



MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Transforming Mississippi Public Education

Child-centered K–12 Reform

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Academic standards among Mississippi public schools are poor, and no significant improvement has been documented with validity. A number of claims that there has been an improvement lack methodological rigor.
- The problem in K–12 education is structural, not merely a lack of money. Transformative, systemic reforms are needed, rather than hosing further dollars at an inefficient system.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened awareness of the problem, so now is an opportune time for reform.
- Three crucial reforms are overdue and realistically attainable:
 - Open enrollment
 - Cap administration costs of school districts
 - Multiple charter school authorizer boards
- Additional policy reforms:
 - High, medium, or low-performing district opportunities
 - Full reciprocity for out-of-state credentialing
 - Adoption of valid and reliable unbiased assessment measures
 - Elimination of public funding for private organizations with personal agendas
- Further changes are needed and do not require legislative intervention:
 - Participation in local school boards
 - Recruitment of teachers
 - Community professionals initiated/led exploring clubs
 - Faith-based lunch partners in local public schools

HISTORICAL UNDERPERFORMANCE AND IMPROVEMENT?

Mississippi ranks second to *last* among the states and D.C. in life expectancy,¹ has the second *highest* rate of incarceration,² and ranks dead *last* among all states in median household income at \$45,000.³

High-quality education could be the lifeline for future generations to overcome these challenges.

However, Stanford’s Dr. Eric Hanushek has estimated that the current cohort of K–12 students has lost up to nine percent of their future lifetime earnings owing to pandemic learning loss. The estimates are worse for disadvantaged students—potentially a 13 percent loss in lifetime income.⁴

Moreover, Mississippi has a history of education underperformance. According to the Legatum Institute, in 2021, Mississippi ranked 47th out of 50 states in overall education along a broad range of output measures, such as math and reading scores, high school graduation, and college attainment. The state had some of the worst outcomes in primary and secondary education in America.⁵

A number of school districts within Mississippi have underperformed for many years and with consistently poor grades; nevertheless, taxpayers have had little input and less choice in making any changes to improve the quality of education. The Jackson Public School District and Humphreys County School District are just two examples of school systems—and the children who attend them—that languish for years before the state entertains a takeover.⁶

“Things are getting better” is an oft-repeated claim by defenders of the status quo. Are they? And if so, is the change fast enough for the children within the system?

¹ CDC. “National Vital Statistics Report.” cdc.gov. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr70/nvsr70-1-508.pdf>

² The Sentencing Project. “State-by-State Data | The Sentencing Project.” Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/#map>

³ US Census Bureau. “2019 Median Household Income in the United States.” census.gov, September 17, 2020. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2019-median-household-income.html>

⁴ Hanushek, E. (2021, February 26). “Research Roundup #1: The Economic Impacts of Learning Losses with Dr. Eric Hanushek – ACE Scholarships.” Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://act.acescholarships.org/the-economic-impacts-of-learning-losses-with-dr-eric-hanushek/>

⁵ Legatum Institute. “US Prosperity Index.” Accessed January 24, 2022, from https://legatuminstitute-uspiwebsite-2.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/state-profiles/Mississippi_profile_USPI_2021.pdf

⁶ “Seven School Districts at Risk of State Takeover.” *Mississippi Today*, October 19, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/MSTODAYnews/>; <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/10/19/six-school-districts-risk-state-takeover/>

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) scores purported to show improvements in education outcomes since 2016. For example, in 2016, just under 10 percent of students achieved an A grade MAAP score. By 2019, the figure had increased to 21 percent.
- Other assessments purported to show a pre-COVID improvement, too. The Quality Counts report in Education Week, for example, claimed that the Mississippi K–12 rankings improved from 50th in 2013 to 35th in 2021.⁷
- According to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), graduation rates are rising and dropout rates falling.

Such claims of improvement should be treated with skepticism.

MAAP scores are arbitrary and prone to grade inflation, as the cut scores determining a grade from A to F are set internally by MDE. Accordingly, their curve shows that the number of A/B/C schools has increased; however, if we use an external measure of student achievement in Mississippi, such as the American College Test (ACT) scores, we find no evidence of improved performance, even before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many schools in the state.

According to the annual results published by the MDE Office of Assessment, the ACT averages for Mississippi students suggest a decline in performance over the period 2016–2021,⁸ with the average falling from 18.3 to 17.3. The state superintendent acknowledges the decline, blaming it on more students being tested; however, their report indicates a decline in the number of students being tested from 29,852 to 27,972. Far from improving, the ACT results suggest that even before the pandemic, Mississippi education standards were steadily falling from 2016 to 2019.

⁷ Center, EdWeek Research. “Map: A-F Grades, Rankings for States on School Quality.” *Education Week*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-a-f-grades-rankings-for-states-on-school-quality/2021/09>

⁸ Mississippi Department of Education. “Student Assessment | The Mississippi Department of Education.” “Home | The Mississippi Department of Education.” Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.mdek12.org/OPR/Reporting/Assessment>

The Quality Counts report data should be closely reviewed to understand the full story. In truth, any “gains” were assumed by a change of ranking or standing when compared with other states. Mississippi made no significant gains; instead, several other states declined at a higher rate, causing them to fall behind in their rankings. In other words, the claims of improvement in Mississippi were attributable to what some might call “dumb luck” because of the loss of others rather than because of any improvement of our own.

