ppi radically pragmatic

Inside the Mississippi Marathon

RACHEL CANTER

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

APRIL 2026

INTRODUCTION

It feels surreal to be a public education advocate from Mississippi these days. After decades of derision, my home state has lately become a cause célèbre for dramatically improving our students' reading and math skills, which rocketed Mississippi from the bottom of national rankings to near the top. The resulting think pieces often border on wonder: Pundits have dubbed our story "the Mississippi miracle," as if it must have taken divine intervention for us to do what so many others are failing to do — improve education for kids of all races, incomes, and achievement levels.

Much of that media coverage[1] has focused solely on Mississippi's "science of reading" reforms, which implemented structured literacy programs.[2] Many policymakers seem to have taken away the message that the science of reading, and particularly *phonics*, is the one silver bullet that all states should implement. To date, 40 states have adopted policies aimed at changing classroom instruction to align with these proven practices.[3]

But this narrow understanding of Mississippi's story is wrong, or at least very incomplete. No one policy, and no one person, is responsible for our educational turnaround. It also didn't happen overnight, or in a few years. Mississippi's progress is neither a miracle nor a myth, as some skeptics have insisted; it's been a two-decade marathon.

I personally spent 17 years helping state leaders run that race. As the head of Mississippi First, a nonprofit I founded in 2008, I played a hand in, and sometimes led, many of the state's key education policy conversations with the legislature while also working with the Mississippi Department of Education to implement the reform agenda. This is my insider's view of what policymakers, philanthropists, and pundits should know about what really happened.

All photos included in this report were taken by Rory Doyle, courtesy of Mississippi First, and feature pre-K-12 traditional and charter public school children in Mississippi.

NO SILVER BULLETS, NO SUPERHEROES

If fixing education were as easy as banning discredited reading practices, such as three-cueing,[4] from the classroom, all of us could just go home now; after all, state legislatures nationwide have already embraced that cause. But real life is not that simple. Rather than a single policy or person, Mississippi's successful transformation rested on four pillars, all of which were variations on a central theme: holding ourselves accountable for higher expectations.

These policy pillars were 1) standards, testing, and accountability, 2) consequences for poor performance, 3) evidence-informed instructional policy, and 4) support for implementation. *(See Appendix A for more details.)*

MISSISSIPPI POLICY PILLARS FROM 2008 TO PRESENT

1. **STANDARDS, TESTING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY:**
   Children rise to the expectations adults set for them, so states must set high learning standards, accurately assess students against those standards, and hold schools accountable for the results. Many states think of these three policy areas in isolation, tweaking one or another over time, without addressing the full picture. But in education, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, an issue-by-issue approach allows state policymakers to gloss over fundamental systemic weaknesses while acting like education champions. Significantly improving these three policy areas at or around *the same time* provided a coherent foundation for Mississippi to reorient the system to work for children. We had to start by answering basic questions like, "What do we expect students to know at the end of every grade?" before we could adopt an approach to reading instruction to meet that goal.

2. **CONSEQUENCES FOR POOR PERFORMANCE:**
   Humans need accountability to make progress. In education, that means both using rating systems to honestly gauge how well schools are succeeding and enforcing consequences for poor outcomes. Mississippi began thinking about the question of how to deal with chronically underperforming schools and districts right before we began to reshape the foundation of our system. We now have a strong law tied to the accountability system that allows the state to take over troubled districts. While our approach to this issue evolved over time, one clear lesson was that the threat of consequences can be just as powerful as the consequences themselves.

3. **EVIDENCE-INFORMED INSTRUCTIONAL POLICY:**
Education research doesn't yet have all the answers, but what we do know about teaching and learning is too rarely implemented in classrooms. Mississippi — but more importantly, our children — did not have the time or the money to experiment with newfangled ideas; we needed proven strategies that we could reliably implement. "Does it work? For whom? How?" became perhaps the most important questions of all to our policymakers, a seismic shift in how we thought about education.[5] This perspective is how we became so committed to the science of reading, among other policies.

