September 14, 2018

Mr. Alan Burrow, Director
Office of District and School Performance
Mississippi Department of Education
P.O. Box 771
Jackson, MS 39205-0771

Dear Mr. Burrow,

Please accept the following public comments regarding revisions in the business rules of the Mississippi Statewide Accountability System to reset the baseline scores for schools with Grade 12 effective for school year 2017-2018.

1. A seemingly entrenched pattern of resetting cut scores has compromised the validity of the accountability system in the minds of the public.

In 2016, the MDE and the State Board of Education publicly expressed an intent to use percentiles only to determine cut scores for the 2015-2016 year, after which the actual scores would remain in place as a measurable target toward which schools could aim. In 2017, that commitment was broken; baseline scores were reset and percentile rankings were re-imposed on schools and districts. Now, in 2018, schools with a 12th grade face a third year of forced percentile rankings, in which only 10 percent of schools will be allowed to receive an A rating and 14 percent will be required to receive an F rating.

Because the State Board of Education reset scores last year when it should not have done so, it now faces two bad options for schools with a 12th grade. Neither of those options offers an accurate reflection of what schools have accomplished.

Recommendation for 2017-2018 accountability ratings: Schools with a 12th grade should be evaluated on actual progress made over the last two years; MDE should determine a fair process for recognizing that progress.

2. Continuing to insist on the use of arbitrary percentile rankings – a practice that inflicts a failing rating on 14 percent of schools, regardless of how schools as a whole perform – is an illogical method of grading schools and districts that parents and educators alike find abhorrent. The Parents’ Campaign has repeatedly called out the unfairness of percentile rankings, noting that the State Board’s decision to ensure a smaller number of A-rated schools and districts (10 percent) than F-rated schools and districts (14 percent) is an unmistakable sign of an inherently unjust system. Furthermore, percentile rankings encourage competition, rather than collegiality, among schools. If only a limited number of
schools can be rated A, the motivation to work together to ensure that ALL schools rise to the highest level is eliminated.

The entrenched pattern of resetting scores, as mentioned above, means that this percentile ranking practice has been employed year after year. We believe the use of percentile rankings falls outside the bounds of ethical treatment of public schools and should be abolished.

Recommendation: Any time cut scores must be reset – this year or in the future – a fair and just system of determining baseline score targets for A-F ratings should be established.

The Parents’ Campaign believes that public school children, their parents, and our state are best served by an accountability system that reflects high standards and that provides an accurate, not arbitrary, measure of the quality of education being provided in Mississippi schools.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Regards,

Nancy Loome
Executive Director