



Fast Facts About Education in Mississippi

Mississippi is considered "business friendly" in almost every regard - except for the quality of our workforce. Lackluster investments in public education and poor showings in other measures of "human capital" result in significant disadvantages in economic development for our state. Forbes' Best States for Business ranks Mississippi 17th in cost of doing business but near the bottom (42nd) 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 demographically similar 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.

**Students with similar characteristics, such as economic status, English language learners, learning disabilities, 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: www.tpcref.org/mississippi-adequate-education-program-maep/.

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 2022-2023 school year, the MAEP is underfunded statewide by \$279-million. Since it was last fully funded in 2008, schools have been shorted \$3.3-billion. You can find the underfunding amounts for each school district on our website.

From Fiscal Year 2008 to Fiscal Year 2021, the total state budget grew by 27% while the public school budget (pre-k through grade 12) grew by only 1.4%.

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. Additionally, significant investments in literacy since Fiscal Year 2014 have resulted in an acceleration in the reading proficiency of Mississippi students as measured by NAEP.

Mississippi Teachers

In 2021, Mississippi ranked 50th of 50 states in average teacher salary, lagging our neighboring states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee by an average of \$5,152. The vast discrepancy between teacher salaries in our state and those in neighboring states over recent years exacerbated our teacher shortage crisis. Teachers in border counties could earn thousands of dollars more per year by driving across the state line to teach.

The 2022 Legislature made strong progress in correcting these salary disparities with our neighboring states, passing into law a significant teacher pay raise that provides an average increase of more than \$5,000 for certified teachers and a \$2,000 across the board increase for assistant teachers.

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 a significant teacher shortage that has worsened in recent years. School district superintendents say that the shortage is becoming more severe every year, with large pockets of openings in districts that typically have no problem finding high quality teachers to lead their classrooms. School leaders and teachers themselves say that teacher pay plays a significant role in attracting young people to the profession and retaining them.

“Mississippi’s teacher pay must be competitive with similarly educated professionals and the Southeastern average to attract the best minds to education.”

More than 50% of Mississippi teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years of teaching. Among the reasons most often cited in the past are low pay, 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)

School boards establish the vision and goals for the public schools in their district, and they set standards for the performance of schools and superintendents. Board members are more than policy-makers and administrators; they are advocates for students and their parents and entrusted to engineer a better future. (*About School Boards and Local Governance*, National School Boards Association)

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

The Mississippi Legislature first began dedicating state funding to pre-kindergarten programs in 2013 through the Early Learning Collaborative Act. Under this act, state funds are provided to local communities to establish, expand, support, and facilitate the implementation of high quality early childhood education through collaborations between school districts and public and private childcare centers. In the 2022 Legislative Session, \$24-million was appropriated for Early Learning Collaboratives. Currently, 30 collaboratives are serving approximately 6,000 children (16% of Mississippi's four-year-olds).

Also in the 2022 Legislative Session, new funding of \$20-million was appropriated for public school pre-k programs that are not part of collaboratives and \$1.5-million was appropriated for early learning coaches.

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. 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*). Earlier 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*).

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*)

Milwaukee, which introduced vouchers in 1990 and by 2014 provided them to 25,000 students annually, requires voucher students to take the same state tests used in public schools. This allows a comparison of private school voucher students and public school students, all of whom reside in the city. Performance results from 2013-2014 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 law initially did not require that the private voucher schools 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, 36% of funds appropriated have not been spent
- As of December 2020, of 1,201 vouchers assigned, only 489 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 relied 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 lacked the needed accountability structure.

The 2020 Legislature addressed some of the program's most glaring deficiencies by prohibiting the use of vouchers at online-only schools and by requiring that voucher schools provide the services called for in a participating student's Individual Education Program (IEP).

However, the 2022 Legislative Session resulted in vast sums diverted to private schools, through tax credits and direct appropriations. These taxpayer dollars are public funds that should be used for public schools.

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

Charter Schools

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 nine charters have been granted since 2015, with the two most recently approved schools slated to open in the 2022-2023 school year.

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.