4. **SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTATION:**
Merely passing good policy is not enough. To make a difference, policies need to be implemented well. Yet too often state policymakers leave this most critical step to chance. Mississippi prioritized thoughtful implementation across each of the first three policy pillars by developing the capacity at the state level to guide and support the work of districts and schools. Because Mississippi predominantly has small school districts, expecting them to develop internal capacity for everything was unrealistic. This increased the importance of state capacity and also enabled tight quality control across state-funded programs.

At first glance, nothing about this agenda — or our unifying principle — seems new. Mississippi, and the rest of the nation, had been pursuing policies containing some form of these ideas for roughly thirty years by the time our work began ramping up in earnest in 2012. I have listened to 90s ed reform stalwarts, for example, lament that "we tried standards-based reform, and it didn't work."

But maybe more remarkable than what we did is what we didn't do: Mississippi resisted chasing the latest fad. Education as a sector is obsessed with the new, careening from big idea to big idea in a matter of a few short years without much thoughtfulness about why the last one seemed to fail — a psychosis the American Enterprise Institute's Rick Hess wrote about in his 1999 book *Spinning Wheels*.

Mississippi combined what I have come to think of as the three Ps of reform: policy, people, and persistence.

I came to believe this novelty obsession was part of Mississippi's problem. It was certainly at play in the Mississippi Delta school I taught in after college, which was haphazardly implementing a "whole school reform" for a few years during the height of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind push, only to dump it before it bore any fruit.

But the reality statewide was actually far worse. Mississippi was only pretending to embrace reforms. We said we were adopting the same policies as everyone else, and we acted like we were implementing them. But the truth was that we rarely did either with any depth or degree of excellence. We had less of a spinning car wheel and more of a lazy Susan whose turns were as slow as our dollops of policy change were small.

This pattern changed most dramatically with the 2012 legislative term. The state not only began to adopt robust, data-driven policies but to do so without compromising on the elements — or their execution — that made those policies work, even if they were difficult or controversial. We also resisted the siren call of the new big idea that would single-handedly revolutionize our schools and focused on developing a coherent policy framework we could implement with excellence over time. This is, in part, why this moment feels so incongruous: other states are turning "literacy, "especially phonics, into the next big idea in exactly the same way they did failed reform ideas of the past.

The detritus of ed reform suggests that there's no perfect antidote to this mode of thinking, but Mississippi's story provides a dose of reality. Instead of the primacy of a single ingredient at any given time — like "literacy" or "choice" or "standards" — Mississippi combined what I have come to think of as the three Ps of reform: policy, people, and persistence. We adopted specific policies, in a specific sequence. We did not rely on a single superhero. We built a team of leaders across state government, in-state nonprofits, and local schools that

agreed on a standard of excellence for what those policies should include and how they should be implemented, and we kept each other honest. Finally, we kept going long enough to see the effects of our efforts.

Mississippi did this work in a national political atmosphere where policymakers were far too eager to abandon both learning standards and accountability just as we decided to embrace them. Both major federal education reform efforts of the past 25 years — No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top — faced bipartisan backlashes that made them political orphans. After 2015, national progress on the NAEP began to stall and has fallen off a cliff post-COVID. Neither political party seems up to the challenge of addressing the issue or is even paying very much attention at a national level.

Yet the playbook for better public education already exists. It is not a political free lunch: Anybody who believes they can fix their state's reading scores by tweaking their literacy curriculum without embracing serious standards and accountability will be sorely disappointed. But progress is possible.

These pages explain each element of Mississippi's reforms with great specificity so that other states can find their own roadmap to success. First, I briefly review Mississippi's data to provide a common understanding of just how deep Mississippi's transformation has been. Then, I turn to the policy agenda, how it came about, and what everyone gets wrong about our literacy work. Next, I describe the people who made this work possible and sustained it, while diving deeper into the political context of the reforms. Finally, I conclude with some consideration of this moment in educational history, both for Mississippi and the nation, and why I remain hopeful that America's public schools can improve.

