



Fast Facts: Education in Mississippi

A state's investment in public education directly correlates with the strength of its communities and the quality of life they offer. The information provided below is a snapshot of where we are in education in Mississippi, how we got here, and where we need to go next. Together, this data forms a picture of what is required for Mississippi to rise to our collective potential in providing brighter futures for all children, and in so doing realize broad prosperity for families and economically viable communities in every region of the state.

Student Achievement

Nationally recognized as the "Mississippi Miracle," our state's dramatic improvement in 4th-grade reading has been the work of decades. Mississippi started far behind other states and has been steadily closing the gap in achievement since NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores were first reported in 1992. From that time to today, The Parents' Campaign Research & Education Fund has tracked a notable trend – when school funding increases, including focused funding (such as for literacy), student achievement improves. In other words, when we supply our teachers and students with the resources they need to be successful, they deliver. The progress in our classrooms is real: Mississippi fourth graders now rank 21st in the nation in reading and 33rd in math (*NAEP 2022*). Remarkably, our fourth graders who live in low-income households rank 2nd in the nation in reading and 3rd in math when compared to their economically-similar peers. Mississippi's challenges exceed those in every other state, therefore, if we want continued progress, we must elect officials at all levels who believe in the power of public education and are committed to investing in our children and in the communities in which they live, grow, and learn.

Resources/Funding

State funding for Mississippi schools now is determined by the Mississippi Student Funding Formula (MSFF), passed into law in 2024. [See details regarding the new formula, including an explanation of its components, calculations, and more.](#)

For the 2024-2025 school year, public schools are fully funded via the new state formula. Prior to that, Mississippi's public schools endured 16 consecutive years of underfunding that resulted in a cumulative loss of \$3.5-billion in the education of a generation of our public school children.

Mississippi ranks 50th in the nation in per capita income (*US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2023*). Approximately 23 percent of Mississippi children live in poverty, and 11 percent of Mississippi children live in extreme poverty (*Annie E. Casey Foundation/Kids Count 2023*). Research has shown consistently that at least 40 percent 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 public schools 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, consistently applied 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 new salary schedule with 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.

Challenges remain in that **neighboring states also have increased teacher salaries**. In 2024, Mississippi is last among our neighbors in starting teacher pay, despite our 2022 pay raise. School districts near our state borders once again are susceptible to teacher attrition due to higher salaries across state lines.

Starting teacher salaries for 2024-2025:

- Alabama – \$47,600
- Arkansas – \$50,000
- Louisiana – no state minimum, districts allowed to set their own
- Mississippi – \$41,500
- Tennessee – \$44,500

**Salaries shown above are state minimums, not including local supplements*

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.” (Mississippi school superintendent)

More than 50% of Mississippi teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years of teaching, an issue that was addressed in part in the new salary schedule enacted in 2022. 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.

Legislative measures enacted to address the teacher shortage in recent years include:

- \$5,140 average salary increase for certified teachers in 2022
- State-paid employee portion of insurance premium increases
- Winter-Reed Loan Repayment Program – initially available only to first-year teachers, expanded in 2024
- Retired teachers allowed to return to work full time in critical shortage areas while receiving PERS benefits

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.

As of August 2024, 40 collaboratives and 24 public school programs are serving approximately 12,500 children (30 percent of Mississippi’s four-year-olds). [See locations of all state-funded pre-k programs.](#) (Mississippi Department of Education 2024)

In 2024, legislators appropriated \$55.5-million in state funding to early childhood education for 2024-2025:

- \$32-million for Early Learning Collaboratives (ELC)
- \$20-million for State Invested Pre-K (SIP) public school programs
- \$3.2-million for early learning coaches

Mississippi assesses kindergarten students at the beginning of the year to evaluate their mastery of the early literacy skills that are the foundation of success in kindergarten and beyond. Almost two-thirds of students entering kindergarten in fall 2023 scored below the kindergarten readiness benchmark of 530. Research indicates that 85 percent of students scoring 530 or higher at the beginning of kindergarten are proficient in reading at the end of grade 3. On average, students who enter kindergarten having previously attended pre-k exceed that benchmark and are better positioned to succeed throughout the early grades. (*Mississippi Department of Education 2024*)

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

(The Abecedarian Project; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Mississippi's academic standards call for reading fluency by the end of the kindergarten year. Dramatic expansion of early learning programs is essential to helping more children reach this target. When children enter kindergarten from a high-quality pre-k program, they are significantly more likely to meet kindergarten expectations and that success places them on a trajectory to meet and exceed critically important third-grade reading proficiency goals.

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 exemptions included in similar laws in other states with successful programs, and the cut score required for passage of the test was raised significantly in 2019. Students who do not pass the reading test the first time have two additional opportunities to take and pass it.

The Legislature has invested \$15-million annually in reading coaches to improve literacy instruction in low-performing schools and in statewide literacy training for 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.

Private School Vouchers

An extensive body of research on the academic impact of private school vouchers finds that **students utilizing vouchers experience significant losses in achievement.**

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*)

Students in Indiana’s voucher program, the largest in the U.S., experienced enduring achievement declines while attending private voucher schools. Six years of longitudinal data showed that voucher students had “substantial average achievement loss” in math and no significant difference in English language arts compared to their public school peers; public and private school students in Indiana take the same assessments. Indiana voucher students’ achievement did not improve over time; math losses remained entrenched over successive years in private schools. (*Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 2018*)

In states that have implemented universal voucher programs, **70 percent of vouchers, on average, have gone to students who already were enrolled in private school.** The result is hard-working taxpayers subsidizing private school tuition for wealthy families whose children always have been in private school.

[See more voucher research from across the U.S.](#)

Mississippi’s ESA Vouchers

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.

Public records requests and a Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) investigation of Mississippi’s voucher program revealed:

- From the program’s inception in 2015 through June 30, 2023, a total of 1595 vouchers were assigned but only 619 were used (38.81%)
- Reasons vouchers were not used, 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 (**PEER requested information from 101 private schools that received public funds through the voucher program; only 33 responded*)
- 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

(Mississippi Department of Education, Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review – PEER)

In recent years, the Legislature addressed some of the program’s most glaring deficiencies by prohibiting the use of vouchers at online-only schools and by requiring voucher schools to certify that they will provide the services called for in a participating student’s Individual Education Program (IEP).

Alarmingly, the Legislature has moved in a dangerous direction by establishing a separate program to divert vast sums to private schools via tax credits. The private schools receiving state dollars through this annual funding stream are held to no restrictions on expenditure of funds, have no reporting requirements, and are in no way accountable to the public.

Notably, the Mississippi Constitution bans the appropriation of funds toward the support of any sectarian school or to any school that charges tuition.

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 10 charters have been granted since 2015. Mississippi's charter schools are located in Canton, Clarksdale, Greenwood, Jackson, and Natchez. (*Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board*)

School District Consolidation

Mississippi's traditional public schools have an average of 3,136 students enrolled per school district. The state's charter schools have an average of 473 students enrolled; each charter school is operated as a separate district. (*Mississippi Department of Education 2023-2024*)

According to the Center for Policy Research (*Does School Consolidation Cut Costs?*), 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 district in terms of efficiency is around 2,000 students.

Combining 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 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.

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. (*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.** (*National School Boards Association*)

Great superintendents hire great principals who hire, retain, and develop 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.

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; graduate-level preparation is the norm in highly competitive Ontario
- 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 during regular school hours – 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, to know curriculum, and be able to provide guidance and support to teachers

Fast Facts: Education in Mississippi, September 2024