues in Sunflower County

Economics. In Sunflower County, probably less than 2 or 3 percent of the population own all the wealth, so when you have economic disparity where you have majority of the population does not control their own economic independence, then you have **INTERGENERATIONAL POVERTY**—cycles of poverty—and that contributes to a decay in the educational system, a decay in community development, a decay in economic development. It all starts with economics, and until we provide economic opportunities for majority of the population, then we will continue to lag behind.

- Dr. Adrian Brown, community member





Sunflower County is a nice county to live in but lately, we have **a lot of crime.**

I think we need to help our young men because they getting lost out there in these streets and the crime rate is so high because they don't have a job and they rob and they steal and they don't have any parents' guidance. When I say

parents' guidance, I mean they don't have a man figure in their home, someone to guide them and steer them in the right way. We're losing our young men and it's just terrible. A lot of older people went to the city, and now want to retire

and come back home, and it's not safe. So much crime—the crime rate is so high, with burglary and young men killing each other. It's just ridiculous.

- Robert Earvin, community member

Lack of jobs, and education is not where it should be. I would love to see more parental involvement in the education system. And parents involved in raising their children. I think that would help the criminal parts of things that are happening and all of the violence that is happening.

- Carolyn Hamilton, elected official

Our high school graduation rate is dropping, the dropout rate is going up, teachers are having a more difficult time trying to educate the young people that are in the classrooms now, parents are not holding as tight a rein on their children as they did, and that's what makes the job even more difficult. With the **unemployment problem**, these are two serious concerns. It's hard for a small community to overcome problems of that nature because of the lack of good infrastructure and tax base to make the needed improvements in education and other things that are necessary for a growing community.

- Clifford Wilson, youth court

The schools **aren't as safe** as they could be. I don't feel like the teachers

are in a position to teach our students to be successful and college ready. But most importantly, I don't feel that students value their education. I don't know if students even know who they are and what values they carry. Many of our students are lost and because of that, many students that have the potential to be great are hindered. It doesn't just start at the school–it starts at home. It's a community, generational thing that has been passed

on. A lot of teachers, parents, students —everybody is slowly losing hope every year. And it feels as if it's only getting worse and worse.

– Shequita Johnson, parent





We have the same schools over there that we had in 1966, which has been 50 years. But it's not the new superintendent's fault; it's the community's fault.

It rains in the high school, it's dark, it's cold in the wintertime; but the community sits still and allows those kinds of things to happen. We wonder why the community is not progressing.

IT'S NOT PROGRESSING BECAUSE WE ARE NOT PUTTING ANY EFFORT INTO IT.

Charles Modley, Sunflower County NAACP President

No matter what it may [look] like, Sunflower County is a county that really needs some help. **Racism is still alive**. **Racism is not about hatred. It's about domination and control**. That's what it's about. But we can still rise above that when we join together as a one man force. There is no limit to what we can do when we actually put our minds to do what needs to [be] done.

– Betty Petty, advocate

data report | sunflowercountysystemschange.com

Being part of R.O.O.T.S. is like being a part of history.

During the summer, the photographer took a picture of me on the train track. It felt great because the people that came before me would not have dared cross it. So when I think about how far we've come and the perception of young black men and boys, I find myself hopeful about the prospect of success for my generation. **The fact that my grandmother and grandfather** *couldn't cross the tracks and now I can, gives me inspiration.* – Calvin, R.O.O.T.S. participant

> I'm noticing that a lot more African Americans are in places of authority, which is a good thing. Because we have very well qualified African Americans who can do the job just like everybody else. That's good to see, because it is representative of this area. – Carolyn Hamilton, elected official

Better or Worse

What changes have you seen in Sunflower County?

Are things better or worse than they used to be?

In the 1980s, Sunflower County and Indianola were booming economically. People had jobs; people were employed at Modern Line.

Modern Line shut down in the early 90s as well as other industries. So the question is, have we made any improvements? I think that overall, we've regressed. You can look at the population of Sunflower County and it has steadily declined over the past 30 years. Back in the 1930s, Sunflower County had 30,000 people ; in the 70s we had about 15,000; in the early 90s we had about 12,000; presently we have about 10,900. Most people are leaving here because there are no opportunities.

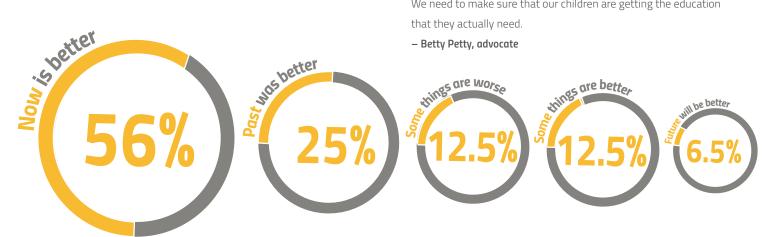
- Dr. Adrian Brown, community member

I like Sunflower County. There have been a lot of changes in Sunflower County from the time I came up, and some of the changes I thought I never would see. They integrated the schools, and we used to have to live on one side of the track and other people lived on the other side of the track. But now Indianola has changed; you can live anywhere you got money to buy a house.

- Cedric Perryman, community member

We had teachers that [were] from the community. We had teachers that actually cared about the welfare of all children in the classroom. When we went to school, we knew exactly what we were going to school for. We were going to school to learn because we had teachers that cared about our education. We had teachers that wanted to make sure that we were getting the education that we actually needed in order for us to be productive in the global society. We need to make sure that our children are getting the education that they actually need.

- Betty Petty, advocate



It was better then than it is now, and the reason I say that is because we had older people that could tell you something and you'd be able to listen to it. Now, young men don't listen to elder people. **Back then, everyone helped everyone**; now it's just everybody out for themselves. There's no love, you know. We don't have love. – **Robert Earvin, community member**

ROOTS participants interviewing community staple "Hambone."



