

Blueprint Mississippi
Closing the Educational Achievement/Opportunity Gap
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1. Ensure Every Student Enters K-12 Ready to Learn

a. Mississippi must establish a high-quality pre-kindergarten system available to all students age 3-5: Mississippi is one of 10 states nationwide and the only state in the South without any pre-kindergarten education system. As a result, children enter kindergarten with widely different skill sets. The children that suffer most disproportionately come from low-income homes without strong family education backgrounds. In many cases, these children are at least two years behind their classmates before they have ever set foot in a classroom. Without universal pre-k, those skills gaps will persist throughout their educational careers and beyond.

2. Achieving Full and Equitable Funding for K-12 Education

a. Commit to fully funding the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) through “education first” budgeting: MAEP, a formula critical to closing funding disparities among Mississippi’s school districts, calculates the amount of funding necessary for every district to meet the standard of “adequate” education for each its students. However, in the 13 years since the law was passed, the Legislature has only met the “adequate” level of funding three times – during the election years of 2003 and 2007 and in 2008.

When MAEP is underfunded, low-income and minority students shoulder a disproportionate share of the pain. Communities must make up the school budget shortfalls to avoid cutting staff and programs, but many low-income areas do not have the tax bases necessary to raise sufficient revenue. Furthermore, low-income schools lose out on critical federal dollars. The federal government provides additional funding for schools based on the concentration of low-income students through the Title I program of the No Child Left Behind Act. The funding formula is based largely on a state’s a) average per-pupil expenditure and b) disparities in district per-pupil funding. When MAEP is underfunded, Mississippi’s average per-pupil spending decreases and district funding disparities increase. As a result, Mississippi’s most vulnerable students schools lose out.

To get its priorities straight, the Legislature should adopt an “education first” budgeting approach in which the education appropriation must be passed before other appropriation items are voted on. This would cement education as the state’s highest fiscal priority and increase the likelihood that education would not be shortchanged during years of budget cutbacks.

3. Increasing Transparency and Accountability in Fiscal Management

a. Prioritize fiscal productivity: Mississippi spends 23 percent less per pupil than the national average. With so few resources, it is imperative that

Mississippi spends its dollars in the most productive manner possible. However, the productivity of Mississippi's schools varies widely, and often the least efficient schools serve low-income, predominantly-minority areas. The Legislature and MDE must explicitly establish fiscal productivity a priority and commit to continuous revision of budgeting procedures to enhance the academic return of dollars spent on education.

b. Require school-level, itemized financial reporting: Expenditures are currently reported on the district level and broken into the following five categories: "Instructional," "Other Instructional," "General Administration," "School Administration," and "Operations." Calculating spending by districts alone can mask school-level inefficiencies and inequities, so MDE should include fiscal productivity in its annual school-level performance reports. Furthermore, the Board of Education should require more specificity in the itemization of expenditures in order to identify best and worst practices that can be disseminated and applied across the state.

c. Empower principals and superintendents with greater budgetary flexibility: Not all schools are created alike, so the Legislature should loosen mandates on pupil-teacher ratios in order to give principals and superintendents more discretion over staffing. Currently, only high-performing schools can opt out of state staffing mandates – the rest must request waivers from the Board of Education. Reductions in class size have not been effective at raising student performance, but the cost of additional teacher salaries can put a pinch on school budgets. With proper oversight from MDE, principals and superintendents should have more discretion to use that money for purposes tailored to the specific needs of their schools.

4. Breaking Concentrations of Poverty and Creating Mixed-Income Schools

a. Where possible, districts should adopt school assignment policies that prevent the concentration of low-income students: School socioeconomic composition is among the strongest predictors of student achievement: low-income students perform significantly better when they attend low-poverty schools. Unfortunately, one-quarter of Mississippi's students attend schools in which at least 90% of students' family incomes are low enough to qualify for free and reduced price lunch (FRL), and 40 percent attend schools with at least 75 percent FRL. Many Mississippi schoolchildren are held back solely because of what part of the county or district they live in. Nearly one-third of Mississippi's counties contain two more districts that vary widely in socioeconomic composition and academic achievement. Even within some districts FRL enrollment can vary up to 60 percentage points between schools.

Mixed-income schools have a number of advantages over high-poverty schools. First, on average, a higher percentage of students come from families with college degrees, which translates into greater emphasis on the value of

education. Studies show that having motivated, college-bound peers positively affect students from families with low educational backgrounds. Second, mixed-income schools are able to attract and retain quality, experienced teachers more easily than high-poverty schools. Finally, mixed-income schools often receive greater parental and community support than high-poverty schools.

Socioeconomic school integration plans have been adopted in over 60 districts of all shapes and sizes nationwide. Diversification has proven to be more successful at raising the achievement of low-income students on a wide scale than any other policy intervention. Mississippi should make a concerted effort to break concentrations of poverty in its schools. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; districts and counties face unique circumstances that must be accounted for, and many areas do not have the critical mass of middle-income students to make integration possible. Nevertheless, the Legislature and Board of Education should explicitly establish the policy objective of breaking up extreme school poverty concentrations and develop innovative methods to encourage, incentivize, and, if necessary, mandate the creation of mixed-income schools.

5. Attracting and Retaining Effective Teachers in Critical Need Areas

a. Offer premium pay and accelerated salary schedules to teachers that work in critical need schools: At least four consecutive years of quality teachers is necessary to close the achievement gap for low-income students, but high-poverty schools in Mississippi struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers. The Mississippi Critical Teacher Shortage Act of 2006 created scholarships and moving assistance for teachers who agreed to work in one of 48 “critical need” districts. However, many high-need districts still rely on temporary teachers with emergency credentials to fill staffing gaps. Teacher salaries across Mississippi are insufficient to compete for qualified teachers with neighboring states, especially when attempting to attract teachers to work in low-performing schools in the Delta and other high-poverty areas. Mississippi should raise the base salary for teachers in critical need areas and accelerate their salary schedules to encourage them to stay.

6. Incentivizing Changes to Academic Calendar

a. Extend grants to schools that experiment with longer school days, year-round calendars: Studies show that low-income students learn at similar rates as affluent students in the classroom, but their growth is stunted by fewer opportunities to learn outside of the classroom. The traditional 180-day academic calendar is structured in a way that further disadvantages low-income students. The three-month summer break, often a time for affluent students to participate in internships or educational programs, can be a time of educational atrophy for students without those opportunities. In Mississippi, local school boards have full discretion over their districts’ academic calendars. Many, however, do not have the resources to extend the school day or pay for the cooling costs of operating in the summer. The Legislature and Board of

Education should encourage and offer grants to districts, especially those with large enrollments of low-income students, to experiment with changes to the school day and academic calendar.