

GIS / Mapping

Case Study: Southern Echo Inc.

*Written by Stephanie Lindenbaum
for the OSI Information Program*



© 2006 Open Society Institute. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

OSI - GIS/Mapping Project
Case Study: [Southern Echo](#), Inc.
Person Contacted: Mike Sayer

ISSUE: A grassroots organization based in Mississippi has access to census data and other government figures, but no way to utilize this information for its community empowerment work.
SOLUTION: A grant from a technology non-profit offers the group training and advanced GIS software so that it can visualize its data and, in turn, train other grassroots organizations throughout the South.

*(adapted from an interview with Michael Sayer, Southern Echo
Executive Director)*

"GIS made sense to us because of the uses to which we put it. The manual we made for [a regional conference] - we had 25-30 pages of maps and charts - it enabled people to visualize issues they'd never be able to understand with straight text. In a culture in which reading skills have been systematically diminished, visualization is very powerful for people."

- Mike Sayer

Southern Echo is a non-profit organization based in Jackson, Mississippi. Founded in 1989, Echo defines itself as "committed to building new, accountable grassroots leadership and organization, based on an inter-generational model, through training, technical and legal assistance." The organization has predominantly focused on black and low-income communities throughout eleven states in the Deep South, concentrating on rural counties in the state of Mississippi. According to Michael Sayer, Echo's Co-Founder, Senior Organizer and Training Coordinator, the organization's primary activity has been in community organizing, empowering communities through local representative groups.

The majority of Echo's constituents are low-income citizens, most of whom have been disenfranchised by constitutional provisions, court decisions, force and violence, and economic and social intimidation. Echo has sought to empower these communities by offering them a chance to build up grassroots organizations and leadership at the local level, and ensure that their voices are heard by State and Federal governing bodies. In 1991-2, through many public hearings held by the Mississippi state legislature, Echo encouraged hundreds of black citizens, who had had no prior opportunity to participate in policy creation, to participate and publicly express unity around

a common strategy and set of outcomes. Echo's redistricting work grew out of this organizing work, designed to empower the community. As Sayer points out, "The primary goal was empowerment: the creation of fair districts in which the black community had a reasonable opportunity to elect representatives who would be accountable to the community was a means to that end." According to Sayer, "The creation of visuals - i.e. redistricting maps - was not original or unusual. All redistricting must include maps of the proposed districts, and especially of the plans that are finally adopted. What was 'original' about our approach was enabling grassroots communities to come onto the playing field knowledgeable about their right to participate, the rules of the games, how redistricting was done, and to be involved in the decision-making process that led to the adoption of redistricting plans as public policy." The redistricting maps for the state legislature and congressional seats were presented first to the community, and then to the state legislature.

Sayer and his colleague, Echo Co-Founder Hollis Watkins, constructed massive state maps by hand, outlining census block-level detail and accounting for the true number of voting-age black Mississippians. The central issue was to could create a district in which black Mississippians, where they were a clear majority of the population in the Delta region of the state, could have a reasonable opportunity to elect a representative who would be accountable to their needs and interests. Working through the night, the two men ultimately presented their accurate map at the state and local level, with positive results. The relative success suggested that these efforts could be replicated for other legislative districts, but the scope of the project was so vast, neither Southern Echo nor any other grassroots group would be able to map them again by hand. By 2001, Echo decided that they needed access to advanced technology to accomplish their mission.

Echo submitted a grant application to the Progressive Technology Project (PTP) for \$50,000 - the largest proposal they'd received at that time. PTP awarded the grant based on what Echo had been doing and what they wanted to do - to develop a model helping other communities to use GIS mapping as a strategic tool to assist in the building of grassroots capacity to participate in the political process. As redistricting is key in electing accountable positions, it is a turnkey for attaining social and political access.

"GIS becomes part of the visualization process - you enable people to see where they live, and what's happening, and what the relationship of demographic data is to what they already know from a narrative point of view, but don't have proof - this is all empowering. People then have confidence - that's why it's

empowering - to assert the positions they know to be true," says Sayer.