How has Sunflower County **Changed?**



Inteview with Lindsey Ray, Sheriff's Deputy and Nicholas, student

LR: It has changed—it has changed tremendously since I've grown up. My childhood was happy. It was fun. You could go out and play and you didn't have to worry about getting shot or getting jumped on or getting introduced to drugs, stuff like that. Nowadays it's not like that. If you don't hold onto your children, you'll lose them out here in the streets. When I was growing up, they had the black side and the white side, which is basically still the same now but they don't really say anything about it. But if you go on the white side, it's a better community than the black. The roads are bad, you know what I'm saying? I mean it's terrible. The houses are terrible. But on the white folks' side – yes it's beautiful over there. It's clean and everything. The garbage is empty when it's supposed to be.

So we need to come together as a unit and change things. I understand what you're saying.

LR: If we don't come together, then nothing will be accomplished. One thing I will say and I'm aware of is that the whites gonna help the whites. We're not helping one another. That's where we keep failing at.

Right. I understand. I like that.

LR: I'm serious. I'm serious. If we could come together and stop bickering over 'oh he got a new car', 'oh he got a brand new house'. Those things are material – you know they don't mean anything. See what I'm saying?

Especially young people.

LR: We need to come together as a community. As one people. Black, White, Indian, Chinese, you know? And we need to try to make a change for the better. If we make a change for the better it'll help our youth. Because they go on what they see us do.

So much has changed; it'll take a lifetime really to tell you the changes.

"At one time we were not able to go to to the grocery store over there. You see that old Piggly Wiggly right there? I've been in there one time. We couldn't go to the library. My first vice principal of the NAACP right now—he got locked up for going to the library. So all the rights that we have today, they just didn't come just like that (snaps fingers). **EVERYTHING, WE HAD TO FIGHT FOR IT. YES SIR.**

- Charles Modley, Sunflower County NAACP President



As a young person {growing up in Sunflower County}, I lived in a rural area and had to walk so many miles just to catch the bus. Whether it was raining, hot, snow, that's the way we got to school. After coming through elementary I went to Gentry High School here. When we would leave school in the afternoon, we had to go back home and make up the rest of the day in the cotton fields. {I've seen} great changes {in my lifetime}. From the cotton field I knew one thing—how to get out of the cotton field was based on education. Education is a milestone. Number one, it got me out of the cotton field and from there it got me into a four-year college where I graduated with a degree in accounting. From there I've been employed for the last 38 years by the largest home health company in Mississippi. So it has really helped me a lot.

We now have a seated School Board and a superintendent who are able to make things happen at the local level rather than them being pushed at the state level. I can also see more of the social changes happening in Indianola just by virtue of some of the things that are provided, like books for young children through Imagination Library, and like people in the community being more in tune to what is happening and trying to make those steps.

– Carolyn Willis, indianola Promise Community

The old saying is 'be home before the streetlights come on' and you had to do that but now they stay out all night. That's one big change. I think the city needs to try to stop the young people from hanging on the corner.

- Cedric Perryman, community member

During my early days as a young man, I spent a lot of time in the cotton field picking cotton, chopping cotton, driving tractors and things of that nature. You don't see as much of that and that's a major change. You still have farms around here, they are just as big now as they were then, but you don't need much manpower because the tractors now can do much more than what the tractors could do back in my day.

- Clifford Wilson, youth court

I'm noticing that a lot more African Americans are in places of authority, which is a good thing. Because we have very well qualified African Americans that can do the job just like everybody else. That's something that is good to see, because it is representative of this area.

- Carolyn Hamilton, elected official

- Liz Johnson, advocate

What changes would you like to see in Sunflower County?

Youth Related Changes:

- Jobs for Young People
- Better Education
- Better Teachers
- Increased Recreational Youth Activities
- Address teen pregnancy more

Other:

- More focus on females
- Better coordination between resources and the people who need them
- Property Improvements
- Community needs to work together
- Clean up garbage



I don't think I can change Indianola, I don't think I can change Sunflower County. I think as a team, as a group, the community working together, the faith-based organizations, the schools, the businesses, parents, community members; I think it would take all of us in a very coordinated, concerted effort to make the changes that need to be made in Sunflower County because what's happening here is not anybody's sole problem, it's all of our problem and we all have to work together to solve it.

– Dr. Deborah Moore, Indianola Promise Community

We need more of the older teachers in the school than we do the younger teachers. The older ones actually help push the kids to do better. A lot of the young ones will say, 'I have my education, you need to get yours.' I don't think that is something an adult should say to a child. The child knows that they need to get their education—the adult is there to help them.

— Tasha Gardner, parent

Get adults involved with students. People like me, we can start mentoring younger students, maybe even providing tutoring services. Even people who are in college and are on dance teams and cheerleading and different things like that, they can come back and mentor the younger students in the Sunflower County district. Different things like job shadowing. Business owners, especially entrepreneurs in the area, could take students under their wing and provide them with those opportunities. – Stephanie Washington, Chancery Clerk's Office

There's a lack of educational and academic support for our kids, and a **lack of job opportunities and internships** for our youngsters to participate in.

– Shaketta Davis, parent



I would try first to help the young men that are dropping out of school. We need to encourage them to stay in school to get their degree. It's very important for these young men to have a college degree behind them because now technology is taking over and it's so hard for young men to get jobs. If you don't have a job, one of the things you're going to go to is what? That's stealing, that's robbing, that's killing. So you know we all have to come together and try to change things.

I don't think one person can change anything, The mayor has a lot to do with it and we have to put the right person in place. The mayor has to be for the North and the South. When I say the North and the South, I mean for the black and the white. We need to come together as a whole, you know what I'm saying? We just can't just say we want to take care of this side and not take care of the other side.