Just as the MAAP scores are unreliable, the way in which graduation rates are measured in Mississippi has also changed, meaning that supposed improvements might tell us more about the methodology used to measure the outcomes than about how students are actually performing. Previously, graduation rates were calculated by measuring the percentage of students that entered high school at Grade 9 and then successfully graduated from Grade 12 over four years. Today, graduation rates measure how many students entering Grade 12 complete Grade 12. It is not measuring quite the same thing as before.

The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy released a report in 2004 that documented some significant deficits related to attrition and graduation in Mississippi compared with the rest of the country.⁹ The report showed that in 2000, Mississippi was ranked the 10th highest state in attrition, with 14.4 percent of Grade 9 students being retained or dropping out before Grade 10. From 1989 to 2001, Mississippi graduation rates fluctuated in the low 60 percent range and the percentage of Grade 9 students graduating on time steadily fell from 68 percent to 57 percent.

According to the most recent NAEP (Nation’s Report Card) data, 24 percent of Mississippi’s Grade 8 students scored proficient or better in math and 25 percent scored proficient or better in reading.¹⁰ Both are well under the national average and 46th among the states.¹¹

We must realize that Mississippi public school expectations are substandard and unacceptable. Claims that education standards in Mississippi are rising are attributable more to wishful thinking on the part of

⁹ The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy. “The Education Pipeline in the United States 1970-2000.” Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.bc.edu/research/nbetpp/statements/nbr3.pdf>

¹⁰ “State Profiles.” *NAEP Report Cards - Home*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/MS?cti=PgTab_Findings&chort=2&sub=RED&sj=MS&fs=Grade&st=AP&year=2019R3&sg=Gender%3A+Male+vs.+Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single+Year&sfj=NP

¹¹ Ibid.

education bureaucrats than to any real improvements in the classrooms. Parents and their children will take little comfort with “improvements” like these. They urgently need transformative policy solutions that will provide immediate relief.

UNDERFUNDING IS NOT THE PROBLEM

A relentless, decades-long campaign by teachers’ unions has perpetuated the narrative that poor education outcomes are attributable to underfunding. This belief is widely held across the country. However, facts suggest that the problem is rather a systemic failure to effectively spend money and judiciously fund academic programs that elevate standards, not simply a lack of spending. For example, about 44 percent of American classrooms purchase Fountas and Pinnell reading programs, which fail to meet the basic science of reading standards. Nevertheless, administrators continue to select and champion these programs despite clear evidence that they do not work for many children.¹² School leaders can and will persist in bad educational practices until they face competitive pressure.

Per pupil spending has increased in Mississippi over the last fifty years. *USAFacts* provides data reflecting the per pupil spending by state for US education in each decade from 1970 to 2017.¹³ The data document a steady increase in spending at a rate that significantly moved Mississippi ahead in ranking when compared with the national average:

- In 1970, MS averaged \$456.74 per pupil—60 percent of the US average of \$751.21.
- In 2017, MS averaged \$8754.56 per pupil—71 percent of the US average of \$12,257.64.

