



September 1, 2021

Senate Education Committee
C/o Ms. Kristi Ishee
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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for your service to our state and, especially, for your efforts to more fairly compensate teachers for the indispensable role they play in equipping Mississippi children with the skills they need to lead productive, happy lives.

Mississippi is experiencing a teacher shortage crisis fueled primarily by low teacher salaries. Superintendents tell us they have few applicants for their teacher vacancies. They fear that, in the very near future, they won't have enough high-quality candidates to provide the level of excellence we expect in our schools.

Neighboring states pay more – significantly more – and teachers report being able to drive 15 minutes across a state line for a salary increase that alters the quality of their lives.

These are the average pay gaps between Mississippi and our neighboring states, according to the most recent state-to-state salary comparison data from Fiscal Year 2020:

State	Average Salary	Mississippi	Average Salary	Difference
Alabama	\$54,095	Mississippi	\$46,843	-\$7,252
Arkansas	\$50,456	Mississippi	\$46,843	-\$3,613
Louisiana	\$51,566	Mississippi	\$46,843	-\$4,723
Tennessee	\$51,862	Mississippi	\$46,843	-\$5,019

While one might hope that the recent pay raises adopted by the Mississippi Legislature have narrowed those gaps, that is likely wishful thinking. Neighboring states have upped the ante, expanding the pay gap even further. While the Mississippi Legislature was adopting a \$1,000 pay raise in the 2021 Legislative Session, Arkansas passed a \$2,000 increase. Neither is reflected in the numbers above.

The salaries listed are averages. The differences are more stark for teachers who are hardest to recruit and retain: math, science, special education... Consider this insight from a DeSoto County math teacher:

“Shelby County (public schools) starting pay is \$43,000 per year. With my experience and my master’s degree, I would get an immediate \$15,000 raise. Plus, they pay a \$5,000 sign-on bonus for math teachers. So, in one year, I could drive 15 minutes and make \$20,000 more.”

School leaders are feeling the pinch as Mississippi teachers leave our classrooms for greener pastures.

For those who believe Mississippi’s generous retirement plan makes up the difference, a veteran educator sums up the consensus among teachers:

"I know more teachers leaving the field than coming into the field...Every single bit of it has to do with pay. Not about benefits – you've got great retirement coming – that's great, but I have to make it to that finish line. I have to survive. I have to provide for my family. I'm the breadwinner."

Though Mississippi provides teachers a procurement card to cover some of the cost of their classroom supplies, it is important to remember that other states fund their schools at a significantly higher level per student, so the schools provide the supplies. Teachers don't have to purchase their own.

The problem isn't only that other states pay more, it's that teachers can't support a family on a Mississippi teacher's salary. Even a teacher with no dependents can't live well. Teachers tell us they often must choose between the career they love and keeping a roof over their heads. Another teacher explains:

"My teacher friend is a single parent with two children, and twice during the last school year we took up donations so he could keep his house. He has a master's degree and works a second job and literally cannot afford to live on his teacher's salary."

We have all read the accounts of teachers working second and third jobs to make ends meet – arriving at school at 7:00 a.m., teaching until mid-afternoon, loading children safely onto buses, leaving campus late in the day to head to a second job waiting tables or running a cash register, then returning home to a stack of papers that need to be graded. What we are asking of our teachers is unthinkable.

We say that we value their work, but our actions reveal a different priority. Teachers are justified in doubting legislators' commitment to their wellbeing when a massive tax cut is being debated as teachers and their families struggle to get by.

Mississippi can do better. Arkansas, which has a similar economy, outspends us on public education by \$1,100 per student. Most of that difference is in teacher salaries. Surely, if Arkansas can do it, Mississippi can, too. It really is a matter of priority.

If we can afford to return state funds to taxpayers, we can afford to pay our teachers a living wage. And we should. State economist Corey Miller and a whole host of business leaders testified to the Joint Tax Study Committee that we all will reap the benefits of an investment in our human capital. They said it's the most important investment we can make. Our children will have excellent teachers, and they will thrive. Mississippi will prosper. Income tax cuts don't even register on business leaders' priority lists, while education and training are at the very top.

Mississippi teachers are doing some of the most challenging and important work in our state under immeasurably difficult circumstances. They deserve our deep appreciation and respect – and a salary that reflects the value of the work we are asking them to do.

Gratefully,



Nancy Loomer
Executive Director