- Robert Earvin, community member

More recreation for young people—especially those who are ages 8 - 18. They need more outlets aside from those that are provided in the school, maybe some sort of league sports like little league baseball, soccer leagues... If you are able to make the link between activities for young people, you decrease the amount of teenage pregnancies that happen.

The other thing I would like to address is looking at some property improvements—especially in the downtown area and the area along 82. Sometimes when it comes to how people perceive the community, they look at the numbers of buildings that are boarded up and that kind of thing. So some beautification projects - I know that the mayor and his office have started on some of that but rather than it being just a one-time thing, to keep it all year and to involve young people in the process because sometimes when young people are able to become involved, that makes them proud of their communities.

- Carolyn Willis, Indianola Promise Community

I would change the way that organizations and people work together. We have a lot of opportunity here, but I don't feel like we are fully coordinating services to ensure that everybody that actually needs services is receiving services properly.

Dr. Deborah Moore, Indianola Promise Community

Involve young people in the process because sometimes when young people are able to become involved, that makes them proud of their communities.

- Carolyn Willis, Indianola Promise Community



Can you tell us a little bit? Just give one thing you would change that you see around SunflowerCounty. Poverty.

That's powerful thing. The homeless. People that don't have.

Yes ma'am. Give back to people.

Yeah, because the way I'm looking at it, the rich get richer and the poor staythey never get helped. Because of the way that it is nowadays.

Yes ma'am. Give back to people.

The United States has so much good in it, but we don't get any good out of it. See what I'm saying?

Right. Yes ma'am.

We make our own money. We grow food. I mean we can build houses. We can do all of that. So why do we have homeless people? Why do we have people who don't have food that's starving? You see what I'm saying.

Yeah.

I don't like that. That's the way it is though. If I could change one thing it would be poverty.

- Lindsey Ray, Sheriff's Deputy

We see a lot of repeat offenders and a lot of times we can't get those children to the places that we want to because of the resources involved. The training school is usually our last resort but it's been where they won't take children until it's really gone pretty far, so that's basically it. We had a program called the Adolescents Offender Program, but that's been discontinued because of funding. – Jimmy Sherman, Sunflower County Justice Court Judge

I think that the saddest part here in Sunflower County is that many of them are fatherless and they don't have a role model. I think, though, there are plenty of people that are out there that are willing to help if the young black community will just allow them to help. – Debbie Kilby Allen, community member

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The children around here, they have no leadership. They have nothing to do, nowhere to go when school is out. So they tend to get into a lot of trouble. I would like to see someone be able to take control of the youth here and give them something to do that's productive. We have youth court. Youth court monitors our youth. It's not really doing any good as far as giving them a sense of change, a better way of living, to keep them occupied.

- Lindsey Ray, Sheriff's Deputy

I think that jobs will always help the community. But as a community, we have to help ourselves by encouraging our kids to do well in school and encouraging them to move forward so that prisons aren't built and we have more resources for schools.

- Melanie Powell, Mississippi Center for Justice

When you live in a city such as Indianola, we don't have YMCA, we don't have different things that the kids can do. So, I'm grateful for the different outreach programs that we do have. But we don't have enough to keep our young kids off the street.

– Edrick Hall, Indianola Police Department, Chief

The education system here in Sunflower County needs to be improved. Unfortunately for the school system here, there are not the resources that they require and need. As youth who are in the school system, you all need to become active and engaged in your education. You can't do well or succeed outside of Indianola if you don't have access to resources that will make you be able to compete with people globally. So I think that youth need to be actively engaged in their education.

– Melanie Powell, Mississippi Center for Justice

Push your parents and your teachers and hold them accountable for giving you

a quality education.



Develop a culture where young black men reach out to younger kids. Because honestly, when they go home, you don't know what they see. They need to see that you don't have to go down this road. Yeah your uncle went down that route. Your daddy may have gone down that route. Your cousin may be doing it, but you don't have to. There's life outside of what you see. Some of them do not understand that there's a whole big world out there. You can have more than what you see. There's more to life than just your surroundings and environment, and they shouldn't inform who you are.

- Betty Petty, advocate

Education

What three words best **describe your** school/school community?

Hardworking Fun Dedicated Challenging Determined Motivational Educated Outstanding Great

- Wonderful Safe Respectful Caring Attentive Mindful Careless Unprepared Boring
- Broke Pathetic Poverty Unsuccessful Sports Academics Loud Active

Do you feel safe at school? Why or why not?



Sometimes. Sometimes I have instances at my school where **KIDS BRING WEAPONS**. So sometimes I don't feel safe. – **Ashley, student**

Sometimes I don't feel safe at school because sometimes we have adults who check our backpacks but **NOT THOROUGHLY CHECK IT TO SEE IF SOMEONE HAS A WEAPON.** They'll just pat your backpack and go on. And I kind of don't feel safe about that because someone can easily have a gun between folders and they can just pat and you could keep going on. That's why I don't feel safe most of the time. – Kaitara, student

If you could change one thing about your school, what would it be?

The one thing that I would change about my school is the TEACHERS, because some of them just don't care about education and some of them just don't care about us as students. – Student

CARING ADULTS

Increase counseling social workers

Teachers: Don't care about students/education

Improve books, facilities, materials

Parents are not involved like they should be involved. Our parents are really difficult. A lot of them don't go to the school. You know I visit school all the time. Kids just stare at me when I come there because I heard one of them say that 'I wish my Dad would come up here' or 'I wish my Dad was like you'. When a parent visits school, it means a lot to a child. I think the parents need to just really buckle down and see what the needs are and make sure they are doing everything they possibly can to make sure their child feels like they're nurtured. And then we'll see a change almost overnight – Charles Modley, Sunflower County NAACP President

Everyone does not have freedom of speech. If you say what you feel they think it's disrespectful and you can't express your ways like you want to.

