Prior to attending the 2015 NEH Mississippi Delta, many of the views I held about the Mississippi Delta were formed by my readings which detailed the Mississippi Delta’s racial struggles, its’ legacy of cotton farming and sharecropping, the stifling poverty of the Delta’ African-American population, and the Delta’s ranking at the bottom or near the bottom of every national educational poll.

 While the afore-mentioned may all be true, many publications have failed to mention or trumpet the myriad of positive changes which have taken place and continue to take place in the Mississippi Delta, in recent years. I was not aware to these changes and the impact the Mississippi Delta has had on American and World culture. These positive changes include the state of Mississippi having the largest number of African-American elected officials in the country, a very note-worthy accomplishment considering the past voting history of the Mississippi Delta.

Another accomplishment Delta Mississippians should be very proud of is that the state of Mississippi is essentially the birthplace of popular American music. Would we have “rock and roll”, “jazz”, “Rhythm and Blues”, and “Jamaican ska” without the “Blues”? Quite possibly, no! The “Blues”, which began in the cotton fields of Mississippi has allowed all of these musical genres to borrow from its’ indigenous Mississippi roots.

Ironically, the statement made by Luther Brown, former Director of the Delta Center and Director of this summer’s seminar, “What you know about Mississippi Delta but did not know you knew about the Mississippi Delta” aptly defines the enormous role the Mississippi Delta has played in building American culture, unbeknownst to most of the nation. The connection between the seminar and my role in the Dallas ISD may not be identifiable at first glance, but there is a connection between the Delta, its’ history, this summer’s seminar and my role in the Dallas ISD.

As a school administrator in the Dallas Independent School District, I truly believe and live by the core values of our school district. Those values are (1) Our main purpose is to improve student academic achievement, (2) Effective instruction makes the most difference in student academic performance, (3) There is no excuse for poor quality instruction, (4) With our help, at risk students will achieve at the same rate as non-at risk students and (5) Staff members must have a commitment to children and a commitment to the pursuit of excellence. My experience during the NEH Mississippi Delta seminar emboldened my beliefs in our district’s core values, specifically the core values, “With our help, at risk students will achieve at the same rate as non-at risk students and “Staff members have a commitment to children and a commitment to the pursuit of excellence”. Each presentation throughout the seminar exemplified one of more of these five core values on a daily basis.

 As I viewed the film, “Lalee’s Kin” and listened to Superintendent Barnes discuss his tenure in the West Tallahachie school district, I surmised that Superintendent Barnes had to have a strong commitment to at risk students and sincerely believed that the students of West Tallahachie, all at-risk students, could and would achieve at the same rate as non-at risk students. The task he accepted, improving the district’s state academic rating, presented huge obstacles that would have proven insurmountable to a less committed educator. However, his faith in himself, the district teachers, and the district’s students exemplified his commitment to all children and to the pursuit of excellence. Why else would he accept the position as Superintendent of the West Tallahachie school district, with its’ inferior physical plant and sub-standard educational financing if he did not have a commitment to at-risk students?

 As I increased my knowledge and understanding of the roles played by Holt Collier, Charley Patton (father of the blues), Fannie Lou Hamer, the Delta’s Jews and Chinese populations, the Mississippi levee break and Simeon Wright in the formation of Mississippi Delta history, as we know it, I realized the connection with the seminar’s teaching and The Dallas ISD core beliefs. In the Dallas ISD, we constantly remind teachers of the importance of effective instruction. As a participant in the Most Southern Place on Earth, I received effective instruction on a daily basis from the Delta Center for Culture and Learning and the seminar’s participants.

 My participation in this seminar has cemented my belief in my district’s core beliefs and re-energized me as I prepare and plan for the 2015/6 school year. As a firm believer in Nelson Mandela’s quote, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world", this summer seminar has been a tangible example of Mandela’s words in action.

 I would like to personally thank Luther, Lee and Rolando, all of the seminar’s presenters, the citizens of Cleveland, Ms. and all of the support staff at Delta State University for the unparalleled learning experience this past summer. It was unbelievable. I cannot imagine any seminars being more engaging, relevant and well planned. Please continue offering this seminar in future years.