

Findings on Education Issues that Affect Student Achievement

High quality, not-for-profit charter schools in consistently underperforming school districts.

Mississippi's charter school law, passed in 2013 with the endorsement of The Parents' Campaign, features important quality stipulations that have earned Mississippi high marks, including a prohibition against for-profit charter schools and charter management organizations.

To date, the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board has approved four charters for location in Mississippi, all within the boundaries of the Jackson Public School District:

- Reimagine Prep Charter School, operated by RePublic Schools, opened August 2015, projected to serve up to 440 students in grades 5-8 upon full implementation
- Midtown Public Charter School, operated by Midtown Partners, opened September 2015, projected to serve up to 224 students in grades 5-8 upon full implementation
- Joel E. Smilow Prep Charter School, operated by RePublic Schools, will open August 2016, projected to serve up to 517 students in grades 5-8 upon full implementation
- Joel E. Smilow Collegiate Charter School, operated by RePublic Schools, will open August 2017, projected to serve up to 942 students in grades K-8 upon full implementation

Strong academic standards. Mississippi in recent years has focused on moving the achievement of our students in line with that of their peers in other states. Mississippi children are as bright and capable as the children in any other state, and should, therefore, be held to similar expectations. To reach their potential, our students need great teaching based on strong academic standards.

The current Mississippi College and Career Ready Standards, adopted in 2010, recently were submitted to the public for comments which were reviewed by a committee of in-state educators, parents, and university faculty. Final changes will be presented to the State Board of Education for adoption.

Academic standards define what students are expected to learn at each grade level to graduate ready for success in college and career. How the standards are taught (the curriculum or methods and materials used) is decided at the local level by school districts, local school boards, principals, and teachers.

Resources and accountability for school districts. Mississippi students and teachers face more challenges than those in any other state due to persistent poverty and low educational attainment which hinder the progress of families and communities. To improve education in our state, all Mississippi children need rigorous and rich course offerings, well-trained teachers, reasonable class sizes, sufficient books and technology, and safe buildings and buses. This can only be achieved with an adequate investment of state funding.

A 2014 study by The Parents' Campaign Research and Education Fund found that Mississippi school districts spent more on teacher salaries and benefits alone than the total amount appropriated through the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), the school funding mechanism outlined in state law. Current MAEP funding is \$201-million below what the law requires. When school districts do not receive enough state funding to pay teacher salaries, let alone other operational costs, local taxpayers must make up the shortfall.

The share of the state budget appropriated to public schools has shrunk through the years and is now at a historic low of 21 percent. Since 2008, the last time public schools were fully funded according to state law, funding for pre-k through 12th grade education in Mississippi has grown just 2.47 percent while the rest of the state budget has grown 47.64 percent. Cumulative inflation in that time has been 15 percent, giving public schools significantly less purchasing power today than they had seven years ago.

Public schools are held to rigorous standards with strong, public accountability for the quality of education they provide, making public education indisputably the state agency with the highest level of transparency and accountability.

High quality early childhood education. Research shows that when children are provided high quality early childhood experiences they have higher academic achievement, they are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to attend college, and they are older when their first child is born. Mississippi administered a kindergarten-readiness assessment to all kindergartners for the first time in the fall of 2014. Two-thirds of Mississippi kindergartners scored below the benchmark associated with 70 percent mastery of the assessed early literacy skills. A study of children in Mississippi's Reading First Schools showed that a full 60 percent of children who entered those programs had the vocabulary of a 1- or 2-year-old child, demonstrating a significant deficit in high quality early learning experiences.

Mississippi currently invests a total of \$6-million annually in pre-kindergarten programs, which is divided between two programs: \$3-million for Early Learning Collaborative programs, through which private entities are paired with Head Start or public school districts, and \$3-million for Mississippi Building Blocks, a program launched by business leaders that provides resources and expertise to improve the quality of education programming in private child care facilities. Mississippi's investment in early learning is well below the early childhood investment made by other states and provides high quality early learning for only 4 percent of Mississippi's four-year-olds.

Appointed superintendents. School leadership is among the most important factors in student achievement. Great superintendents hire great principals who hire and retain great teachers – the key to improving student achievement. Great school leaders create excellent learning environments, ensure alignment of the curriculum throughout the entire school system, and provide teachers sufficient planning and collaboration time.

Electing superintendents limits the pool of candidates to those who live within the school district and who are willing to wage a political campaign. We believe it is in the best interests of Mississippi children for school superintendents to be appointed (hired) by the local school board, ensuring the broadest possible search for an excellent school leader.

Privatization of public education. Vouchers, for-profit charter schools, virtual charter schools, or other privatization schemes are a means of diverting public school dollars to private schools or corporate shareholders. States that have experimented with shifting taxpayer dollars to private schools or corporate interests (usually headquartered in other states) have had dismal results:

- For-profit and virtual charter schools rank among the worst performing of all schools nationally in both the traditional and charter sectors (Mississippi's law prohibits for-profit charter schools)
- Academic gains for students using vouchers to attend private schools have been no better than, and sometimes worse than, the gains for comparable students in public schools, despite voucher schools being allowed to pick and choose their students, while public schools accept every child
- In Florida's special needs voucher program, "storefront" schools received publicly funded vouchers with no corresponding public accountability, providing substandard care to the state's most vulnerable children while defrauding taxpayers of millions of dollars

In 2015, the Mississippi Legislature passed a voucher bill that provides state funding to pay tuition for children with special needs to attend private schools, though the private voucher schools are not required to provide special education services and there are no provisions to allow the state to monitor the quality of education provided the voucher students.

As of December 2015, 251 students had been approved for the vouchers, called "Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs)," but less than half of them appear to be using the ESA. Just 107 of those awarded vouchers requested first quarter reimbursements for tuition or other allowable costs. The state director of special education reported to the State Board of Education that many of the parents whose children were approved for vouchers notified the Department of Education that they were unable to find private schools that would accept their children. If reimbursements continue at the same rate through the end of the fiscal year, the special needs voucher program will use roughly \$764,910 of the \$3-million appropriated for the first year, with administrative costs making up nearly a quarter (\$180,000) of the expenditures.

Public school special education programs, which serve more than 50,000 children statewide, are underfunded by \$12-million this year, placing a significant burden on local districts to make up the shortfall.