I. FROM LAST TO FIRST

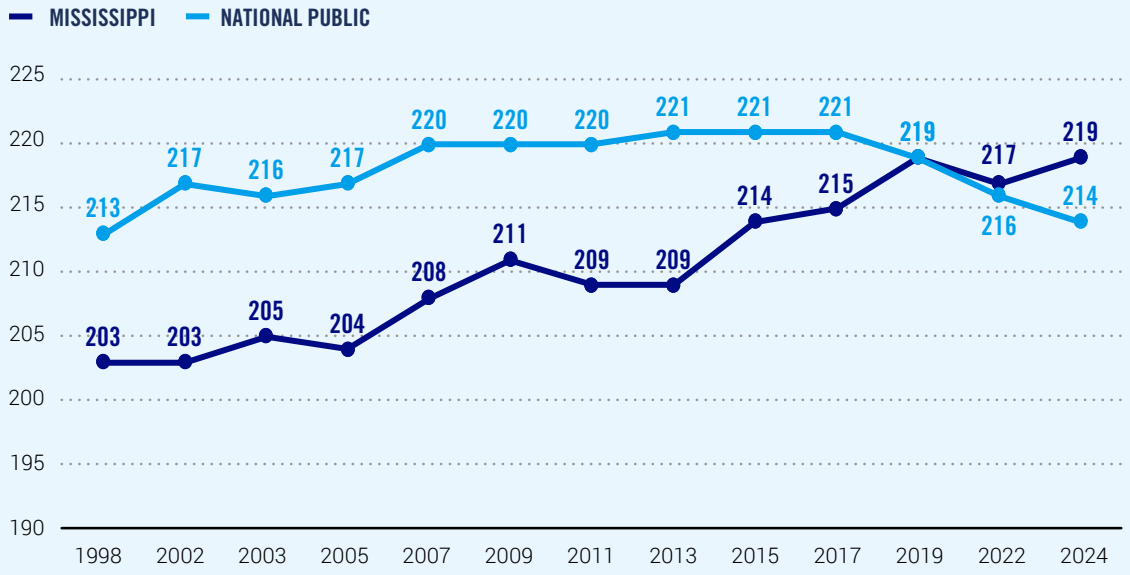
Mississippi gradually moved from the bottom of national rankings on math and reading to at and above the national average, reflecting years of reform efforts rather than a single major change. When adjusting for demographics, the state now ranks no. 1 on some measures.

CHARTING MISSISSIPPI'S RISE

Between 1998 and 2019, Mississippi's students made steady gains on the National Assessment for Education Progress, the test known as America's report card, which has long been the gold standard for measuring state-by-state K-12 performance.[6] Mississippi moved from last in the country in fourth-grade reading and math to the national average by 2019.[7] We also substantially closed the gap between our state performance and the nation in eighth-grade reading and math.[8] The size and pace of these gains over two decades is phenomenal: on average, Mississippi students have improved twice as fast as students nationally.

