



***Securing Mississippi's Future Through  
Education, Workforce and Talent***



## **Why it Matters**

The Alignment Initiative for Mississippi (AIM) will build momentum, provide coordination of programs, and drive meaningful public policy to improve educational outcomes, develop a skilled workforce, and create a talent pipeline to meet the needs of business.

By aligning the goals and objectives outlined in the Mississippi Economic Council's Securing Mississippi's Future: Vision for Economic Growth into a single fund-raising initiative, MEC and its subsidiaries can procure funding and better utilize resources. This will also ensure a greater return on investment for those supporting these efforts and produce tangible outcomes that put Mississippi and her citizens in the place of greatest opportunity.

## Overview

The Alignment Initiative for Mississippi will identify private sector resources at the state and national levels to support existing efforts to improve education, workforce development, and talent retention and attraction.

MEC's initiatives have merit individually and are essential in moving Mississippi forward. A collaborative effort will produce a more meaningful change for Mississippi.

Major initiatives include:

- **Balancing K-12 Accountability Model** – Developing a Student-Centered K-12 Accountability Model Leading to Individuals Success After Graduation
- **Ascent to 55%** – Improving Post-Secondary Education Attainment
- **Mississippi Talent Initiative** – Increasing Opportunity for Young Professionals

MEC will also utilize existing programs and efforts to carry out the goals of its three major initiatives. Grants and donations to MEC's 501(c)3 organizations, the Public Education Forum of Mississippi (PEF) and M.B. Swayze Foundation, could assist in the continued success of programs overseen by MEC's subsidiaries and partnering groups that MEC supports.

These include:

- Mississippi Scholars
- Mississippi Scholars Tech Master
- Early Childhood Development
- Career Coaching – Defining Career Pathways
- Accessibility/Affordability for Post-Secondary Education
- STAR Student & Teacher Recognition Program
- Leadership Mississippi

AIM would create a process to serve as a clearinghouse for distributing funds through grants to non-profit organizations that support the goals and objectives of the Mississippi Department of Education, Accelerate Mississippi, the State Office of Workforce Development, and other state agencies focusing on improving opportunities for all Mississippians.

## Building on Success

Over the past two years, MEC has built alliances with like-minded organizations to focus on improving education, workforce development, and skills training. This synergy is creating a more balanced, work-ready citizenry to promote business growth, job creation, and opportunities for young professionals to thrive in our state.

Using MEC's "Securing Mississippi's Future: Vision for Economic Growth" report as a blueprint, MEC has joined forces with partnering organizations to push for and achieve meaningful public policy to continue to improve educational outcomes, provide career-driven solutions and focus on the needs of businesses throughout the state. The collaborative effort is only the beginning of what MEC sees as a watershed moment for our state.

Partnerships developed through MEC's Public Education Forum of Mississippi and M.B. Swayze Foundation will be vital in achieving the objectives outlined in the Alignment Initiatives for Mississippi plan. While not a complete list, public and private sector partners could include:

- Accelerate Mississippi – the State Office of Workforce Development
- The State Workforce Investment Board
- Mississippi Department of Education
- Mississippi Community College Board and its Community Colleges
- Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning
- Community foundations
- Business organizations
- Issue specific non-profits and foundations
  - Examples: Skills Foundation, The Children's Foundation, etc.
- Elected officials
- Individual businesses

Working together with a common objective is essential. MEC will serve as a conduit for determining which programs meet the goals outlined in AIM and provide support and resources when available.

Ultimately this initiative can serve as a clearinghouse for providing grants to programs focusing on improving education and workforce development. This also allows an opportunity to track outcomes, refine data collection, and create an improved and consistent way of reporting results.

## **Data Vital in Driving Outcomes**

For the major initiatives outlined in AIM to be sustainable, it is essential we collect data and measure outcomes in a meaningful way.

While Mississippi's State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) provides some of the vital information we need for understanding outcomes at both the secondary and postsecondary levels of education, numerous aspects need improvement or refining. One of the biggest challenges is accurately tracking non-degreed programs and credentials.

While Mississippi isn't alone in having access to the comprehensive data necessary for fully understanding the true outcomes of current educational and workforce programs, we can be a leader in helping develop solutions to provide complete reporting. Doing so would create an opportunity to utilize the data for consistent metrics to track progress.