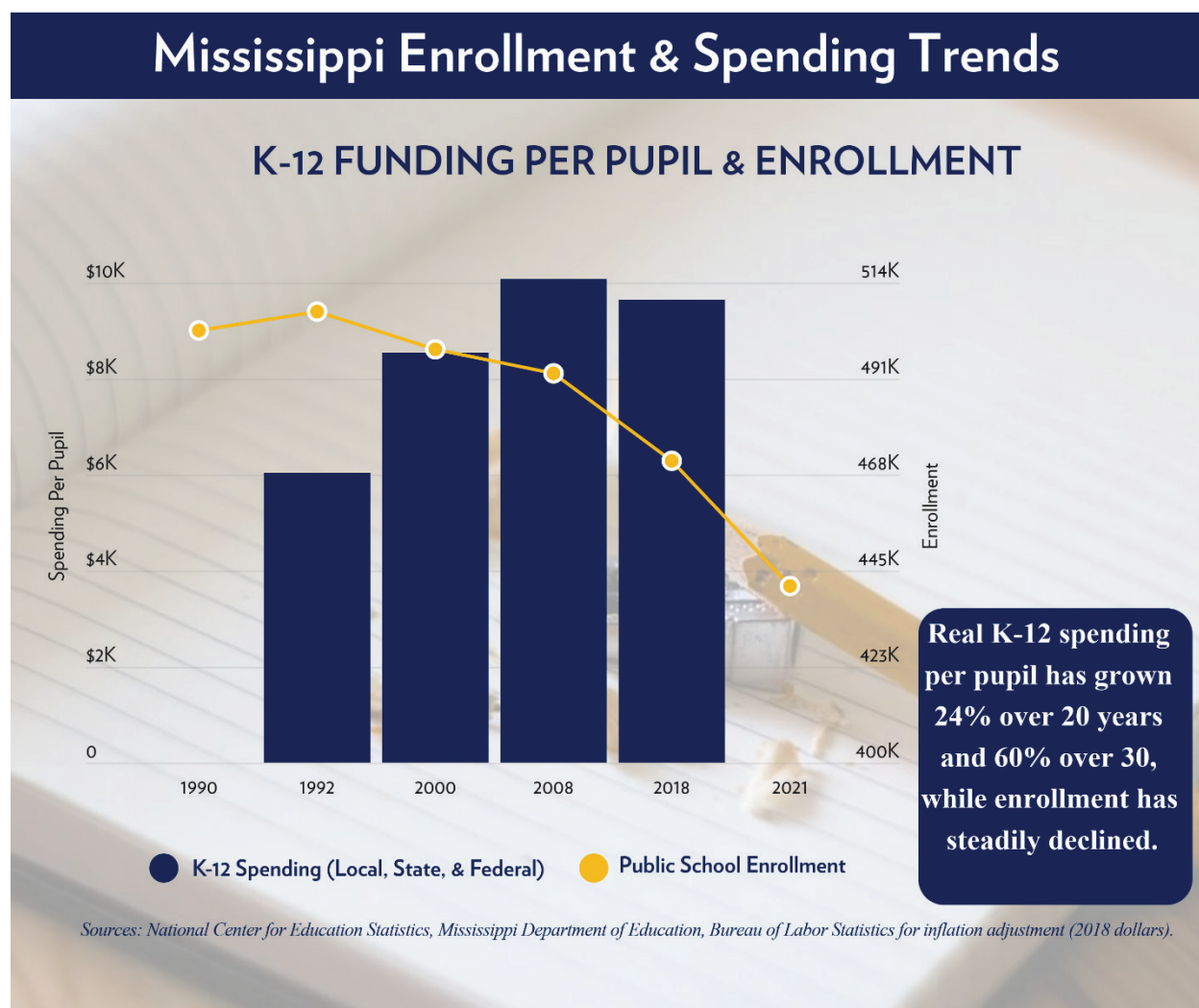
In 2021, US News compiled the following academic metrics for Mississippi:

- 49th in college readiness
- 32nd in high school graduation

¹² “Fountas & Pinnell Classroom (2020) - Series Overview.” *EdReports*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.edreports.org/reports/overview/fountas-pinnell-classroom-2020>

¹³ “Spending per Student in K-12 Public Schools.” *USAFacts*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/education/k-12-education/spending-per-student-in-k-12-public-schools/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=ND-StatsData&gclid=Cj0KCQiAIMCOBhCZARIsANLid6YmBUQGkBOS1OvMGppIfe4a6CEKVdHwC__i-cHuG6RMcylzow5oXiEaAkQIEALw_wcB

- 43rd in NAEP math scores
- 45th in NAEP reading scores
- 4th in preschool enrollment¹⁴



However, teacher salaries have not increased at a comparable rate.¹⁵

¹⁴ US News. "Pre-K - 12 Rankings." Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education/prek-12>

¹⁵ "Average Public School Teacher Salary." *USAFacts*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/education/k-12-education/public-school-teacher-salary-average/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=ND-StatsData&gclid=Cj0KCQiAIMCOBhCZARIsANLid6a0rq2T6MliaiG8m3KboT7sbkNQ_ygDp8JIYTXPeR9Q31T087d-Dt8aAt5_EALw_wcB

- In 1970, MS teacher salaries averaged \$5,789.00—67 percent of the US average of \$8,626.00.
- In 2017, MS teacher salaries averaged \$42,925.00—72 percent of the US average of \$59,539.00.

Conversely, administrative salaries have ranged significantly higher than those of teachers.

In 2021, MS superintendent salaries averaged \$120,000¹⁶—72 percent of the US average of \$75,500.00.¹⁷

The Mississippi Center for Public Policy released the *Fat Cat* Report in August 2021 that included several findings directly related to education in the state.¹⁸

1. MS has some of the highest paid officials, including the State Superintendent of Education.
2. Almost half of the top fifty public salaries in MS are of the local superintendents.
3. Some of the highest paid superintendents are in the lowest performing districts.
4. Superintendents are paid, on average, nearly three times the salaries of teachers.

The clear conclusion is that Mississippi prioritizes administrative spending over spending in the classroom.

Furthermore, in 2019, Mississippi State Auditor Shad White released a report stating that although Mississippi spends among the least per student in the country, the state ranks second in administrative spending.¹⁹

Testimonials from veteran educators provide additional perspectives to dispel this myth:

- Paying for inordinately small districts means that much of the tax dollars pay for the personnel and resources in central offices, which might otherwise be routed into classrooms to pay higher teacher salaries and provide more resources when necessary. These districts need to right-size.

¹⁶ “How Much Does Your School’s Superintendent Make?” *Mississippi Today*, August 17, 2021.