Sayer insists upon the critical importance of ongoing technical assistance; Echo, after receiving the grant from PTP, was put in touch with Brian Lipsett of Movementech in Naples, Maine. Lipsett was a friend of PTP's director, who knew that Echo was holding out for a Technical Assistance person. Even though the grant from PTP had come through, Echo refused to spend any of the funds unless they knew they had a TA person in place. They declined to buy the software or hardware and the grant money looked as if it were going to remain unused. After considering Lipsett as a technical advisor, Echo invited him to come visit the organization at its Jackson, MS headquarters, to hash out all of the issues and needs and come to an agreement.

Echo, Lipsett and PTP mapped out a hardware and software strategy to strike a balance between utility and cost effectiveness. Then Lipsett and Sayer designed and conducted the training process together. Echo trained four of its own staff members as well as two people from South Carolina in its first ArcView training - it had undertaken learning modules across the South, and had set parameters for participants, stipulating people who had to be committed to taking the knowledge back to their communities. Outside of Mississippi Echo selected only these two groups from South Carolina, each of which sent one delegate to the sessions, in order to keep this initial training smaller and more manageable. After this training, Echo began to see that GIS could be useful for environmental and educational issues as well, and not exclusively for redistricting.

The education focus - which Sayer considers multifold - is built around basic demographic data: precincts, counties, population, race, ethnicity, economic and social characteristics, and educational attainment. Echo has looked at how to manipulate the GIS software in the context closely related to the work their trainees were doing. Echo has specifically worked with these advocacy groups to enable them to visualize complex data on how their educational system is working (or not), and linked this data to charts. Showing them how to make charts and graphs from databases, and how to mix and match these into the development of visual materials has been the sessions' primary objective.

Not only did the technology "demystify," but confirmed that the expertise was not in the State or its evaluators but in the communities, who knew where everyone lived and what facts were true. In Holmes County, Mississippi, young trainees handily grasped the process, enabling them to use GIS effectively, and even brilliantly, in negotiating strategy and tactics. But technically, the organizations continued to need Echo's help. Specifically in negotiating outcomes with demographers and attorneys who represented school districts, the training helped

them to fully understand the tools and skills, even though they weren't necessarily ready to manipulate them. Being able to use the technology, even at a basic level, says Sayer, was "a very empowering process." Unable to trust many of the State's demographers, the mapping put the data in the hands of advocacy organizations who, with the help of the maps were finally able to fully understand the data themselves.

Sayer has pointed to the power of these images as enabling people to see all of the data that was available in a 7-column, 4-page table. "People obviously first look in their own district - in a map they see it instantly. It was very powerful. The governor's office, of course, complained about it." For the first time, advocates from the majority black delta regions could see that low-income white people were suffering the same burdens that they were, and vice-versa - there was a common ground. Sayer calls these "unusual alliances" - ones that never existed before with regard to education policy; part of the idea behind Echo's contemporary conferences is to visualize this collaboration.