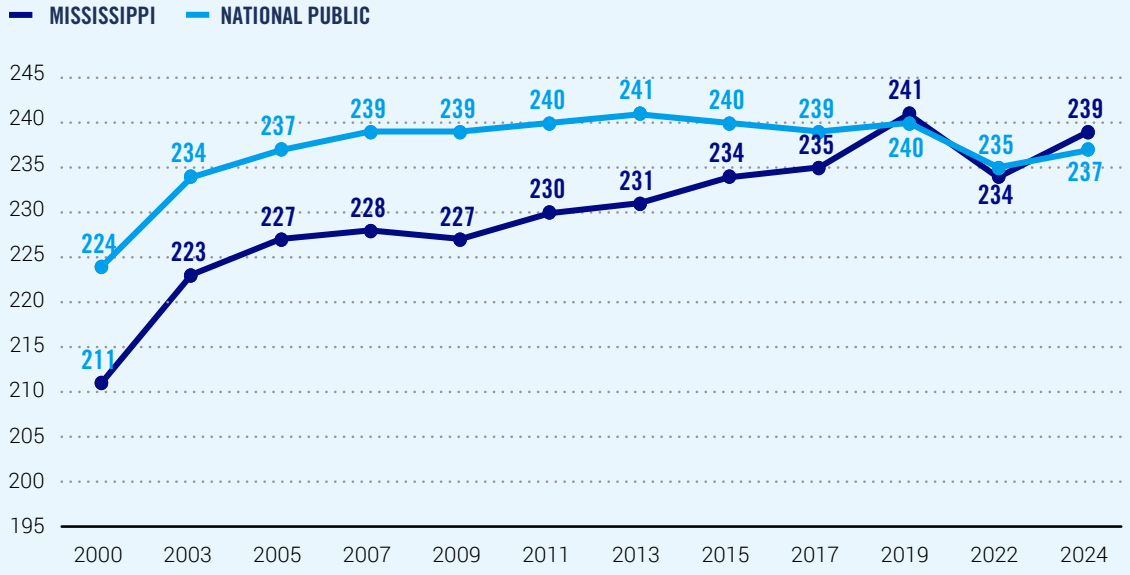
Far from an overnight miracle, these gains were mostly gradual and consistent for fourth-grade reading and math and eighth-grade math over this 20-year period. (There were lulls between some testing cycles.) Even in eighth-grade reading, where our growth was far more uneven, performance mostly trended upward from 2009 to 2019. This steady pattern is key, since it suggests Mississippi's rising scores were a product of our accumulated reform efforts rather than an overnight change.

NAEP FOURTH GRADE READING AVERAGE SCALE SCORES FROM 1998 TO 2024: MISSISSIPPI AND NATIONAL PUBLIC



Source: National Center for Education Statistics[9]