<https://www.facebook.com/MSTODAYnews/>; <https://mississippitoday.org/2021/08/17/how-much-does-your-mississippi-schools-superintendent-make/>

¹⁷ “School Superintendent Salary.” salary.com. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.salary.com/research/salary/benchmark/school-superintendent-salary>

¹⁸ “Fat Cat Report.” *Mississippi Center for Public Policy*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://mspolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Fat-Cat-Report-2021-Final.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

- Schools are failing to protect taxpayer investments in technology and material resources, whereby these materials and pieces of equipment are sent home with students and frequently destroyed or lost. Schools must adopt solutions to partner with parents for a reasonable standard of material stewardship.
- Some districts have continued to create new leadership positions beyond those necessary for the supervision of instruction. In some instances, this practice seems to have been intended to promote favored individuals; other situations imply that rather than documenting and releasing ineffective leaders, additional ones are hired to offset incompetence.

Although some problems with the level of funding may exist, many other factors must be considered to establish optimal per pupil expenditure. Some factors include lower costs of living in Mississippi as well as higher needs at the classroom level to lower the teacher-to-student ratio and to offset the challenges of poverty. Ultimately, tinkering with the funding scheme yields, at best, marginal improvements for students.

The fundamental problem in Mississippi K–12 education is the lack of accountability and competition. The existing model of accountability relies on school district boards. They are often ineffective—especially the smaller ones. We need a new model of accountability whereby the parents have choice and community employers have influence. A child-centered system driven by parental choice will produce the transformative change so urgently needed.

THE CASE FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE—POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cap Administrative Spending:

The preceding section diagnosed the need to designate a proportional cap on administrative spending. In truth, 58 of Mississippi’s local public education districts serve fewer than 2,000 students each, with 13 serving fewer than 1,000 students each. One district of 3,600 employs 8 administrators to supervise the education of 750 high school students—a ratio of 1 administrator to fewer than 100 students! Such low enrollment does not generate sufficient funding to adequately provide for district offices as well as to provide teacher salaries that attract highly qualified teachers; although the teachers who simply stayed in the communities where they grew up bring some real benefits, the funding often does not attract the

most prepared teachers to staff the other needed positions. One easy solution would be to consolidate neighboring small districts that share the same accountability ratings. Another solution would be to allow a highly successful large district to acquire responsibility for low-performing neighboring small districts. In addition, one may suggest additional leeway for a small district to share in administrative duties instead of funding district-specific positions and therefore lowering the tax dollars going into administration. This cap may allow funds to be redirected into teacher salaries, classroom resources, and operational maintenance.

Teachers are critical to the development of young minds, and effective teachers make a tangible difference. Dr. Eric Hanushek projected that an effective teacher can positively shift the collective lifetime earnings for a classroom of 20 by \$400,000. By contrast, an ineffective teacher can have a negative impact of \$400,000.²⁰

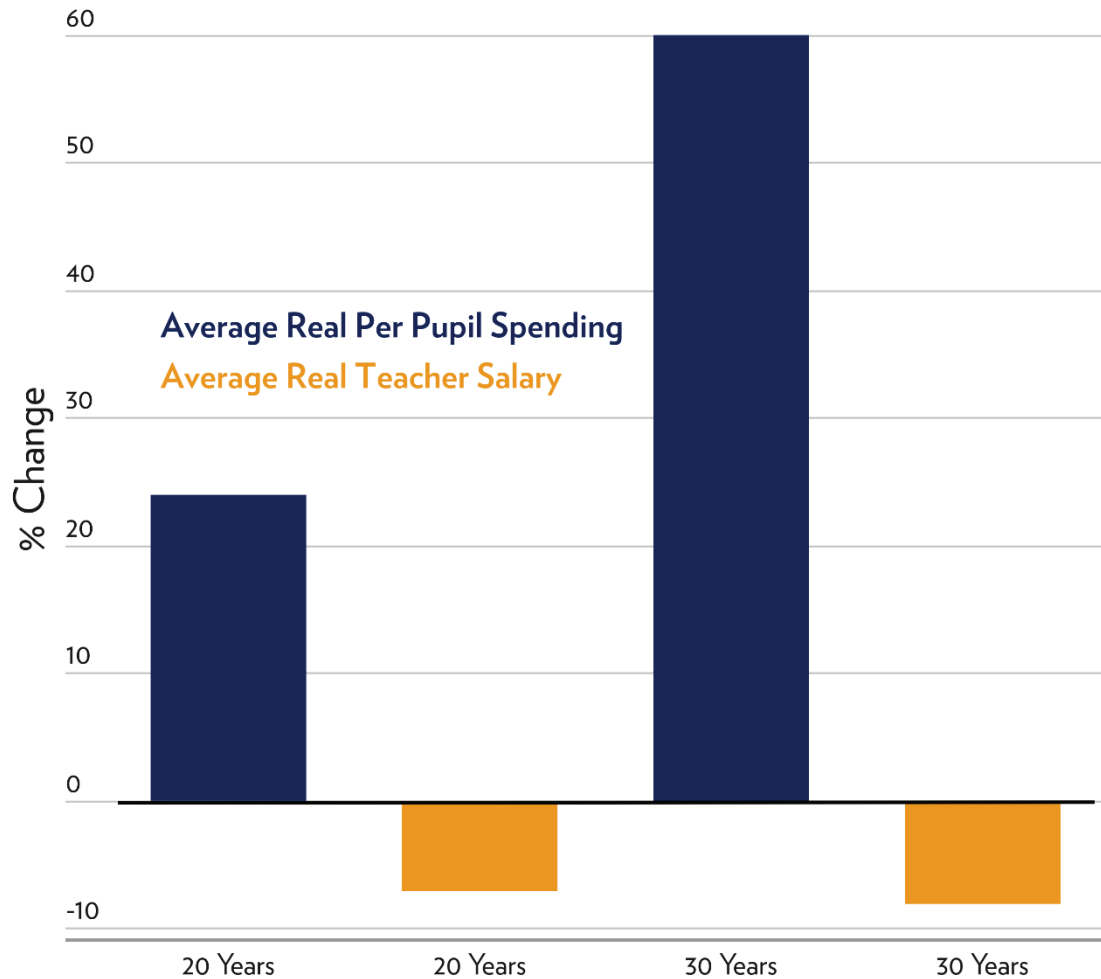
It is therefore incumbent on school leaders to direct as many available resources to the classroom as possible. However, a 2020 report from Harvard's Kennedy School of Public Policy identified a 75 percent uptick in school district administrative staff since 2000, coupled with a 33 percent increase in the number of principals and assistant principals and only an 8 percent increase in the number of teachers.²¹ This is symptomatic of a larger trend, where school district leaders prioritize education dollars toward administrative roles rather than toward teaching.