Student

Some teachers and the principal don't handle things appropriately. They act like they are kids also. The kids, they disrespect each other. The teachers disrespect the kids. The kids disrespect the teachers. It's nothing productive at Gentry High School. But you do have certain people that try to lead the kids in the right way. – Student

To make the school better, it's about all of us coming together to make a change at our school. And the changes are not being done because no one likes to come together and make a change. Everybody is going against each other. **– Student**

If you could change one thing about Sunflower County schools, what would it be?

The environment —the facility itself—would be one thing. There are several things contributing to a student having a great outcome— not just the building and not just teachers. The environment is very, very important. So that the students feel like there are high expectations for them and they deserve the best. It starts with perception, the way things look.

- Dr. Deborah Moore, Indianola Promise Community

We do have a lot of young parents these days. And I feel like they still want to go out and live their life versus actually trying to rear their kids. If we try to bridge the gap between the teachers and administrators and the parents, then we will have better outcomes for our kids. – Shaketta Davis, parent If we had caring teachers, I think

that there is no limit to what our

young people today would be able

to do. Sometimes that's all they

need is to know that someone

actually cares about them. Caring

about a child could make a world

<mark>of a difference.</mark> – Betty Petty, advocate



In your role as School Resource Officer what are you protecting?

Young people.

People period.

That's my main goal.

– Markricus Hibbler Chief School Resource Officer



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M. Hibblen Sn Chief

Officers in school

Get counselors and social workers on campus that would be able to provide one-on-one conversations with students and implement different interventions. They would play a very vital role in a child's life individually. I really feel like we should do away with any officers on campus because we're basically telling our kids that this is what you can expect. It's one thing seeing the police officers out in the community, but it's another when your child comes in there going through a metal detector and they see resource officers on campus. We've never had an incident to make people feel as if we needed metal detectors or officers on campus. I mean, there was a shooting that happened elsewhere and it had nothing to do with our kids. But because of something that happened somewhere else, our kids are forced to have officers on campus. And if you look at it—just me looking at it—you can tell that more fights have occurred since they've had that. It's a mental thing. Children think that that is what's supposed to happen. If they have officers on campus, they feel as if the campus is dangerous. I would get rid of SRO officers. - Shequita Johnson, parent

What do you think is the single most important positive solution to improve interaction between students and law enforcement?

Communication.

Law enforcement and students need to learn how to communicate better. They got a lot of law enforcement officers who tend to feel that because they have on a uniform that what they say is right and that's not always the case. Everybody has to be willing to listen to one another. If you have a situation or a problem, I need to be able to listen to your situation or problem and hear it fully before I even open my mouth to say what I'm going to say and not be so ready to put handcuffs on you or assume that you've done something wrong. We need to be able to hear each other out. Communication is key.

Darnell Fisher, Indianola Police Department, Sergeant

In your role as a police officer, what are you protecting?

I'm protecting life, liberty, health, and freedom. Everybody has the right to life. Everybody has the right to freedom. Everybody has the right to be who they are. Of course, material things, I have to protect those things too—cars, clothes, commerce. Actually there are a plethora of things that we protect, but I think that the **main thing that we protect is life.**

You guys are our future. When addressing the youth of today it is important that we listen and understand where you're coming from and **not be so quick to incarcerate.** It is very important for us to protect all aspects, even if it has to be protecting you from your own people.

A lot of students need to be protected from themselves. **Some of the students are their own worst enemies.** They need to be protected from negative environments around the school. We have a lot of people who don't necessarily have the best interest in schools in mind when they're looking around the school.

I think it's needed. I think it's a good thing, as long as they are trained and have the type of people skills and patience that it takes to deal with young people. Y'all can be a handful. But at the same time you do have to have some type of security and control in the high schools nowadays. It's not like it used to be.

So, not only to deal with the students, but to **deal with the predators around the students.**

- Darnell Fisher, Indianola Police Department, Sergeant

School Discipline

Have you ever received corporal punishment at school?



"When I was in 1st grade my teacher used to get my hand and say, "Ball up your fist as tight as you can" and she would **beat my knuckles in front of the class.** I felt embarrassed and sad because all the students would laugh and point."

"We were 30 minutes into class and another boy was talking and the teacher thought it was me. So she told me to get out, so I did. I went to [an administrator] and he whooped me. It didn't hurt because I've had plenty of beatings before. I felt no pain and no emotions towards anyone, but I wanted to fight someone."

"It had me feeling physically and ready to fight. I felt this way because I never got hit that hard. It really did not impact me emotionally."

"I was late for class and got a whooping and was mad. I was not sitting in the desk when the bell rang."

"I was paddled once for refusing to put up my Bible. We weren't doing anything. We were just sitting and talking amongst each other and I decided to write a sermon. The teacher wrote me up and I got paddled and an overnight suspension. I was highly upset and saddened that I was in trouble simply over my Bible. **It made me rebellious against that teacher, but I forgave him and moved on."**

- students

One word that describes the impact of corporal punishment on you:

Heart-breaking Nonchalant Indifferent HATRED

Parents, do you support corporal punishment in school? **Why or why not?**

20%

Yes. I feel that that's another way of giving youth a way of respecting those that have authority over them.

40%

– Tammy Pernell, parent

If used properly, it can be very effective to actually be a positive thing. But if not used properly it'll be real messed up. It'll mess everything up.

- Markricus Hibbler, Chief School Resource Officer

I'm a proponent of strong discipline but students have to understand that they are in school for a reason and that's not to disrupt the normal activity of the school day but to be able to learn. And the only way you can learn is to be in school and not be out of school for behavioral reasons.

– Thomas Edwards, former school administrator/ educator No, I don't feel that the punishments or the discipline actions that are taken toward students are helping them period. I feel as if it's only showing our kids that you don't deserve to be here and if you can't do things a certain way, you're going to be kicked out.