A system to provide clear outcomes is a priority for Strada Education Network's National Benchmark Initiative and the National Association of State Chambers Workforce Transformation Task Force.

Developing metrics that provide consistent reporting at the state and national levels is vital for assessing the success of MEC's work with developing a student-centered accountability model, increasing educational attainment, and providing career opportunities for young professionals in Mississippi.

The data collection must include metrics for all postsecondary education and training programs, including degrees, apprenticeships, certificates, and other non-degree credentials, especially those in high-demand career sectors.

MEC would work with Mississippi State University's National Strategic Planning & Analysis Research Center, which oversees SLDS, educational agencies, the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, Accelerate Mississippi, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to ensure accurate data collection and access.

## Initiative 1: Balancing K-12 Accountability Model

**GOAL:** *Create a student-centered K-12 accountability model that emphasizes students' competencies to ensure college and career readiness and aligns with the expectations of businesses.*

**Why it Matters:** The state's K-12 accountability model should focus on helping guide students to success after high school graduation. We must adapt Mississippi's accountability model to better balance academic degrees with collegiate-level career and technical education and workforce credentialing.

**Adjustments Needed:** Mississippi's Accountability Model was adopted in 2013 to raise the state's academic achievement in certain subjects. It was designed to encourage students to pursue an academic college experience after graduation, whether at a two- or four-year college. There is no doubt educators succeeded; in fact, they excelled. Mississippi leads the U.S. in the percentage of high school students who graduate and immediately enroll at a college on an academic track. Unfortunately, the state's public university Year 2 retention rate falls from 1st to 37th. As a result, over 300,000 Mississippians have some college credit but no degree.

**Balancing College and Careers:** A secondary school system that promotes only a post-secondary academic degree track is an inefficient mismatch for any state's economy. The Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce suggests at least 70% of workers should have some college credential by 2030. The time is right for a policy shift. Mississippi has emphasized improving workforce training systems in order to be regionally and nationally competitive.

**Looking Ahead:** The system should equally promote college for industry-recognized certification and professional degrees while providing an equitable model to all districts and removing barriers disadvantaged schools face. A K-12 accountability model that promotes stackable credentials will provide students with the opportunity for multiple levels of certifications leading to meaningful employment and future post-secondary degrees. This process would help increase educational attainment at all levels and enhance economic opportunities for all Mississippi's citizens.

## Initiative 2: Ascent to 55%

**Goal:** *The Ascent to 55% initiative will increase the number of working-age Mississippians with measurable education or training beyond high school to 55% by 2030 and 60% by 2035.*

**Why it Matters:** Improving post-secondary education attainment will close education and employment opportunity gaps, help meet workforce demands, and improve economic opportunities for all Mississippians. In 2021, the Education Achievement Council established goals to move our attainment level from 45.2% to 60% and beyond. To accomplish this will require education, business, government, and non-profits to work together to address barriers that are impeding educational attainment levels.

**Work Underway:** MEC's Public Education Forum is leading the Ascent to 55% initiative. This work began through a grant from the Woodward Hines Education Foundation. The Ascent to 55% initiative is committed to addressing how more Mississippians can obtain education beyond a high school diploma in the form of postsecondary degrees, certifications, or credentials that will allow them to improve their quality of life, strengthen their communities, and provide a prosperous future for all of Mississippi.

Ascent to 55% focuses on 5 A's:

- **Alignment** of policies between Mississippi's workforce development and education systems, including private sector employers, will produce more citizens with career credentials and promote future economic development.
- **Awareness** informing Mississippians about the importance of obtaining postsecondary degrees and credentials, supporting career completion, and the effects of postsecondary completion on workforce participation.
- **Accessibility** to career credentials and degrees so every citizen who desires additional educational attainment has ongoing support to ensure their pursuit is both an efficient use of their time and leads to a career credential of value.
- **Affordability** focuses on providing Mississippians who desire a career credential or degree with appropriate assistance and improving the state's financial aid policies will help remove barriers to educational attainment.
- **Accountability** measures Mississippi's efforts to meet the attainment goal of 60% by 2035. Data collection must include the entire education system and include worked-based learning experiences and non-degree credentials in high-demand areas, and document transitions from education to the workforce.

**Long-term Sustainability:** The groundwork for achieving the goals is being laid. To reach the goals established by the educational achievement council will require sustained financial support for Ascent to 55%.



