Fast Facts about Education in Mississippi

Mississippi is considered "business friendly" in almost every regard - except for our education system, which is a significant disadvantage in economic development. Beacon Hill Institute’s 16th annual State Competitiveness Report ranks Mississippi 25th in fiscal policy, but 45th overall based on measures of human capital, with low rankings in high school and college attainment, fourth grade math proficiency, skilled labor, employment rates, and health of population. Likewise, Forbes’ Best States for Business ranks Mississippi 19th in cost of doing business but near the bottom (44th) overall due to poor rankings associated with education of the workforce.

Student Achievement

Mississippi is no longer at the bottom in national test scores in any tested grade or subject. In fact, Mississippi students outperform their true peers* in most states and in most tested subjects on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, the Nation's Report Card). But Mississippi’s challenges exceed those in every other state, and considerable improvement still is needed if Mississippi is ever to meet her potential in terms of prosperity, economic development, and quality of life. The good news: state test scores have improved dramatically over the last two decades.

*Mississippi students in poverty compared to other states’ students in poverty and MS non-poor students compared to other states’ non-poor students, etc.

Achievement: What Works in Other Countries

According to eSchool News, Finland, Ontario, and Singapore have attained the highest and most equitable performance on international assessments. Five traits that contribute to their success are:

- A systemic, comprehensive approach to education.
- Extremely selective entry into teacher education programs. Finland selects just one of every 10 teacher education applicants; Singapore traditionally selects future teachers from the top third of high school classes; and the teaching profession is highly competitive in Ontario where graduate level preparation is the norm.
- Making teaching an attractive career choice – well-paid, highly respected educators stay in the profession instead of leaving for higher paying jobs in other sectors.
- Investment in continuous learning - all three jurisdictions provide considerable time for teachers to work collaboratively and learn together during the regular school schedule - as much as five times what U.S. teachers receive.
- Proactive recruitment and development of high quality leadership - school leaders are expected to be instructional leaders. They are expected to know curriculum and teaching intimately and be able to provide guidance and support to teachers.

Resources/Funding

State funding for Mississippi schools is determined by the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), passed into law in 1997. Learn more about the MAEP on our website at www.msparentscampaign.org.

The legislature has voted to comply with this law and fully fund the MAEP formula only four times since 1997. During the recession, in fiscal years 2009 and 2010, school budgets were reduced mid-year, so schools have only received full funding twice, in fiscal years 2004 and 2008. For the 2019-2020 school year, the MAEP is underfunded statewide by $224-million. Since it was last fully funded in 2008, schools have been shorted $2.6-billion. You can find the under-funding amounts for each school district on our website.

Access to adequate resources remains a critical issue for Mississippi students, with our neighboring states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee outspending Mississippi by an average of more than $1,000
per student. Even if the MAEP were fully funded, Mississippi’s public school funding would lag that of our neighboring states by more than $600 per student.

Mississippi ranks 47th of 51 (all states and D.C.) and last among southeastern states in per student funding, and the percent of Mississippi's state budget allocated to public schools has shrunk significantly since 2008.

From Fiscal Year 2008 to Fiscal Year 2019, the total state budget grew by 26% while the public school budget (pre-k through grade 12) grew by only 2.4%.

Mississippi ranks 50th in the nation in per capita income (US Bureau of Economic Analysis). Nearly 28% of Mississippi children live in poverty, and more than 26% of Mississippi children live in extreme poverty. Research has shown consistently that at least 40% more in resources is required to bring children in poverty to the same level of achievement as children in non-poverty homes.

Mississippi’s own experience shows that adequate school funding is correlated with achievement. Following full funding of the MAEP in 2008 and near-full funding in 2009, Mississippi students had the highest gains in fourth grade reading in the nation.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the states that consistently perform the best in student achievement spend 67% more per student than Mississippi invests. The top five states in achievement rankings spend an average of $14,538 per student, compared to Mississippi’s $8,692.

**Mississippi Teachers**

Mississippi ranks 50th of 50 states in average teacher salary, lagging our neighboring states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee by an average of $6,588 (this includes the meager pay raise passed in the 2019 Legislative Session). The vast discrepancy between teacher salaries in our state and those in neighboring states has exacerbated our teacher shortage crisis. Teachers in border counties drive across the state line to teach and earn up to $7,800 more per year.

Countries with the highest student achievement rankings typically have very selective teacher education programs, selecting just one of every eight or ten applicants. These same countries also compensate teachers on a level that is comparable to the compensation paid doctors, engineers, attorneys, and other professionals.

Mississippi has for years had a significant teacher shortage, as evidenced by the dramatic decrease in the number of teacher licenses issued annually. The number of teacher licenses issued by the Mississippi Department of Education dropped from 3,447 in 2013 to 1,624 in 2018. Thousands of Mississippi children are taught all year by long-term substitute teachers, many of whom lack certification.