²⁰ Hanushek, Eric. "Valuing Teachers: How Much Is a Good Teacher Worth?" Accessed January 24, 2022, from <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/valuing-teachers-how-much-good-teacher-worth>

²¹ "Growth in Administrative Staff, Assistant Principals Far Outpaces Teacher Hiring." *Education Next*, October 1, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/EducationNextJournal>; <https://www.educationnext.org/growth-administrative-staff-assistant-principals-far-outpaces-teacher-hiring/>

Mississippi K-12 Spending v Teacher Pay

Twenty and Thirty Year Trends



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Per-pupil real expenditures (2018 Dollars--all sources; Federal, State, Local) 1992 to 2018. Real spending increased 24% and 60% over 20 and 30 years, respectively.

Average real teacher salary (2020 Dollars) 1990 to 2020. Real average teacher salary decreased 7% and 8% over 20 and 30 years, respectively.

2. Open Enrollment

Residential assignment may have served a practical purpose when the public education system was created over a century ago. However, it does not meet the needs of modern families or the broader society. Confining children to the school they happen to live in the vicinity of worsens inequality and constrains opportunity. No other sphere of American life—food, clothing, medicine, or even education at the pre-school and post-secondary levels—is structured this way.

The purpose of the public education system is, quite simply, to educate the public’s children. No divine decree mandates that education must be uniformly delivered through a district model and via residential assignment. We can move closer to the original intent of the education system by empowering parents to choose the best public school for their children, regardless of where they live.

Mississippi code stipulates that school age children must be geographically assigned to a school according to their residence.²² In other words, district schools are required to discriminate against students based on their zip code and school attendance zone boundaries.

As commonly understood, the two types of open enrollment include:

- a. Intra-district, where parents are free to enroll their children across attendance zone boundaries within a school district;
- b. Inter-district, where parents may enroll their child in a school outside the bounds of their residentially zoned school district.

Forty-seven states plus Washington, DC, presently have open enrollment in some form.

Arizona offers the gold standard of open enrollment. Arizona school districts must establish open enrollment policies—both intra-district and inter-district transfer—and the receiving district may provide transportation for children within twenty miles, depending on income eligibility, disability, or IEP status.

Although several other states have comparable enrollment policies, Arizona’s transportation provision is the most generous.

²² MS Code § 37-15-13 (2013)

Mississippi should adopt a similar policy, thereby setting parents free to choose any public school—district or charter—for their child.

3. Increase Student Access to Charter Schools via **Multiple Authorizers**

Under the current state policy in Mississippi, prospective charter operators must apply to and seek approval from a state-designated Charter School Authorizing Board. The board was initially led by a sitting local superintendent, advised by one local superintendent deemed as successful as well as numerous others who have little to no motivation to provide opportunities for parents to choose anything other than a traditional public school district or personally subsidized private school education for their children. Some may assume that owing to this governing board's bias, only a handful of the submitted applications have been approved. If lawmakers sincerely desire to provide access to public alternatives, they need to broaden the avenues for achieving such realities through multiple approaches.

Incentives matter when it comes to charter authorization. School district authorizers face an inherent conflict of interest: they are disincentivized from approving their competition. You would not seek permission from McDonald's to open Burger King next door. Philadelphia City School District, for example, has never authorized a charter school (since returning to Board of Education control).²³

Chartering boards typically document their reasoning for rejecting a charter school application, often in long bulleted lists. In head-scratching fashion, the myriad reasons for rejection tend to boil down to either "not enough like the school district" or "too much like the school district." This defeats the dual purpose of charter schools to a) create innovative educational environments free from traditional bureaucratic constraints and b) provide families with an alternative to their zip-code–assigned school that may not meet their needs.

Any sole authorizer system should be avoided, as the goal is to offer multiple education options to families. As such, prospective charter school operators should have multiple options when seeking

²³ Graham, Maddie Hanna and Kristen A. "Philly School Board Unanimously Rejects Five New Charter Schools." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 5, 2021. <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-school-district-board-charter-applications-20210305.html>

approval to serve those families. A system of multiple, independent authorizers is ideal. Authorizers should have no skin in the game, in the sense that currently, district authorizers do not want to lose revenue and are therefore incentivized to reject charter applications.