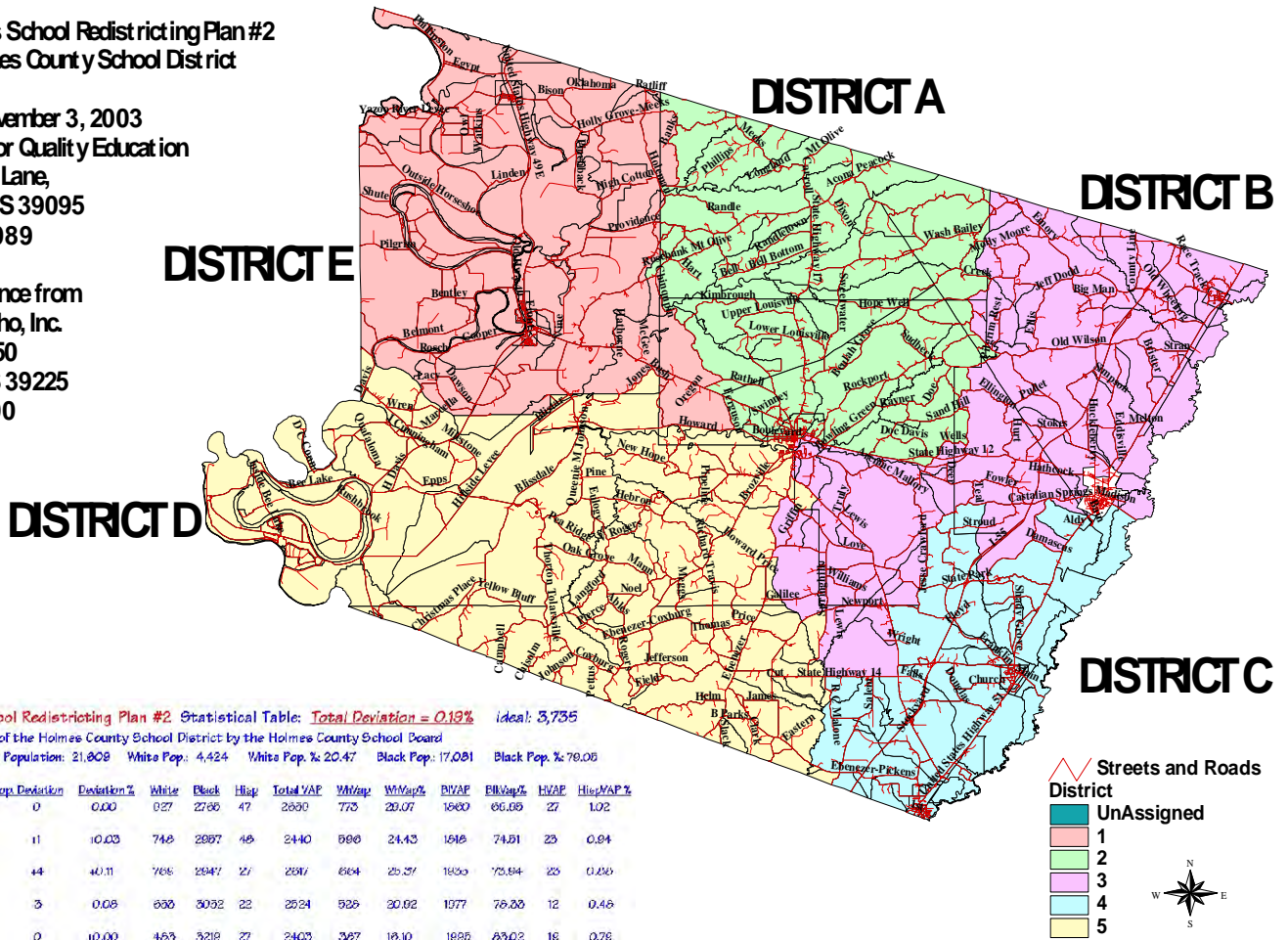
"These are knowledge weapons. Now people come armed for the first time in history - having tools to stand toe-to-toe with public officials, and to believe they know as much or more and having the confidence to assert that." In some ways this is far more important than the specific policy they're advocating - it's transformational in the specific culture. You can see that the changes that have taken place at the state level are absolutely remarkable. The community is now being treated as an active player in education policy. 5 years ago we were treated dismissively. 10 years ago we were treated with hostility. 15 years ago we were *persona non grata*. Now we're treated as players with a significant role to play because the organizing process has taken hold. And the alliance across race and class lines had been the establishment's worst nightmare. We'd have to adapt and adjust rapidly to the opportunities so we could take advantage of them rather than being too taken aback."

Sayer acknowledges that without the activists interested in the movements - redistricting, public education, environmental stewardship - the maps would be meaningless. Yet the fact that the data used in all of their projects and their trainees' projects was all publicly available speaks to the incontrovertible nature of the maps. "We're way beyond 'the rhetoric of protest,'" says Sayer. "It's not about good guys and bad guys, we're talking about what policies are needed and how we get there. It's a material shift in the center of gravity of the subject. We were fighting to get on the playing field and now they're asking us our opinions on the policies."