## **Initiative 3: Mississippi Talent Initiative**

**Goal:** *To increase the number of highly-qualified, skilled young professionals in Mississippi's workforce through retention and recruitment.*

**Why it Matters:** Imbalances between demand and supply of talent have existed in Mississippi over the past several years, and the gap continues to grow. To understand the impact of this imbalance, MEC's M.B. Swayze Foundation is leading a fact-based, data-driven research project called the Mississippi Talent Initiative (MTI). The first step is to understand what is currently happening in the state's job market and what may occur over the next 10 years. Achieving this goal will produce insight crucial for Mississippi to form strategies capable of retaining and attracting talent to meet current and future workforce needs.

**What's Happening Now:** MTI is pursuing qualitative and quantitative research to identify factors and trends that impact Mississippi's mission to develop a more competitive workforce. Qualitative factors will include the opinions about working in Mississippi from young professionals and those preparing to enter the workforce. Quantitative factors consist of educational attainment, industry, and business sector needs, projected growth in the job market, wages, and cost of living. This fact-gathering initiative is essential because employers' needs are rapidly changing. Understanding Mississippi's current and future job market will enable leaders and policymakers to make informed decisions in developing solutions to grow the state's economy through talent retention and attraction.

**Working Together:** This will require the support of the educational community and employers to ensure Mississippi aligns its educational and training initiatives with employers' needs. Coordination between the business sector and education is vital. Businesses must outline their expectations, and training at all levels of education must be nimble enough to meet those needs.

**Next Steps:** As the research is concluded, the real work will begin and the data gathered will provide a clear picture of where we are and where we are going as a state. Changing our trajectory will require innovative solutions and the resources necessary to implement programs to grow the number of talented young professionals essential for increasing Mississippi's economic competitiveness.



## Summary

The Initiatives outlined must work in concert to truly accomplish the objective of securing Mississippi's future through education, workforce, and talent.

Success at all levels of education is critical, but to truly address the workforce needs that businesses face today and prepare a workforce for the future, we must rethink how we measure what takes place in the K-12 system. Mississippi's current accountability system does not truly serve the needs of all students, and as a result, some students are left behind or find themselves on pathways that do not lead to a meaningful career.

Once this is corrected, students will find greater fulfillment and success with their secondary and postsecondary education. This will improve the state's educational attainment levels and create opportunities in areas that face barriers traditionally difficult to overcome.

Getting students on a pathway to meaningful, productive careers will change lives. More importantly, it will help develop the type of workforce essential for economic growth. This will spur job growth, increase options for young professionals to remain in Mississippi, and provide an avenue to recruit talented individuals to our state.

We must AIM high to foster a new level of prosperity throughout the state.



# Progress

*“We are preparing students to be successful with an accountability model, not successful in life.”*

- Current Mississippi High School Principal

*“We have got to give students more than a piece of paper and then boot them out the door.”*

- Longtime Mississippi Educator/Consultant

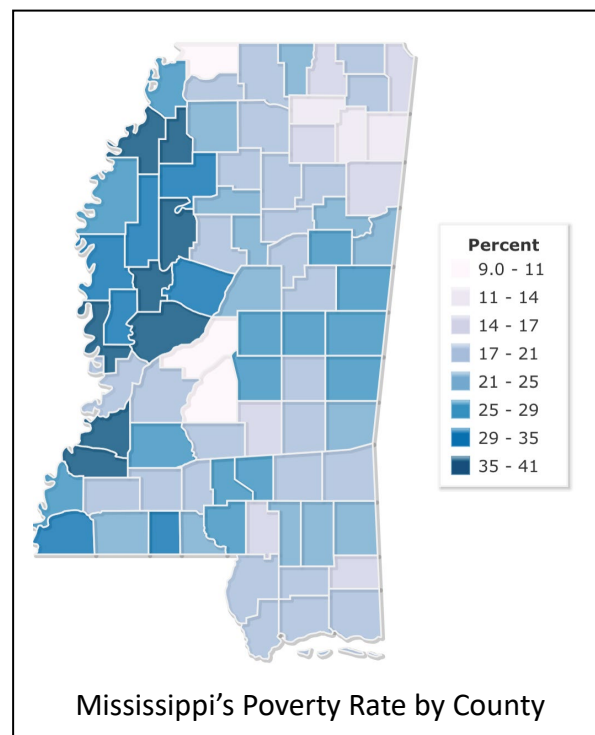
## Improving our AIM

These comments from educators emphasize why the initiatives outlined in AIM are essential to the long-term economic growth of our state and to ensure all students, regardless of race, gender, and socio-economic status, have an opportunity to succeed.