Contrary to the inflated rankings of groups such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NASCA), Mississippi is particularly bad at providing public charter school options to its schoolchildren. In 2018, NASCA awarded Mississippi a 6th in the nation ranking for its 2013 Charter School Law.²⁴ The ranking was misguided, as Mississippi had no open charter schools at the time.

Mississippi has since expanded its charter school offerings but has only 7 charter schools serving 2,000 children—or 0.4 percent of eligible children.²⁵ The Education Freedom Institute (EFI) created a charter ranking ecosystem to more closely match student outputs, such as the percentage of students attending charter schools, percentage of students with geographic access to a charter school, and academic achievement metrics. Unfortunately, Mississippi does not even make the EFI rankings. EFI ranked the top 35 charter school states—of the 45 states with charter school laws.²⁶

Eight states have less than one percent of their public school students enrolled in public charter schools: Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming.²⁷

²⁴ Scafidi, Benjamin. “ECER 2022 EFI Charter School Ecosystem Rankings.” Education Freedom Institute, Education Economics Center Kennesaw State University. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://secureservercdn.net/45.40.149.34/n5e.cd2.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EFI-ECER2022.pdf>

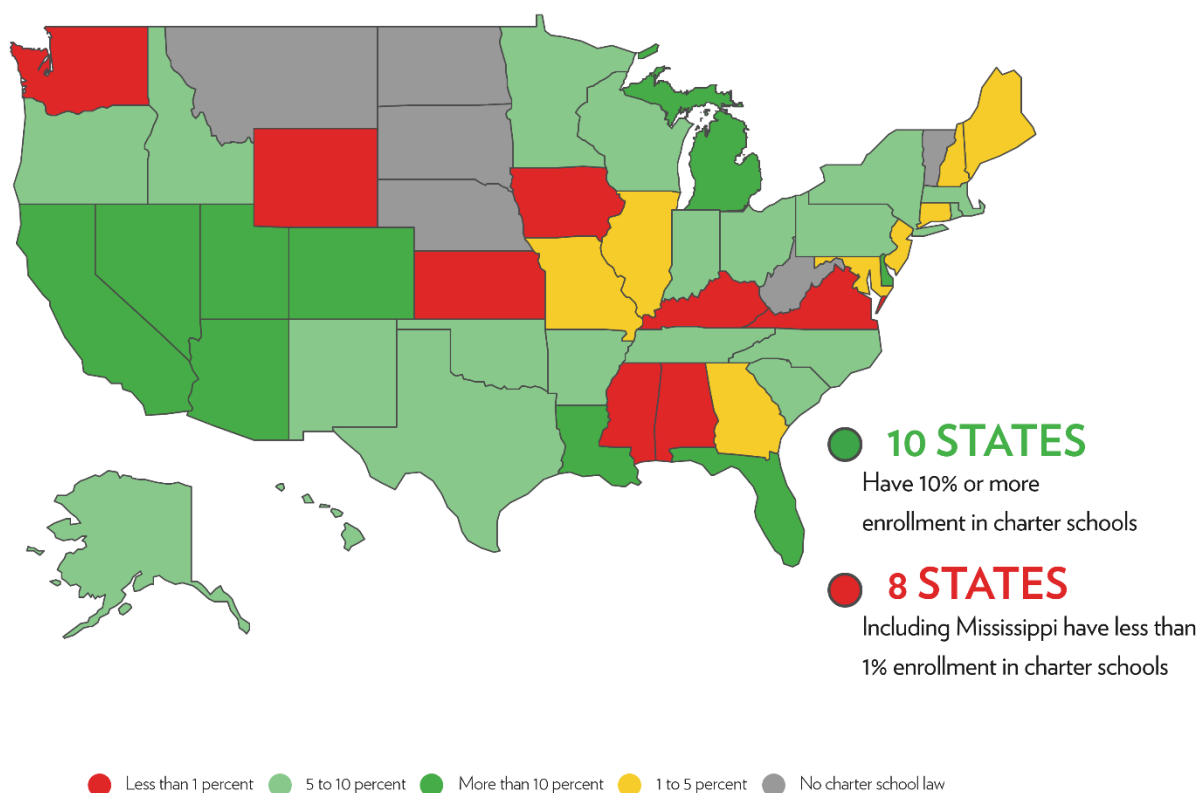
²⁵ “Charter Schools.” *Mississippi First*. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.facebook.com/MississippiFirst>; <https://www.mississippifirst.org/we-support/charter-schools/>

²⁶ Scafidi, Benjamin. “ECER 2022 EFI Charter School Ecosystem Rankings.” Education Freedom Institute, Education Economics Center Kennesaw State University. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://secureservercdn.net/45.40.149.34/n5e.cd2.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EFI-ECER2022.pdf>

²⁷ “COE - Public Charter School Enrollment.” National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U.S. Department of Education. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgb>

