

The Real Story on School Funding: Myths vs. Facts

What is the Mississippi Adequate Education Program?

In 1997, the Mississippi Legislature passed the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) in an attempt to address two primary problems: *low student achievement and inequity among school districts*. At that time, Mississippi school children were being outperformed by children in other states. Other states were outspending Mississippi on education, though most of those states faced fewer challenges.

Fast forward almost 20 years and the MAEP has only been fully funded twice, the last time being in Fiscal Year 2008. For the school year 2015-2016, the MAEP is underfunded statewide by more than \$200-million. Since it was last fully funded eight years ago, schools have been shorted \$1.7-billion.

Two decades later, Mississippi is still being outspent and outperformed by other states, and children are lacking the equitable and adequate education they need to grow to their full potential.

MYTH: The public education system is broken – no use throwing good money after bad

FACT: Public school teachers, and administrators are working harder than ever and student achievement reflects that. Mississippi's fourth-graders led the nation in improvement in reading and math on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 2009, there were more than 200 Mississippi schools rated F; today there are 24. Additionally, the number of schools rated A or B has more than doubled since 2009. The public education system is showing steady improvement, but other states are improving, as well. It's hard to catch up, particularly given that students and teachers in other states are consistently provided much more in the way of resources and funding.

MYTH: There is no correlation between funding and performance

FACT: According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the states that consistently perform the best in student achievement spend about twice per student than what Mississippi invests. There is also a direct correlation between funding and the number of teachers a district can hire, building repairs a district can make, and technology and supplies that go into each classroom – MAEP funds all of these things.

Ask superintendents what they would do with additional state funding, and what is the almost universal answer? They would invest in resources that directly affect the quality of children's education. A basic level of state funding is needed to ensure that, at the very least, the education that each child receives is adequate.

MYTH: The MAEP formula is broken

FACT: Some suggest that better performing school districts should be rewarded with additional funding. The key feature of MAEP is that it provides equitable funding so that all children have an adequate education no matter where they live. Changing the formula to provide better funding for children in affluent or successful districts is not only immoral, but would likely put Mississippi at risk for a lawsuit in federal court, the very thing MAEP was designed to avoid.

MYTH: There is no accountability for the MAEP formula

FACT: Since the inception of MAEP, school districts have adhered to stringent accountability and accreditation standards. Most recently the accountability system was revamped in 2011 and assigns a grading system to schools based on both student proficiency and rate of academic growth in multiple subjects as well as graduation rates. The new "3rd Grade Gate" testing adds another layer of accountability at the elementary school level. Some complain that MAEP funding is delivered in a lump sum to schools, but professional educators and locally-elected school board members are best suited to make decisions about how to manage local school budgets.

MYTH: The formula is too complicated

FACT: The formula provides adequate funding for a school system that educates almost 500,000 children. The formula takes into account children's needs related to basic instruction, plant maintenance, transportation, special education, gifted and talented programming, vocational training, alternative education, and impacts of poverty. The MAEP formula was developed with the help of a consulting firm that has expertise in public school funding formulas, and two previous reviews by experts found the formula to be sound. According to the 2015 Quality Counts State Report Card issued by the Education Week Research Center, Mississippi earned a "B" for "funding equity" due to the model used to distribute funds but an "F" on "school spending" due to expenditures being well below the national average.

MYTH: The funding provided to schools through MAEP does not go to the classroom

FACT: Virtually all classroom funding coming from the state is through the MAEP, including the base salary for Mississippi teachers. In the 2015-2016 school year, the MAEP allotment is \$2.26-billion. The state funds other K-12 education initiatives outside of the formula to the tune of about \$300-million. Much of that funding never reaches local public schools, such as funds to cover regulatory oversight and support provided by the Mississippi Department of Education. Other portions are earmarked for targeted programs such as the "3rd Grade Gate", early childhood education, and stipends for teacher supplies. While funding for these ancillary programs is important, it does not provide for day-to-day classroom instruction. MAEP funding provides resources schools need to hire teachers and staff, provide instructional materials, and maintain basic operations.