

NATIONAL REVIEW

Successful Education Reform Needs Parent Power to Work in the Long Term



By **DOUGLAS CARSWELL**

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Mississippi is making great education strides — but building on these gains demands that parents have a say.

Mississippi House Speaker Jason White has introduced what may be the most consequential education legislation in a generation, and on Thursday, the legislation passed in the State House and will now move on for consideration by the State Senate. If enacted, his Mississippi Education Freedom Bill (HB 2) would represent the pinnacle of conservative education reform in the United States. And most importantly, it shows a deep understanding that to be truly successful, education reform requires parental involvement.

The Magnolia State has made some great progress in recent years on the education front. To tackle persistently poor literacy standards, Mississippi began to require teachers to teach using phonics from 2013 with the Literacy-Based Promotion Act. Third-graders who cannot read have since been required to repeat the year.

Mississippi's fourth-graders now read better than those in New York, California, or Minnesota, according to [National Assessment of Education Progress \(NAEP\) scores](#). You read that correctly: A state that barely a decade ago ranked near the bottom for fourth-grade reading now sits near the top of the NAEP tables.

This is great news — but more needs to be done. As a former British Member of Parliament now working in public policy in Mississippi, I am acutely aware of the risks of relying solely on top-down conservative reforms to fix local education systems. Back in the United Kingdom, conservative leaders could have implemented any education reforms they wished — and they did. They emphasized phonics and rigor, and just as in Mississippi, standards rose sharply. But so confident were they in their ability to drive improvements they overlooked the importance of giving families a say in their children's education. Michael Gove, the conservative education minister, even [rejected the idea of education vouchers](#).

Without parent power, their victories over phonics and much else proved fleeting. Once conservative leaders were distracted, the education bureaucracy reversed what it disliked. Parent involvement is the only reliable safeguard; political oversight waxes and wanes with the fortunes of different parties. Families wanting the best for their children is a constant.

Across the pond, Mississippi may not make that same mistake. HB 2 opens the door to universal school choice across the state. Under the bill, families would receive roughly \$7,000 per child, deposited into a dedicated Education Savings Account known as a Magnolia Student Account. They could then use those funds to send their child to a school of their choice — public, private, or charter. The money can be spent on tuition fees, curriculum material and education services.

While dozens of other states have enacted similar policies allowing families to direct their child's share of the education budget, Mississippi's new funding formula was intentionally created to give each child a personalized state education budget, with a base amount determined annually by the state legislature topped by according to each students' individual needs and circumstances. For example, more funds over and above the base amount are allocated to those with special needs or in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This avoids putting the choice cart before the funding horse, which is what has given rise to all sorts of implementation challenges in other states.

The goal in Mississippi is to create 12,500 Magnolia Student Accounts in the first year, with the number increasing in subsequent years until every family that wants an account can obtain one. Half of the first tranche of accounts would be reserved for students currently in the public school system. The remaining half would be available on a first-come, first-served lottery basis to any student eligible to enroll in public education. Although the bill prioritizes low- and middle – income families, the federal income definitions involved mean that in practice, roughly two-thirds of Mississippi households could qualify.

So far, so impressive — but Speaker White’s proposal doesn’t stop there. HB 2 would also sweep away many of the self-serving restrictions imposed by the state’s education bureaucracy over the years. School districts would no longer be able to block students who wish to transfer from their current district. If a receiving district is willing to take a student, that student would be free to switch.

Also set for removal are the intentionally restrictive rules designed to limit charter school growth. Mississippi technically legalized charter schools a decade ago, but the law gave local education bureaucrats the power to veto new schools in all but the lowest-performing districts. As a result, Mississippi has only a handful of charter schools and has never benefited from large-scale investment by major charter providers. White is proposing to allow charter schools wherever prospective operators believe a school would be viable.

Perhaps the icing on the cake, however, is the bill’s proposal to extend the state’s phenomenally successful focus on phonics beyond K – 3.

Mississippi’s top-down insistence on phonics and rigor has yielded positive results for that, but the state also reveals the limits of taking that approach alone. Despite Mississippi’s stellar progress, almost half of fourth-graders still are not proficient in reading and math, and roughly one in four elementary students continues to be chronically absent.

Only by giving parents more choice can we consolidate the gains our state has made. And fortunately, the Mississippi Education Freedom Bill would do just that. Families would be able to choose a school that better meets the needs of their child. Every family could exercise the choices that today only wealthy Mississippians are able to.

Mississippi needs to give parents — not politicians — the ultimate oversight of what happens in the classroom. Jason White’s proposal would give Mississippi everything education reformers could hope for.

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