40% sometimes

You can't punish a kid for doing something wrong by always kicking them out. What have they learned? They haven't learned anything. But if you set rules in place and be intentional about providing interventions for students, they are learning as they go. They gain something from the way you discipline them.

[Kicking kids out of school leads to the] pipeline from school to prison that I see very often. If [a student] ends up doing something and he's 16, it's jail. And once he's out of jail it keeps repeating itself. And once you get into the system, that's how our kids end up in the position that they are in now, especially our black boys.

And being a parent of two black boys coming up in this school system, I'm very afraid. – Shequita Johnson, parent

Perception

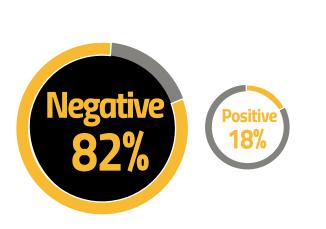
African American youth in our community is a generation that seems as though they **WANT TO BE HEARD** but no one is listening to the cry.

Things are being done for some reason or another just to get some attention but no one is listening. A lot of times it's not what is being said; it's what is not said. We have to be able to look at our children to see that hurt and feel that need. And we need to help them. We have some bright intelligent gifted young black males in our community. And the only thing that we need to do is to GIVE THEM ENCOURAGING WORDS and be that model for them and help them to understand that they can make it.

– Betty Petty, advocate



How do you feel African American young men are **perceived**?



Threat Uneducated Ghetto Unlikely to succeed Unlikely to go to college Lack guidance Need to learn to be men No one is listening Unfairly

Here in Indianola - and all around the world - as if they are a threat. That they are uneducated. They're ghetto. They're less likely to succeed academically and more likely not to go to college. – Shequita Johnson, parent

I think that it depends on the person who is there perceiving them. But I think that our African American men are great and they can be great with reinforcement.

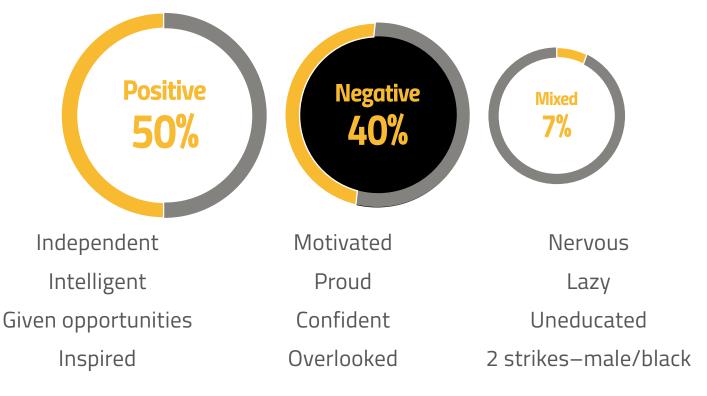
– Tammy Pernell, parent

I feel that African American young men are perceived unfairly. Most African American young men are perceived based on what people see on the television and that's not always the case. – Darnell Fisher, Indianola Police Department, Sergeant





How do you feel you are perceived as an African American young man or woman?





Keep your head up. Make a difference.

Lay out your plan,

know what your objectives are,

and how you are going

to go about doing it. And do it.

Because you can.

You can rise above the stigma

that has been put on

our young black men.

– Betty Petty, advocate

What recommendations do you have for our young African American men to thrive?

Most youth in the Delta are faced with obstacles that a lot of youth around the globe aren't faced with. So, I would have to say first compassion and then respect. Everybody deserves respect and once we can get those two things mobilized, I think the door will open.

> – Darnell Fisher, Indianola Police Department, Sergeant

Engagement. We have to remember we are living in a different age. We have to make sure the teachers are keeping the kids engaged. Everybody learns different. And I challenge the teachers ... I don't care if you have 30 kids in your classroom. You need to understand what's the best way to keep each child individually engaged in class so they can receive their proper education. – Edrick Hall, Indianola Police Department, Chief



What should people know about young African American men?

"African Americans, they have been through a lot.

They been through more than white Americans, I would say myself. Some whites, they just don't understand what we been through in the past and sometimes in the present.

They should understand—all should understand. All races should understand what we've been through."

- Vindarius, student

I want them to know that we are **highly educated**, and fit and active, and dedicated towards our goals.

– Damien, student

I want the world to know that all African American young men in the Delta are **not lazy and are not delinquents.**

– Anastacia, student

That we can do anything we put our minds to. We are very intelligent and we can do a lot.

– T'Rossi, student

That there is a lot of hope for our young men to make a difference in this world, but they need to be given an opportunity. That's what it's about now —it's having an opportunity. But it's also about our young men taking advantage of the opportunity.

– Thomas Edwards, former school administrator/educator

That they have the ability to do and be all that anybody else has the ability to do and be.

– Darnell Fisher, indianola Police Department, Sergeant

Vindarius, student

What advice do you have for other African American young men?

Get your Education

Keep trying at their goals they are trying to reach and never give up if it's possible. – Damien, student

Keep your head up and keep on going. – Antonio, student

Stand up. Rise up. And make a change in your community.

– Anastacia, student

When you have a hope or a dream to become something, you should go after it no matter what the obstacles are because you can always triumph over them.

- Beyonce, student

People, especially of other races, expect us to fail, and we have to prove them wrong.

– T'Rossi, student

The advice I have is to stay strong. Don't feel that just men can do things. Women can do things too.

– Ashlie, student

Anything is possible. Never give up! – Shequita Johnson, parent

Be positive. Be a positive role model. Strive to be the best that you can possibly be. Get an education. Want to be positive. Do positive things.

– Tammy Pernell, parent



Anybody can do anything in this American society, but will it be hard? Yes. Is it going to be easy? No. You're just going to have to work out your differences and try to be successful together.

– Vonkerius, student



LEARN HOW TO START AND OPERATE YOUR OWN BUSINESS.