In 2022, 19.1 percent of Mississippi's population lived below the poverty line, which is five percent above the national average. Eight counties in Mississippi have a poverty rate that exceeds 35 percent. These same counties also have extremely low educational attainment rates.

In fact, in six of these counties less than 20 percent of residents have completed a post-secondary education program – defined as a bachelor or above, an associate degree or an industry certification.

Not only do opportunities increase through post-secondary education attainment, but the state will also see a direct economic benefit. Research has shown that with every one percent increase in educational attainment, \$20 million is added annually in state tax dollars.



[illegible]

This is currently not the case with Mississippi's K-12 accountability model. You only have to look at the Mississippi Department of Education's website section entitled "Understanding the Accountability System" to realize the model is off target.

## What is Not Captured in the Accountability Letter Grades?

- 12

**The bottom line:** The accountability model doesn't take into consideration the whole student, or the student's needs. As a result, too many students – especially in parts of the state where they need it the most – are being left behind.

Instead, the current model's primary focus is on state assessments in math, English, and science in elementary and middle school. In high school the state assessments are in algebra I, English II, biology, and U.S. history.

In the high school model, assessments (a single test) in those subject areas account for 70 percent of the scoring. The score isn't just from the standpoint of proficiency but includes two different components for growth (improvement).

Another 20 percent is for graduation rate. However, the emphasis isn't placed on the type of diploma, but instead it is based on the student graduating from high school with a basic diploma. While Mississippi has made great strides in helping students get across the finish line, we must continue to increase the emphasis on the types of knowledge and skills students are receiving, and ensure they are prepared to be successful in life.

The final 10 percent of the model accounts for a student's college and career readiness, and participation in accelerated courses, such as advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual credit. College and career readiness is measured by the ACT and ACT Workkeys. The ACT composite scores range from 13.1 percent in the lowest performing schools to 21.8 percent in higher

### **Accountability Scores Soar**

Mississippi Schools posted the best scores in history in the most recent accountability results.

Using the letter grade system of A-F there were:

57 A Districts  
47 B Districts  
29 C Districts  
6 D Districts  
6 F Districts

### **But We Are Missing the Mark**

The limitations of what is being judged fail to consider individual student needs.

Additionally, because more than 65 percent of districts scored an A or B, state law requires the scoring be adjusted to limit the number of A or B districts and will require the number of D and F districts to increase. Districts could improve academic performance but receive a lower grade due to changes in scale scores.

performing schools. These numbers directly impact postsecondary success.

All other classes, activities, and programming, which can make up as much as 90% of what a student does in high school, have no value in the current system.

**Why does this matter?** The adage of “what gets measured gets done” drives how educators approach a student’s journey in high school. If the attention is centered on so few things to judge success, many important aspects of education are put on the sidelines.

It is important to understand this is not an indictment of the teachers, their ability, or their desire, but an indictment of the system that forces administrators to focus on only a few things that will lead to success with the accountability model and sacrifices individual students’ needs and fails to prepare students for a pathway to success through post-secondary education or in the workplace.

## Creating Equitable Pathways to Change Lives

Focusing on the initiatives outlined in AIM will improve long-term outcomes for all Mississippians.

Turning our attention to rethinking the needs of today’s students and ensuring that the educational outcomes align with business needs will create a more equitable path for students, especially those in parts of the state where there is higher poverty and lower educational attainment.



About 100 educational leaders participate in a regional meeting.

Currently, MEC is making progress with all three areas under AIM.

The first step in balancing the K-12 accountability model is underway.



More than a dozen focus group-style sessions to gather input from educators, as well as business and community leaders, have taken place, including seven regional meetings across the state. The input being provided by participants will be compiled. This information, along with additional research to understand the existing framework, will be used in helping develop solutions and amending current policy to create the student-centered approach to measuring educational success throughout the K-12 system in Mississippi.

In addition to providing input on what changes are essential, these meetings are helping build support for working with policymakers.