NAEP FOURTH-GRADE MATHEMATICS AVERAGE SCALE SCORES FROM 2000 TO 2024: MISSISSIPPI AND NATIONAL PUBLIC

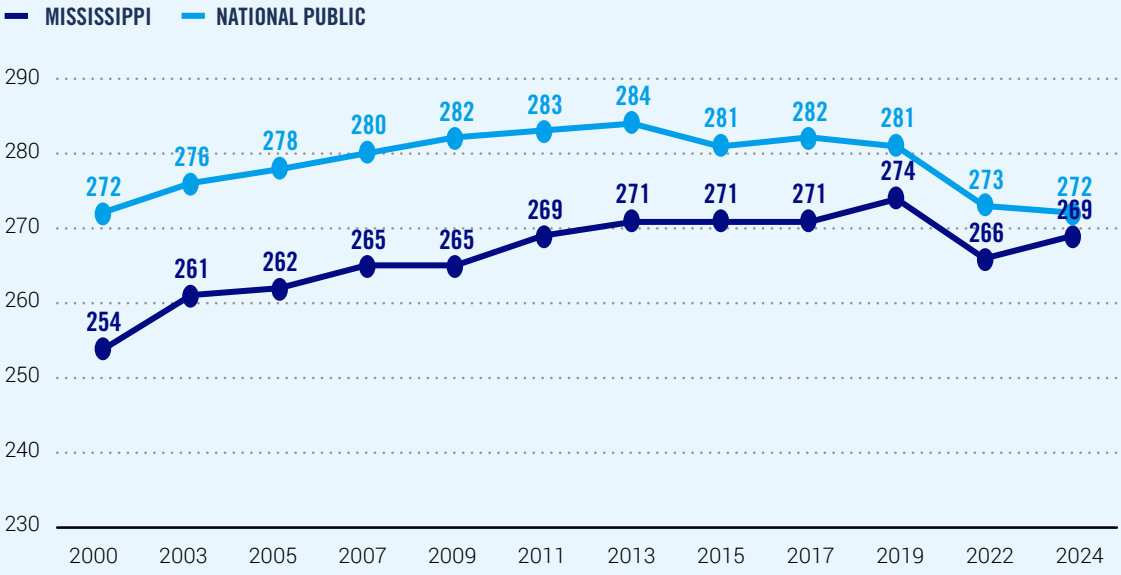


Source: National Center for Education Statistics

NAEP EIGHTH-GRADE READING AVERAGE SCALE SCORES FROM 1998 TO 2024: MISSISSIPPI AND NATIONAL PUBLIC

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

NAEP EIGHTH-GRADE MATHEMATICS AVERAGE SCALE SCORES FROM 2000 TO 2024: MISSISSIPPI AND NATIONAL PUBLIC



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Post-COVID, Mississippi students have recovered in fourth-grade reading and math, unlike many of their national peers.[10] They have also begun to recover in eighth-grade math as of 2024.[11] In eighth-grade reading, Mississippi students held steady in 2024, while eighth graders nationally continue to tumble downward.[12]

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Mississippi's story is that our improvement is not just among students who are White, higher income, already highly performing, or without disabilities. Among Mississippi's fourth graders, for example,

- **Black students matched their national peers in both math and reading by 2017, and have bested them since 2019.**
- **Economically disadvantaged students met their peers in reading and math by 2015 and have topped them in both since 2019.**
- **Students at our 25th percentile met their peers' average in reading and math in 2019 and beat the national average for both in 2024.[13]**
- **Students with disabilities met their peers in reading and math in 2015 and beat them in 2019 and in 2024.**

Because these gains were shared across student subgroups, the Urban Institute has found that Mississippi now ranks near or at the top of the NAEP leaderboard, once you adjust for the demographics of our students.[14] Measured that way, the state ranks first in fourth-grade reading and math, as well as in eighth-grade math. It is ranked fourth in eighth-grade reading.

In the simplest terms, Massachusetts has long been considered the nationwide leader in education, but if the Bay State had as many low-income and minority students as Mississippi, we'd be beating them.

REBUTTING THE SKEPTICS

As early as 2023, when Mississippi's success began drawing more national attention, some self-proclaimed NAEP scholars have tried to cast doubt on the state's results.[15]

The most common claim has focused on the state's policy of holding back students who fail to make adequate reading progress by third grade. Critics have suggested that this somehow removes the weakest readers from our fourth-grade NAEP sample, unfairly boosting Mississippi's results on the test.

This critique is nonsense.[16] Students affected by the retention policy do not appear in the NAEP sample until 2017, after three-quarters of our climb to the national average was already complete. That year, the state gained only a single

scale-score point on the test, and the change wasn't statistically significant from 2015.

Crucially, although the retention policy has been a powerful motivational tool in Mississippi's classrooms, the number of students held back has not greatly increased. The retention rate for kids in the gap-closing 2019 cohort was less than 5%, at most only 1.58 percentage points higher than the year before the literacy law passed. The average age of fourth graders taking the NAEP in Mississippi is also no older than before the policy was put in place, suggesting it has not skewed our results by allowing more cognitively developed students to sit for the test.

Finally, there's no such thing as "disappearing" children for fourth-grade NAEP purposes, or any other. No Mississippi child can be retained more than once as a result of our reading law; everyone eventually goes to fourth grade, even if previously retained — and can end up in the NAEP sample. The biggest difference in our fourth graders today is simply that they have much, much stronger reading skills than ever before.

Mississippi's progress is real. Our story proves a point that this country continues to debate: all students, regardless of their lot in life, can learn; and public schools, regardless of what students they serve, can improve.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Mississippi's new heights on NAEP in both reading and math are the result of a two-decade climb to reach, and begin to exceed, the national average. The gradual improvement suggests accumulated reforms, rather than one big change, were responsible for the results.