Learn how to create jobs for your own people.

Learn how to create jobs for yourself.

Learn to become self-sufficient.

There's nothing wrong with going to work for somebody else, but you should always have in the back of your mind that you're going to eventually do this for yourself.

Because **people aren't standing by waiting to give you a job.** People aren't standing by waiting to give you anything. It's best for you to learn how it's done, and what it takes to get it done.

– Darnell Fisher, Indianola Police Department, Sergeant

Education. It's simple. I can't stress it enough. The most important thing is education. Stay in school. Do what you have to do. We have a fad that's going on where we think it's ok to hang out on the street. We think if so k to sag our pants. We think if we make all A's in school, we are a nerd or a geek or something like that and those kids sometimes are targeted. But those are the future doctors and those are the future lawyers. That's the future.

- Edrick Hall, Indianola Police Department, Chief

"Never settle for mediocrity when greatness is available.

I really push young men and women to aspire toward greatness. We settle for mediocrity too much. Not only in our communities, but our world as a whole. The reality is that inherently, we are great, and what you are great at, is entirely up to you to decide. Whatever you are going to do, I believe that you should be the best at it otherwise, why do it?"

- Shaka Senghor, author and activist



First of all, you have to have respect for yourself.

You have to love yourself first. If you don't love yourself, you cannot love nobody else. You cannot do nothing for your sister... you cannot do nothing for your parents. You have to love yourself.

When you go to school tomorrow, be obedient. Obey your teacher. Once you're obedient it establishes discipline within yourself. You have to be disciplined, you have to love yourself, and you got to pray. Stay in school and stay focused. I know you all have heard about the school to prison pipeline in the black community. It's happening all over our nation. The majority of black kids right now.

I had a friend that worked at Parchment, he played ball down at Valley. And he said every Thursday they would bring young black men down up there to Parchment and they would get off the bus crying like a baby. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—all young.

If you do an adult crime at 14 or 15, they gone charge you as an adult, especially here in Mississippi.

They do stupid stuff. They kill one another in our community. They shoot one another down in our community. Seventeen years old and have a gun. What you need a gun for? Who are you mad at 17 years old. Is it that serious that y'all would get a gun and kill someone? And you have messed your life up, you have destroyed your life. Parents crying and your cousin crying and all that kind of stuff. We need to focus on the prize.

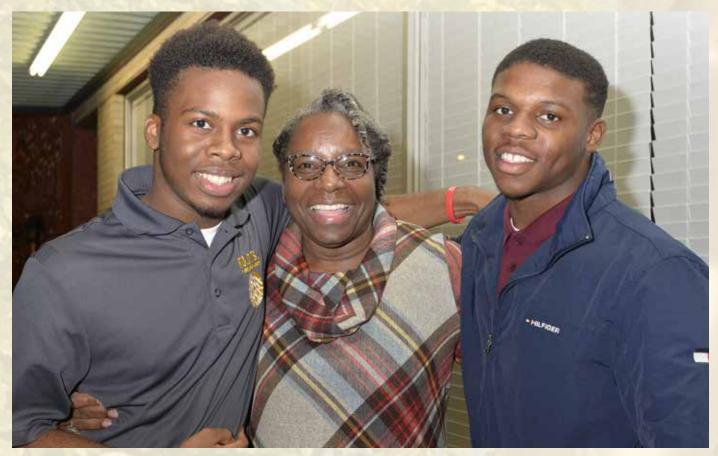
- Charles Modley, Sunflower County NAACP President

Be a person of character. Be a person of integrity. And be an example to the people that are younger than you. That's what I've always tried to do and exemplify in this community. If I was able to go to school in the 50s and 60s all the way up to the 90s and continue to get more degrees, what's your excuse for not going? There is no excuse, none at all, for young people not getting an education.

- Thomas Edwards, former administrator/educator



ROOTS participants interviewing Civil Rights activist Charles McLaurin.



ROOTS participants Vonkerius and Theon with local education advocate, Betty Petty.

I would encourage each of you and everybody who's looking at this to KEEP PRESSING AND KEEP FIGHTING. I can't tell you that you won't come along obstacles. I won't tell you things won't hurt along the way. But if you **STAY THE PATH AND MAKE UP YOUR MIND** what you want to do, you can be whatever it is you want to be.

Edrick Hall, Indianola Police Department, Chief

For my people, for my African American people, for my melanin people, as they say on the internet: **STAY POSITIVE. STAY MOTIVATED.** Understand who you really are. Don't just go on what people tell you you are and what social media tells you you are. **Understand who you really are,** go deeper and find out your real roots in who you really are and the reason why you have this skin color.

- Markricus Hibbler, Chief School Resource

The **advice** that I would give a young person growing up in Sunflower County

is number one: keep your head focused. Always remember that God is at the top. When you need some guidance, start with your parents. Then you venture out into the counselors and then sometimes there are good friends, but always stay focused. And everything that looks good isn't always good. – Liz Johnson, advocate

YOU NEED TO BE ABLE TO DREAM BIG.

And not just dream big, you have to be able to get out there and actively try to be successful. All of our young people, we look at sports and that may be fine for some folks, but the majority of us will not excel in sports and have that as a lifestyle.

Once you get an education, nobody can take that away from you. That is something that I constantly preach to any young men that I have an opportunity to talk to, is that you dream big but you

don't just dream. Nothing in this life worth having is given to you.

YOU HAVE TO EARN IT.

Those people that you look around and see who are somewhat successful—nobody just gave it to them. They had to work hard. They had to study. They had to go to school. – Thomas Edwards, former adminstrator/educator

Vision for your life 10 years from now



Do you see yourself as a leader?

I do see myself as a leader even though I'm quiet. I still always do the right thing and I always stay true to myself. So I think that's what makes me a leader.