Public Charter Attendance in Mississippi

National Picture - Mississippi Kids Lack Charter Opportunities

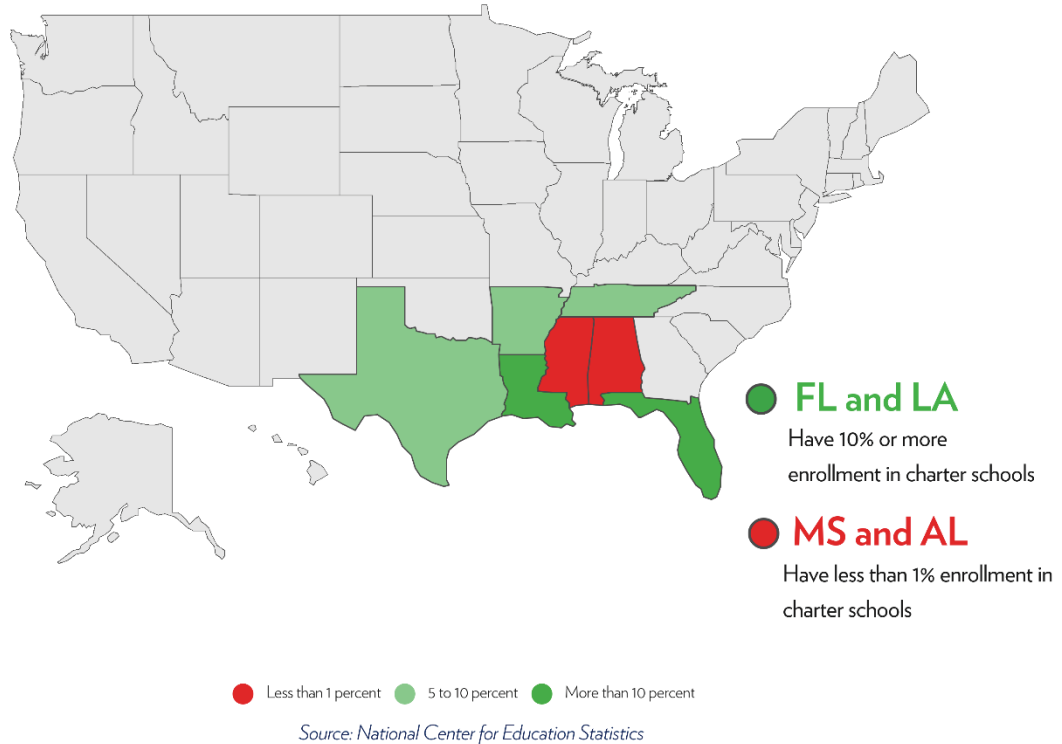


Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Mississippi lags its neighbors. Within the region, only Alabama and Mississippi offer charter school access to less than one percent of the population.

Public Charter Attendance in Mississippi

Regional Picture - Mississippi Kids Lack Charter Opportunities vs Neighboring States



Forty-five states have charter school laws. Of those, 24 have some form of independent authorizer—whether an independent board, a higher education institution, or a nongovernmental agency.²⁸ Twenty states have multiple independent authorizers.

South Carolina, for instance, has a system of multiple authorizers, including an independent state chartering board, multiple higher education authorizers, and local school boards.²⁹

4. High, Medium, or Low Performing Options

²⁸ “Charter School Authorizers by State.” National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://www.qualitycharters.org/state-policy/multiple-authorizers/list-of-charter-school-authorizers-by-state/>

²⁹ “Charter School Sponsors (Authorizers).” South Carolina Department of Education. Accessed January 24, 2022, from <https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/school-choice/charter-schools-program/charter-school-sponsors-authorizers/>

Currently, a charter school can only be opened in a district with poor grades. We believe that it should be possible to open a charter school in any district. Policy should allow for options in school choice in *all* Mississippi schools and districts in accordance with the constitutional rights of parents “to guide their children’s education as they see fit.” In addition to charter schools, it would be constitutionally supported to provide avenues for communities to design organizational options that would produce a good fit for educating the children in their community to more successfully matriculate into post-secondary education and training options that could produce more satisfied and motivated young people while lowering the crime rate and improving the economy of the community through the development of a more competent workforce.

5. Full Reciprocity for Out-of-State Credentialing

Additional access for those who desire to teach in Mississippi schools is critical. Certainly, there is a national, state, and local teacher shortage. Mississippi’s restrictive policies have added to the shortage in this underperforming state. Although the state superintendent decided to lower the ACT scores necessary for students to enter teacher education programs to address the teacher shortage, such responses simply mean that Mississippi will have less prepared teachers!

We must acknowledge that the Mississippi legislature attempted to alleviate this challenge by passing more inclusive legislation last session, which provided for expanded reciprocity to those credentialed in other states in licensing professionals, including the field of education. The challenge is that the Mississippi Department of Education twisted the intent by opening reciprocity to the educators from other states who hold full licensure; however, they maintained limits by not allowing educators who achieved their licenses in other states through an alternate route instead of completing a traditional teacher education program. This only continues to maintain their control and protect the traditional education methods that have produced growing failure in American public schools. Policy needs to be extended to ensure that *all* professionals holding current credentials and certifications in other states are given full reciprocity in Mississippi. The local schools and districts are responsible for observing, assessing, and supporting the performance of those teachers and for not renewing the ones who are not a good fit for their needs.