The gains are shared across students of different races, socioeconomic categories, achievement levels, and disability statuses.

Controlling for demographics, Mississippi led the nation in 2024 fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading, and eighth-grade math. We were fourth in eighth-grade reading.

Claims that Mississippi gamed the NAEP since 2013 to artificially inflate its scores are false and have been repeatedly debunked.

II. THE REAL MISSISSIPPI STORY

Mississippi successful policies were implemented over a nearly two-decade period. Before the state put its famous literacy policies in place, policymakers laid the groundwork by adopting rigorous learning standards, tough testing, and serious accountability measures for schools that failed to deliver results — then successfully weathered a period of political backlash without abandoning core reforms.

Being last in the country has been both a generational problem and a galvanizing force for Mississippi leaders for as long as I've been alive. Our education policy long revolved around the desperate desire to avoid ranking 50th.[17] But for reasons that should seem obvious, "anything but last" was a recipe for mediocrity at best. Officials always seemed to do enough to keep up with the national conversation about reform, but not enough to actually improve learning. That Mississippi might embark on a twenty-year climb starting in 1999 — one that would not just propel us from our last place but eventually make the state a national leader by some measures — would have been an outrageous prediction at the time.

But this unlikely story is exactly what unfolded over two distinct eras. In the first, federal mandates — perhaps most importantly, the controversial Bush-era law No Child Left Behind — pulled Mississippi along with the rest of the nation; in the second and most important period, state leaders pushed the state to find our own success.

THE FEDERAL POLICY ERA

Ask a Mississippian to date the dawn of our modern education history, and they will often point to the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1982, which aimed to address bottom-of-the-barrel school outcomes. Passed just months before the publication of 1983's *A Nation at Risk*, the act established several state firsts, including our first accountability system,[18] statewide testing requirements,[19] compulsory attendance law, and state-funded kindergarten program. It also decreed that to graduate from high school, students would eventually be required to pass a minimum competency exam in addition to accumulating credits. By 1990, Mississippi's education policies resembled

those most common nationwide.[20] When the state NAEP program began in 1992, though, it revealed the same result that had given rise to the Education Reform Act ten years earlier: Mississippi was tied for last in the country in reading and math.[21]

The rest of the 90s brought more of the same incrementalism. Driven by Clinton-era changes in federal law, the state began testing more frequently in lower grades, added more end-of-course exams for high school, and developed the state's first comprehensive content standards. The Mississippi Student Achievement Improvement Act (SAIA),[22] passed in 1999, called for "high expectations" and "high standards" and brought new testing and accountability measures to schools based on student performance.[23] Mississippi's standards were revised as a result. Whether this represented an actual improvement in either reading or math is debatable,[24] but what is clear is that its first-generation state assessment, the Mississippi Curriculum Test, which debuted in 1999, held dismally low student performance expectations, which resulted in proficiency, let alone passage, being well below "high" grade level expectations. As the decade came to a close, Mississippi's education policy landscape was again similar on paper to other states across such issues as accountability, assessment, content standards, teacher licensure, and graduation requirements.[25] NAEP scores, though, had barely budged.[26]

In 2001, before the state could fully implement the SAIA changes,[27] Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a law best remembered now for introducing federal test-based accountability.[28] Schools nationwide had to test students annually, report data overall and by subgroup,[29] and meet "adequate yearly progress" toward getting all students to proficiency by 2014 or face penalties. By 2009, Mississippi finally had something big to celebrate: our NAEP scores had improved significantly in fourth-grade reading as well as fourth and eighth-grade math, mirroring progress nationwide.[30] Today, as back then, I would be hard-pressed to find NCLB fans either in Mississippi or elsewhere, but its testing, reporting, and accountability requirements are the most likely cause of the state's math gains between 2000 and 2009.

