

**FIRST-PERSON COLUMN**

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**Protecting The Integrity Of The Classroom  
By Dr. Tom Burnham,  
State Superintendent of Education**

Learning is a powerful word. The time our children spend engaged in quality learning greatly increases their opportunities to become successful in life. Current Mississippi law requires children to receive a minimum of 180 instructional days. We should be proud of the fact that Mississippi is among a majority of states, 30 to be exact, which set the bar at a minimum of 180 days for classroom instruction.

We are in a global economy. Not only are our children competing against children from other states, they are competing against children from all over the world. Are our children competing on a level playing field? According to Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), international students receive an average of 193 school days per year – 13 more days than students in the United States, who are required to attend school an average of 180 days each year. Students in Korea, Japan and China receive 225, 223 and 221 instructional days, respectively, in a school year. Only Canada is second to the United States in offering a lower number of instructional days for their students at 188 – more than Mississippi.

Also according to TIMSS, the average number of hours of instruction per year received by Chinese students is 1,374 compared to 1,061 for American students. In a report by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), three states, South Carolina, Louisiana and Arizona, have enacted laws since 2000 to increase the minimum number of instructional days in the school year. Only two states and a commonwealth have fewer than 174 days.

I am appreciative to the Mississippi Legislature for identifying funding solutions to help K-12 education during this difficult economy and I also respect the Legislature for the tough decisions they are making. At the same time, I am concerned about the conflicting messages that the education community is sending when we encourage legislators to reduce the number of instructional days in order to help balance local district budgets. Some superintendents have requested the flexibility to furlough all employees on non-instructional days to reduce both personnel and operational expenses. I support superintendents and school boards having this flexibility, but only in the event of an extreme financial emergency. While professional development opportunities are important for our teachers, it is more important that our students have quality instructional time with their teachers.

Budgets are tight in Mississippi – just as they are in other states across the country. However, now is not the time to shortchange our students. In the worst of budget times, we must do all that we can to protect the integrity of the classroom. Therefore, I cannot support anything less than the current minimum requirement of 180 days of student classroom instruction. Even in these difficult economic times, we must not defer to solutions that reduce the opportunities for student learning. We know that the two most important factors in student achievement are quality teachers in the classroom and quality time on task.

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