- Ashley, student

I do see myself as a leader because I make critical decisions in tough situations.

– Anastacia, student



I want to go to college for four years and get a bachelor's degree. And get my major in computer science and become a computer engineer.
Vindarius, student 10 years from now, I plan to be enrolled in Harvard Law School becoming a certified criminal lawyer. – T'Rossi, student



My vision for my life is to live a successful life where I am practicing medicine at a hospital and having a wonderful career and serving a wonderful life. – Anastacia, student 10 years from now, I'll probably have my own business. A better life for my mama and my daddy. – Guss, student 10 years from now, I hope to be an artist and graduate from Ole Miss.

– Ashlie, student

10 years from now, I see myself still in college or graduating college with a Master's or a bachelor's degree and I can see myself being a lawyer or a computer or forensic scientist.

My vision for my life is I'm gonna be in college getting a PhD. **– Kaitara, student**



Chief School Resource Officer Markricus Hibbler with his two sons.

"Family. Family gives me hope because it keeps me striving to keep going." "Is there anyone particular in your family that gives you hope?"

"My kids. Both of my sons. They keep me striving to do more."

– Patrick Strong, Professional Barber

What gives you **hope?**

What gives me hope is support from the teachers and staff at my school, and support from my family and friends.

– Damien, student

Seeing my kids advance in the future. Just knowing that I have instilled something positive into their life and to see that I have motivated them to want to do well.

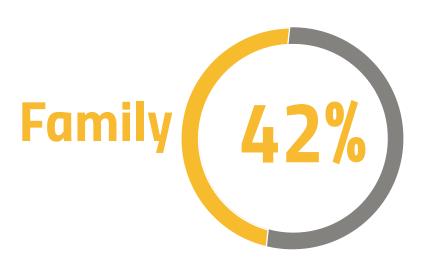
– Tammy Pernell, parent

Young people having more of an opportunity than I had when I came along. We have a lot more opportunities today for young people than my period of time coming up in this community.

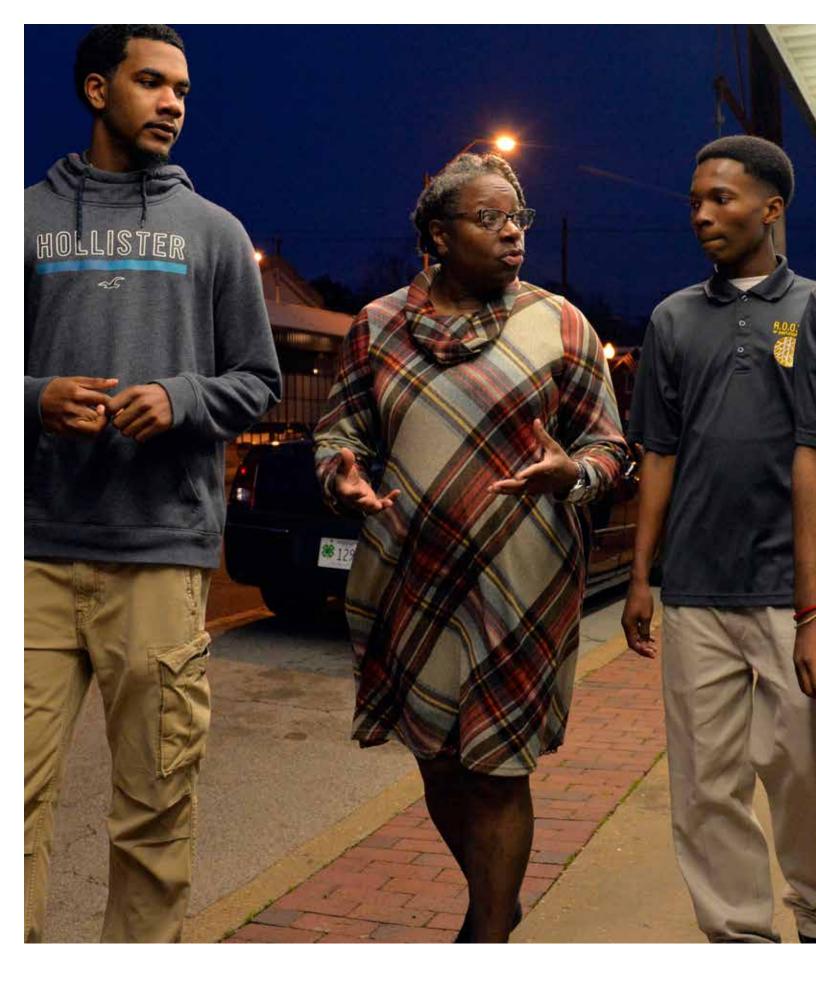
Thomas Edwards, former administrator/educator

What gives me hope [laughs]? What gives me hope is people like you asking me these types of questions. Young black men trying to do the right thing. Trying to face the obstacles that are plaguing you on a daily basis. And then the other thing that gives me hope is my spiritual connection. – Darnell Fisher, indianola Police Department, Sergeant





Youth. Things like this. Just sitting here with you guys today. I think I counted about 17 or 18 of you all today. You could be anywhere else right now but you chose to be here today and you took time out of your schedule to want to interview and talk to me and I want to thank you for it. That gives me hope. – Edrick Hall, Indianola Police Department, Chief





You can prosper if you take a stand.

You can prosper.

You all can join forces together

and decide that we not are going

to let our county, we are not

even gonna let our nation go down.

Because you know how?

You're a part of it.

One person can only go so far.

But look at if you had

25 men from Indianola.

If you had 25 men, young men,

from Inverness, from Moorhead,

from Sunflower, from Rome,

from Parchment -look at the

length of you all.

You all are powerful,

when you are organized and

when you come united.