6. Adoption of Valid and Reliable Unbiased Assessment Measures

Assessing student performance each year is important; it is also beneficial to ensure that the resulting data provide an accurate view of how students perform relative to their peers. For this reason, replacing the Mississippi Curriculum Tests with the ACT Aspire Assessments would be advantageous. This removes the opportunity for the state to curve the scores and pretend that schools are making progress by providing an unbiased measure.

7. Eliminate Public Funding for Private Organizations with Personal Agendas

Public sector unions, union groups and professional organizations lobby, campaign, and promote overtly partisan political activity with taxpayer funds. Policy that denies the use of local/state/federal funds to pay for memberships in private organizations is critical to ending agendas that compete with appropriate parental involvement and choice as well as improved student performance for all subgroups.

What Can Private Citizens and Institutions Do? Further Changes without Legislative Intervention

Additional improvement ultimately depends upon the involvement of the entire community in public education. Many of the educated families left public education in the last 50 years. This outward migration decreased the number of role models in the schools and led to a shift in agendas for the decision makers. Indeed, one purpose of education is to transmit community values to the next generations. One may assume that if we want to enjoy continued traditional American values based on freedom and liberty; the pursuit of the American Dream; and free markets that exhibit independence, responsibility, and accountability, those Americans who hold these values must remain involved in the process!

This means YOU! One prime example is to be active in the recruitment and election or appointment of interested professionals as board members in local public schools. These individuals should represent the broad range of community members and their values—not just those of a select few. Everyone pays the taxes for these schools, and everyone prospers or suffers from the resulting economic growth and crime rates.

In addition to participation in the selection of school board members, regular participation in school board meetings is beneficial. Agendas are mandated to be released at least 24 hours before meetings. Review these agendas and investigate the impacts of the items being considered. Before the meeting begins, ask to be placed on the public comment portion of the meeting so that you may use your constitutional 1–2 minutes to make your perspective and the factual basis known before the members cast their votes to make policy decisions.

Recruiting youth to the teaching profession is critical. Although the MDE has convinced the legislature to provide funding to entice youth into teaching with scholarships, the best way to motivate new teachers is to change the messaging. For years, people have said things like, “those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach” or “why would anyone want to teach if they could do anything else?” We must change the narrative to communicate a value to those who are influencing and determining our future generations

and leaders. Pushing to increase teacher salaries as well as to encourage our most intelligent young people to consider teaching as a respected career option is important.

Another example is to begin Community Professionals Initiated/Led Exploring Clubs to increase awareness and mentor interest in local career opportunities.³⁰ Private and corporate partners in each career area should consider funding such clubs as a tax deduction and volunteering time of the professionals in their organization to support these clubs in every community. The clubs meet one night per month with the interested Grade 8–12 students to explore their respective career opportunities. This accomplishes several important tasks related to American values, including but not limited to:

- Providing responsible, accountable role models demonstrating interest in local youth.
- Developing interest and motivation for workforce development.
- Allowing potential employers to get to know future applicants in a real-world situation.

Faith-based groups might partner with local schools to visit students during breakfast and lunch times. Sharing a meal demonstrates human interest and has been shown to positively influence the morale and behavior of students in public schools. The increased feelings of value and appreciation from the community often translate into greater motivation and effort as well as improved academic and behavioral performance of students.

Although the saying “It takes a village to raise a child” is often attributed to liberals, it is true. Conservative and patriotic Americans must get involved to have their voices heard and their influence realized in order to reclaim and return education to one of the best in the world. We must reduce the trends that have caused us to fall from being one of the top five among industrialized nations a few decades ago to barely making the top 25.

³⁰ “About Us.” exploring.org, November 10, 2015. <https://www.exploring.org/about-us/>

About the Mississippi Center for Public Policy

The Mississippi Center for Public Policy is a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-partisan advocacy organization. Our mission is to advance the cause of free markets and individual liberty in Mississippi and across the United States. We believe that taxes should be low, regulation light, and government limited. Mississippi has been one of the poorest in America for as long as anyone can remember because of bad public policy. We exist to change this.

About Marvin Jeter, III Ph.D.

Marvin Jeter is a third generation Mississippi educator. Primarily, he is a product of private schools, attending Jackson Academy in elementary school and Jackson Prep in secondary; he did attend Grade 1 in Jackson Public Schools and graduated from a public school in Oklahoma when his family relocated to Tulsa. Dr. Jeter's post-secondary education included both private and public universities, where he again experienced the broad diversity of education. His advanced degrees in education and psychology, paired with experience in three states at the classroom, building, district, and state levels, provide him with a broad and informed perspective.

About Marc LeBlond, MPP

Marc LeBlond is a product of school choice, having attended private, public, and home schools for K–12 and then public university and private college for post-secondary education. Marc's four primary grade children have attended public district, public charter, private, and home schools. Marc was born and raised in Connecticut, spending most of his life there, before moving with his wife and children to Pennsylvania in 2018. Marc is a senior policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation, Pennsylvania's free market think tank, where he focuses on education policy.