More than 50% of Mississippi teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years of teaching. Among the reasons most often cited are stress related to an overly punitive and constantly changing accountability model, over-testing of students, and a perceived hostility toward public education on the part of state elected officials.

**School Leadership**

School leadership (principals, superintendents, school boards) is among the most important factors in student achievement. Excellent schools have excellent leaders, and excellent leaders yield excellent schools. *(Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning, The Wallace Foundation)*

Great superintendents hire great principals who hire and retain great teachers - the key to improving student achievement.

The administrative staff in a school building serves a critical role in curriculum and instructional leadership, implementing legislatively-mandated programs and accountability measures, coordinating student assessments and interventions, and managing student discipline and parent engagement.

Effective principals are instructional leaders. They ensure that teachers are well placed to optimize their strengths, and they help teachers identify weaknesses and address them through appropriate, targeted, professional development. 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. Mississippi has a significant shortage of school administrators.
Early Childhood Education

In 2013, the Mississippi Legislature for the first time dedicated state funding to pre-kindergarten programs. Mississippi’s state funding for early learning programs now totals $6.7-million annually, far below the early learning commitment of most states, providing high-quality early learning for 3,200, or 8%, of Mississippi’s 38,938 four-year-olds.

Almost two-thirds of Mississippi kindergartners score below the benchmark associated with 70% mastery of the assessed early literacy skills on the kindergarten-readiness assessment administered to all kindergartners each fall, underscoring the need for better access to high quality pre-kindergarten programs. On average, students who attended public or private pre-k programs have scored above the 530 target score that indicates kindergarten readiness. (Mississippi Department of Education Superintendent’s Annual Report)

Research has shown that when children are provided high quality early childhood experiences...

- They have higher cognitive test scores from the toddler years to age 21
- Their academic achievement in reading and math is higher from primary grades through young adulthood
- They complete more years of education and are more likely to attend a four-year college
- They are older, on average, when their first child is born

Source: The Abecedarian Project; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Mississippi’s College- and Career-Readiness Standards call for reading fluency by the end of the kindergarten year. High-quality early childhood education can help children develop the pre-literacy skills they will need to read fluently by the end of kindergarten.

Literacy-Based Promotion Act

The Literacy-Based Promotion Act, also known as the “Third Grade Gate,” was passed by lawmakers during the 2013 Legislative Session. This law requires screening of all K-3rd grade students to identify reading deficiencies and requires that districts provide intensive reading instruction for those students who have deficiencies. It also requires the retention of any student who does not meet the cut score on a summative reading assessment at the end of third grade, unless the student has already been retained, is an English Language Learner who has received less than two years of instruction in English, or has disabilities that exempt the student from the statewide assessment program. Mississippi's law omits important exemptions included in similar laws in other states with successful programs, and the cut score required for passage of the test was raised significantly this year. Students who do not pass the reading test the first time have two additional opportunities to take and pass it.

The Legislature has provided $15-million annually to the Mississippi Department of Education to employ reading coaches who work part-time in the lowest performing schools and to provide literacy training to teachers in kindergarten through grade three, both of which have been instrumental in improving reading scores. Additional funding is needed to provide literacy coaches in all schools.

Privatization of Public Education

Corporate interests and those seeking to privatize public education have pushed a variety of profit-driven reforms, including for-profit and virtual charter schools and state-funded vouchers to pay tuition at private and for-profit schools. For-profit and virtual charter schools rank among the lowest performing of all schools in both the traditional and charter sectors. The most recent research on the academic impact of private school vouchers finds that students utilizing vouchers experience significant losses in achievement (Thomas B Fordham Institute 2016, University of Arkansas 2019, National Bureau of Economic Research 2015, Center for Tax and Budget Accountability 2015, Florida State University 2015). Prior research showed that gains in achievement were about the same for low income students receiving vouchers as they were for comparable public school students. (Center on Education Policy 2011, University of Arkansas and Georgetown University 2010, Indiana University 2006).

In Louisiana, students using vouchers to attend private schools were 24-50% more likely to score below Basic (failing) in the four tested subjects than comparable students in public schools. By the end of year four of
Louisiana’s voucher program, voucher students “performed noticeably worse on state assessments than their control group counterparts.” (University of Arkansas 2019)

Long-term studies of voucher programs in Milwaukee, the oldest school choice/voucher program in the U.S., Cleveland, and the District of Columbia found “no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers.”

Milwaukee, which introduced vouchers in 1990 and by 2014 provided them to 25,000 students annually, requires its voucher students to take the same Wisconsin state tests used in the public schools. This allows a comparison of private school voucher students and public school students, all of whom reside within the city of Milwaukee. Performance results from the 2013-2014 school year showed slightly lower proficiency rates for voucher students in both math and reading as compared to their public school peers. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2014)

Ten years of longitudinal data on Ohio’s EdChoice voucher program found persistently lower achievement for voucher students relative to public school peers in both math and English language arts, with the greatest disparity in math. (Thomas B. Fordham Institute July 2016)

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. No accountability measures that would allow the state to monitor the quality of education provided the voucher students were included in the bill.