**Community's School Redistricting Plan #2
for the Holmes County School District**

Prepared November 3, 2003
by Citizens for Quality Education
109 Swinney Lane,
Lexington, MS 39095
662-834-0089

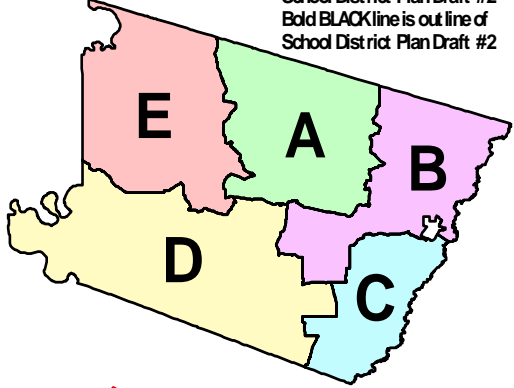
with assistance from
Southern Echo, Inc.
P.O. Box 2450
Jackson, MS 39225
601-352-1500



Community's School Redistricting Plan #2. Statistical Table: **Total Deviation = 0.19%** *Ideal: 3,735*
for the redistricting of the Holmes County School District by the Holmes County School Board
Holmes County - Total Population: 21,808 White Pop.: 4,424 White Pop. % 20.47 Black Pop.: 17,081 Black Pop. % 79.08

District	Total Pop.	Pop. Deviation	Deviation %	White	Black	Hisp.	Total VAP	W/Vap	W/Vap%	B/VAP	B/Vap%	H/VAP	H/Vap %
A	3735	0	0.00	027	2736	47	2690	775	29.07	1600	66.69	27	1.02
B	3736	11	0.03	748	2897	46	2440	806	24.43	1516	74.51	23	0.94
C	3736	44	0.11	766	2947	27	2387	804	25.27	1600	75.54	23	0.96
D	3732	3	0.08	630	3032	22	2524	526	20.02	1977	78.33	12	0.48
E	3736	0	0.00	463	3219	27	2405	387	16.10	1986	83.02	16	0.78

School District Plan Draft #2
 Bold BLACK line is outline of
 School District Plan Draft #2

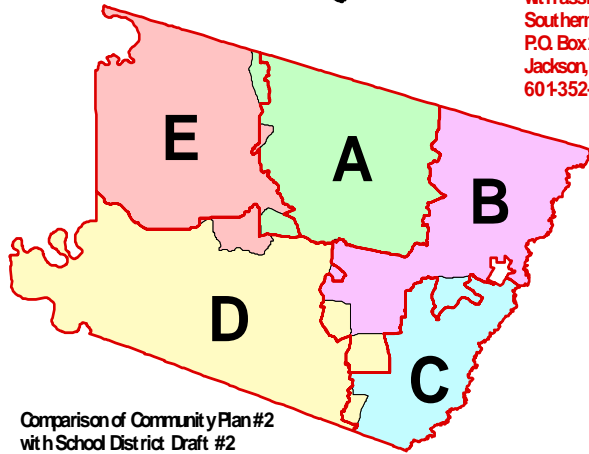
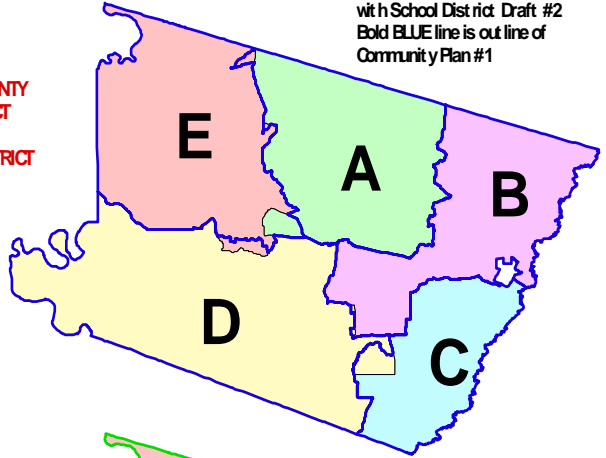


COMPARISON OF HOLMES COUNTY
 COMMUNITY'S SCHOOL DISTRICT
 PLANS #1, 2 and 3 with
 HOLMES COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
 PLAN DRAFT #2

prepared by
 Citizens for Quality Education
 109 Swinney Lane
 Lexington, MS 39095
 662-834-0089

with assistance from
 Southern Echo, Inc.
 P.O. Box 2450
 Jackson, MS 39225
 601-352-1500

Comparison of Community Plan #1
 with School District Draft #2
 Bold BLUE line is outline of
 Community Plan #1



Comparison of Community Plan #2
 with School District Draft #2
 Bold RED line is outline of
 Community Plan #2



Comparison of Community Plan #3
 with School District Draft #2
 Bold GREEN line is outline of
 Community Plan #3