Betty Petty, advocate

Exhibit Opening at the B.B.King Museum,

March 30, 2017



Top left. Olger Twyner, Mississippi Center for Justice Development Director, enjoys the R.O.O.T.S exhibit at the B.B King Museum; Top right: Theon James, R.O.O.T.S. Participant; Bottom left: Kimberly Merchant, Mississippi Center for Justice, Director of Educational Opportunities and Reilly Morse, President and CEO of the Mississippi Center for Justice; Bottom Right: Jadan Farrow and A'Xavier Carpernter, R.O.O.T.S. Participants.

"Congratulations!

You are encouraging the younger voices to engage as our leaders grounded and strong! Our hope!!" -exhibit viewer

Impact: Exhibit viewers reported **30% improved perceptions** of YMBOC

94% increased hope for better outcomes for YMBOC



Top Left: R.O.O.T.S. Participants talk about their experiences during the Opening Reception at the B.B. King Museum.; Top Right: Jennifer Riley-Collins, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi; Bottom Left: R.O.O.T.S. Participants Cornivion Bracey, Jadan Farrow, Nicholas Warren, Johnny Phillips, and Kyle Pernell; Bottom Right: Dr.Debra Dace, former Superintendent of Sunflower County Consolidated School District; Angela Zusman, Founder of Story for All; Jennifer Riley-Collins, Executive Director of American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi; Dr. Adrian Brown, Former Chair of the P16 Parental Engagement Council; Kimberly Merchant, Director of Educational Opportunities at the Mississippi Center for Justice; Aisha Carson, Advocacy Coordinator; Jacorius Liner, Advocacy Coordinator.

Next Steps

The SCSCP has developed a new and innovative community driven model towards creating sustainable and systemic change by addressing the systems that impact YMBOC. In order to classify this model as an "evidence based best practice", Phase Two will include the implementation, evaluation and measurement of the framework created by the community.

In addition, the SCSCP will be focusing on broader statewide change to policies that impact YMBOC across school districts. Ultimately, the SCSCP seeks to replicate its framework both statewide and nationally in an effort to disrupt the school to prison pipeline. With these goals in mind there are several next steps. The following outlines the next steps of the project and also how individuals can stay current with SCSCP and ROOTS updates.

Policy Change at the Local and State Level

The realization of systemic change can only be accomplished by implementing the policy changes established by the SCSCP and expanding its reach to statewide policy revisions which are drivers of the school to prison pipeline. To ensure its sustainability and effectiveness, the SCSCP team will continue to focus district wide trainings towards a restorative and preventative approach, to continue the channel of communication between systems, and to be accountable and transparent to the community we serve.

During the 2017-2018 school year, SCSCP will implement, evaluate, monitor and measure the revised code of conduct produced by the Advisory Council. By tracking disciplinary infractions and youth court referrals, the school district will made data driven decisions about schools and/or teachers who need additional support and classroom management training. In addition, SCSCP will track the success of the restorative justice practices at the school level. This will establish the SCSCP as an evidence-based model for rural and urban districts alike in moving from punitive to preventative and restorative practices. SCSCP will implement, evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of Memorandums of Understanding between the school system and the youth court/juvenile justice system, the school district and the local law enforcement, and the school district and the parental/community engagement council. The continuation of communication between these systems will decrease student contact with the juvenile justice system.

The SCSCP seeks to replicate its success both statewide and nationally in an effort to disrupt the school to prison pipeline.

"This is a great program that many schools in Mississippi need to model." -exhibit viewer

At the state level, policy in Mississippi has also negatively impacted YMBOC and encourages zero tolerance, excessive use of expulsion under the three strikes rule, and the use of corporal punishment. Phase 2 will target statewide disciplinary policies that increase infractions that funnel students from school to the juvenile justice system, including state law on disruption of school setting that is currently too broad allowing minor school based infractions to be characterized as criminal offense; zero tolerance policies that place students outside of the school setting for minor infractions; the three strikes law that allows school districts to expel students for minor infractions; and, the over-utilization of corporal punishment in lieu of out of school suspension. The SCSCP will shift its attention towards disrupting the school to prison pipeline by advocating a measure of reform to these policies.

Continuing Narrative Change

The data report, oral history archive, traveling exhibition, and documentary are a huge part of continuing the conversation around narrative change for YMBOC in Sunflower County and across the nation. The SCSCP and ROOTS team will continue to create awareness around implicit bias and changing the perception of YMBOC. You can find more information about the ROOTS project, view

the documentary and interviews done by the ROOTS participants, and find out when the exhibition will be in a city near you by visiting www.sunflowercountysystemschange.com/ROOTS.

SCSCP as a Model

The SCSCP seeks to replicate its success both statewide and nationally in an effort to disrupt the school to prison pipeline for rural and urban districts alike in moving from punitive to preventative and restorative practices. The successes and lessons learned will be used to create a step-by-step guide of how people can replicate systems change in their communities. After implementation and the evaluation of its success, the SCSCP will look to expand systems change in communities looking to make similar strides in improving outcomes for YMBOC.

For more information about the Systems Change Project and The R.O.O.T.S. participants, please visit:

Website: www.sunflowercountysystemschange.com Facebook: Sunflower County Systems Change Twitter: SCSystemsChange Instagram: SunflowerSystemsChange

Feedback from exhibit viewers

"This is a wonderful project. I see that the participants are proud of themselves, what they have accomplished, and their future."

"There are some very intelligent young men out there and people need to continue to hear them out."

"I am inspired to be more of a change agent."

"More programs like this should be created for other areas."

"I hope we do this everywhere!"



You all are young and vibrant. *You can do it.* It doesn't take a whole group. One person can start a change. One person can actually get there and influence others. You all have an opportunity to come together and decide we can make a change here in Sunflower County. **And the change has just begun.**

-Betty Petty, advocate



R.O.O.T.S. RECLAIMING OUR ORIGINS THROUGH STORY



sunflowercountysystemschange.com