Records requests and a Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) investigation of Mississippi’s voucher program revealed:

- Since the program’s implementation in 2015, 43% of funds appropriated have not been spent
- As of December 2018, of 776 vouchers assigned, only 346 were used. Reasons per parents:
  - Students were denied admission to private schools
  - Unable to find a private school that met their child’s needs
  - Unable to afford tuition/fee balance charged by voucher schools
- Of 33 private voucher schools that responded to PEER’s request for information*, 22 rely on public schools to provide special education services to their private school students
- Misuse of funds by voucher recipients, including:
  - $11,000 to a parent for “teaching” with no evidence the child attended an eligible school
  - $4,286 for uncertified “tutoring”
  - $390 to a preschool for “Mother’s Day Out”
- The program lacks the accountability structure needed to ensure that:
  - Nonpublic schools enrolling voucher students meet statutory requirements
  - Students with disabilities are receiving the services they need and progressing toward their special needs goals

*PEER requested information from 101 private schools that received public funds through the voucher program; only 33 responded.

**Charter Schools**

The most extensive study of charter schools (National Charter School Study, CREDO, released June 2013) found that:

- 25% of charters performed better in reading than their traditional public school counterparts; 29% of charters performed better in math
- 19% performed worse in reading than their traditional public school counterparts; 31% of charters performed worse in math
- 56% performed the same in reading as their traditional public school counterparts; 40% of charters performed the same in math

Another national CREDO study, released in January 2013, revealed the value of due diligence by charter school authorizers during the approval process and the importance of early identification of underperforming schools. The study also found evidence that slow growing charter schools - opening one grade at a time - produce superior results to faster growing schools.
Charter schools performed relatively poorly when:

- They competed with high performing traditional public schools
  - These charter schools yielded less academic growth than their traditional public school counterparts while diminishing the traditional schools’ resources
- They were cyber-based
- They focused on corporate profits rather than education
- They served multiple grade spans

A number of chartering organizations have very good track records and have been successful in moving low-achieving students who had been in low-achieving schools to higher levels of achievement. As with traditional public schools, the success of these organizations is almost universally due to excellent leadership.

Charter schools typically have not done well when attempting to compete with successful traditional public schools. Test scores of students moving from successful traditional schools into charter schools have, on average, remained equal to or dropped below those of their traditional public school peers.

Successful charter schools have, on average, significantly higher administrative costs than do their traditional public school counterparts. A study by Gary Miron and Jessica Urschel of Western Michigan University (Equal or Fair? A Study of Revenues and Expenditures in American Charter Schools) confirmed previous studies. Some successful charter schools attribute their success, in part, to the fact that they use non-instructional staff to take care of all non-teaching, or administrative, functions, allowing teachers to spend almost all of their time teaching and planning for instruction. Such administrative functions include student discipline, family outreach (parent instruction), data analysis, reporting, etc.

The Mississippi Legislature passed a charter school law in 2013 that allows charter schools to locate without local board approval in school districts rated D or F. Students in school districts rated C or lower may attend a charter school located in another school district. The statute established the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board, which is tasked with awarding charters to applicants and overseeing charter schools. Mississippi law sets high standards that must be met in order for a charter application to gain approval, prohibits for-profit management of charter schools, and provides charter schools the same funding and resources that are provided to Mississippi’s traditional public schools.

Because of these high standards, only eight charters have been granted since 2015, with the schools most recently approved slated to open in the 2020-2021 school year. The five charter schools with tested grades that have opened to date have struggled with achievement, with one school rated a C, two rated D, and one rated F according to Mississippi’s A through F Statewide Accountability System.

**School District Consolidation**

Mississippi has an average of 3,383 students per school district, which ranks our state 29th of 50 in the number of school districts per enrolled student.

According to the Center for Policy Research (Does School Consolidation Cut Costs?, 2001), consolidation of very small school districts is likely to yield a cost savings, while combining large districts will likely increase costs. The optimal size for a school district in terms of efficiency is around 2,000 students. Combining school districts typically yields the following cost savings:

- Combining two 300-student districts saves 20%
- Combining two 900-student districts saves 7-9%
- Combining two 1,500-student districts yields no cost savings
- A combined 3,000+ student school district yields increased costs

Consolidation of small school districts can cut costs at the local level; however, it will not reduce state funding requirements. The Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) is based on per-pupil funding, and the base student cost will follow the student, regardless of the number of school districts.

Consolidation of very small school districts can yield an increase in course offerings and additional opportunities for students.