Balancing the accountability model and developing a process that emphasizes students' competencies to ensure college and career readiness and aligns with the expectations of businesses is critical in increasing Mississippi's postsecondary education attainment rate.

---

The Ascent to 55% initiative began in September of 2022. The program is focusing on having 55 percent of Mississippians with post-secondary credentials by 2030. However, the work won't stop there, as the 2035 goal is to have an attainment level of 60 percent.



The evaluation process of where the state currently stands has been thorough. There has been an emphasis placed on identifying and helping students enter in-demand career pathways. In many cases, these pathways can have citizens working in their career field after receiving credentials through short-term programs. More importantly, the vast majority of these credentials are considered “stackable” and create an opportunity to earn an even higher level of post-secondary education.

As a result, Mississippi has already seen an increase in its attainment rate. Earlier this year, the Lumina Foundation's “A Stronger Nation” reported that Mississippi moved from 45.2 percent to 48.5 percent in two years. From 2019 to 2021, states with the most significant increases in Attainment Rates among adults 25 to 64 years old include Indiana, Idaho, Mississippi, South Dakota, Utah, and Vermont.



Another reason improving the educational attainment rate is important is Mississippi has one of the lowest workforce participation rates in the country. Only 55 percent of working age adults (ages 16-64) are currently employed. It is vital that we connect skills training to job requirements and job availability to provide opportunities for all Mississippians.

As we move forward, the success of Ascent to 55% will be based on the model known as the 5As. These are:

- **Alignment** of policies among Mississippi's workforce development, education, and the private sector.
- **Awareness** among Mississippians about the importance of obtaining postsecondary degrees/credentials.
- **Accessibility** to career credentials and degrees.
- **Affordability** for Mississippians by providing appropriate assistance.
- **Accountability** measures established to collect accurate data to ensure the state meets attainment goal.

Groups that will see the most significant, positive impact will include African Americans, young adult learners, adult learners, incarcerated citizens, active military, and veterans.

#### PRIMARY OUTCOMES

Career Credentials Increased

- From 48.5% in 2023 to 55% by 2030
- From 48.5% in 2023 to 60% by 2035

#### ANCILLARY OUTCOMES

- Higher Labor Participation Rate
- Increased Gender and Racial Equity in Credential Participation Rates
- Alignment of Education and Workforce Systems

**Several areas for strategic implementation for Ascent to 55% are already under development. They include:**

- Assist with aligning credentials to "In-Demand Jobs" within different regions of the state to expand high-quality education and workforce training opportunities.
- Engage local and regional stakeholders to communicate the need for greater educational attainment and deeper economic alignment.

- Engage families and other stakeholders as active partners in supporting equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities to boost the immediate post-secondary completion rate of each region's high school graduates.
- Explore how to re-engage a growing proportion of adults with some college but no degree. This includes re-engagement of incarcerated individuals.
- Develop ways to address gaps in education attainment for underserved populations.
- Identify ways to expand high-quality, work-based learning opportunities through partnerships among institutions and employers, including paid internships and apprenticeships.
- Better align and coordinate systems within a region to support students at all levels, from pre-K education through high-quality certificate, associate, and higher-degree programs with clear and concise pathways that connect to careers.

Ascent to 55% is an ongoing, long-term initiative. Additional strategies will be developed as we move forward. It is important that we continue to find the resources necessary to sustain the effort. It is essential to Mississippi businesses, as 87 percent of employers surveyed by MEC believe their current workforce will need additional training, credentials, certifications, or degrees in the next 10-20 years.

---

Providing the proper training that aligns with in-demand jobs for today and in the future is critical for increasing Mississippi's population. Retaining and attracting talent and providing additional opportunities for young professionals must be a priority. This is why the Mississippi Talent Initiative serves as the third leg of the AIM stool.



The Mississippi Talent Initiative is in the initial research phase. In early 2023 the work began on an in-depth look at where our state is today, and to

project what our needs will be in a variety of areas that impact economic growth and competitiveness.

The goal is to understand what is currently happening in the state's job market and what may occur over the next 10 years. Achieving this goal will produce insight that is crucial for Mississippi to form strategies capable of retaining and attracting talent to meet current and future workforce needs. The Initiative will pursue qualitative and quantitative research to identify factors and trends that impact Mississippi's mission to develop a more competitive workforce.

Among the key quantitative factors that the research will include are:

- Measuring education completion rates over the past 10 years.
- Assessing current employment outcomes for graduates.
- Using 10-year education projections to estimate the future number of students in Mississippi's education pipeline.
- Determining the current needs (in-demand jobs) of Mississippi's employers, and the post-secondary education required for a workforce to fill these needs.
- Gauging 10-year employment projections to estimate the future needs of Mississippi's employers; identify sectors that will grow and decline in the state and the nation.
- Measuring the current wages paid to workers based on their skill level and occupation; compare wage growth trends to the national average trends.
- Calculating cost-of-living equivalencies between major regions of Mississippi and other regions that are currently attracting Mississippi's graduates.
- Assessing Mississippi's current supply of talent, and how the population trends, birth trends, and retirement trends impact this supply.

Qualitative factors will include the opinions held by young professionals and those preparing to enter the workforce about working in Mississippi. This will take place by:

- Conducting roundtable discussions with young professionals working in Mississippi.

- Working with Mississippi universities and colleges to identify alumni that left the state for work; conduct roundtable discussions in select cities with large numbers of expatriates.
- Coordinating with Mississippi universities and colleges to conduct roundtable discussions with current in-state and out-of-state students.

In addition, the Mississippi Talent Initiative research process includes a survey to be broadly distributed to Mississippi's young professionals, specifically 4-year university graduates between the ages of 25-40. The survey will be designed to gather input from alumni from Mississippi universities to gather data from those who are working both inside and outside the state.

The insights gathered through the research will allow for a broader understanding of the wants, needs and worldviews of Mississippi's young workforce. Data from numerous state agencies and information about the working population will be gathered and analyzed to provide state leaders with confidence that proposed solutions will be fact-based.

This information will allow MEC to work with state leaders to identify steps Mississippi can take to ensure opportunities exist for working young professionals and those entering the workforce from high school, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities.

Emerging strategies will include ideas for balancing the demand and supply of talent to close the gap between the two, with an eye toward Mississippi's greatest job needs by sector.

MEC believes Mississippi must be more competitive in retaining and attracting talent. The information provided with this research will help develop strategies to align educational outcomes with business needs, and steadily grow the Mississippi economy by developing a more competitive workforce.



# Sustainability

## **Next Steps**

There is tremendous progress being made in addressing the objectives of AIM. However, for the state to see the full benefit it is crucial that processes are put in place to sustain the effort.

MEC, through its 501(c)3 foundations, must ensure we have the resources, the programs, and the personnel to allow us to reach the goal of growing the state's economy and improving the lives of all Mississippians.

It is incumbent on MEC to focus on creating a long-term strategic approach to find solutions, advocate for meaningful public policy, and deploy programs to successfully meet the initiatives of AIM.

This intense focus will require a dedicated entity. It is our intent to secure the necessary funding to create the MEC Center for Workforce and Educational Excellence.

The top issue that was identified in MEC's "Securing Mississippi's Future: Vision for Economic Growth" report was a lack of qualified workers. The center will serve as the conduit between the business community, political leaders, and the citizens in addressing this issue.

Developing a talent pipeline to provide a thriving workforce in Mississippi begins with ensuring access and equitable pathways to education and skills training opportunities for all Mississippians.



## WE ARE THE VOICE OF BUSINESS

### About MEC

*The Mississippi Economic Council – the State Chamber of Commerce – has been the voice of Mississippi business since 1949. MEC deals with broad issues that relate to businesses through Advocacy, Research, Resources and Leadership.*

### MEC Mission Statement

*To be the leading force for business in Mississippi. Use factual, data-driven research to promote collaboration between top private and public sector leaders, develop feasible solutions for economic competitiveness, and effectively advocate proactive public policy to put Mississippi and her citizens in the place of greatest opportunity.*

### MEC Vision Statement

*Serve as the essential organization for Mississippi businesses to cultivate job creation and economic growth.*

### MEC Values Statement

*Providing leadership to create a more prosperous future for all citizens is the foundation for MEC. Developing partnerships with like-minded organizations allows consensus building to advance meaningful pro-business, free enterprise public policy. Strong relationships built on trust can facilitate business connections for prospective members and provide essential resources for success. Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion of people, businesses, and ideas encourages engagement that allows for advancing non-partisan principles and an entrepreneurial spirit. By maintaining an effective communication process, MEC will serve as the unified voice of business.*