There has been no rigorous study of Mississippi's progress in this period, but some research suggests NCLB led to math improvement nationally, particularly at fourth grade, with evidence at eighth.[31] Mississippi's early 2000s reading gains are more of a mystery, but among the possible causes, the catalyzing effect of NCLB is still most likely.[32]

NCLB ushered in another change that received far less attention than its famous testing mandates but would set Mississippi on a new path long term: It forced states to implement "challenging" academic standards and assessments. The U.S. Department of Education (ED), which was tasked with oversight of the law, could no longer turn a blind eye to Mississippi's perennially low expectations. In 2004, its peer review process determined that Mississippi's standards and assessments were so weak that they did not comply with the federal requirements and ordered the state to change them.[33]

Mississippi responded by making the first of two significant improvements to its system of standards, assessments, and accountability that it would implement over the next twenty years. The new standards and assessment were still not very rigorous — but they were better than their predecessors. Since their final rollout wasn't until 2007-2008, they happened too late to explain the state's first era of big growth, but these changes, along with an updated accountability system rolled out in the Fall of 2009, probably played a role in the state's math gains in 2011 and 2013 and eighth grade reading gains in 2011 as the era of NCLB accountability wound down. Mississippi's continual improvement, just as the nation was starting to stagnate, gave us an opportunity to catch up, though it was hard to see at the time.

In fact, no one thought our progress was the beginning of a historic turnaround, as our students still badly trailed national averages. Mississippi has always had a much larger share of students at risk of academic failure, and we were starting from the absolute bottom of state performance. Slightly faster than average progress was not enough; we had to improve much faster than the rest of the nation to see any real difference.

Slightly faster than average progress was not enough; we had to improve much faster than the rest of the nation to see any real difference.

State and local leaders were so inured to this reality that it had become a self-fulfilling prophecy: *Our children are very poor and very far behind; poor children struggle to learn at high levels; therefore, we can't expect them to learn very much, let alone catch up.* This belief was why our state content standards, and critically, our state expectations for grade-level learning, remained stubbornly low, even after the NCLB-era revisions. When our student outcomes only ever matched these very low expectations, most state leaders shrugged. It was a "we can't win for losing" mentality, and it was pervasive. Changing this mindset from one of collective resignation to collective efficacy and a commitment to higher expectations was a necessary precondition for Mississippi's transformation.

THE STATE LEADERSHIP ERA PART I: 2009-2011

Beginning around 2008, Mississippi began to take more ownership for setting a bold education agenda. This shift was subtle at first, starting with a desire among state leaders and advocates to do something about the problem of chronically underperforming schools, which NCLB had lain bare in a new way via the ever-growing federal "school improvement" list.

Beginning around 2008, Mississippi began to take more ownership for setting a bold educations agenda.

NCLB set an expectation that the state would enforce specific consequences when schools did not meet academic goals. But districts, to the chagrin of state leaders, quickly realized they could cleverly game the new system to avoid repercussions for failure.[34] Once they reached their sixth year on the school improvement list, when the direst consequences were supposed to kick in, they could reset the clock by simply reconfiguring grade spans across schools. Two K-6 schools could "restructure" to become a K-3 and a 4-6; a high school might split to have a "ninth grade academy" and a traditional 10-12. The promise to address poor performance swiftly evaporated like the haze rising off a blacktop on a hot Delta morning.

State law was similarly inadequate to deal with the worst examples of poor student performance. Since 1999's SAIA, the state could intervene in school districts in which it determined an "extreme emergency situation" existed, including, "…serious failure to meet minimum academic standards, as evidenced by a continued pattern of poor student performance."[35]

This language strengthened the state's previous takeover law, which could only be invoked to deal with financial weaknesses or health and safety violations.[36] But after a decade, the SAIA standard again had proven too weak.[37] Even if a school consistently scored among the worst performing in the state, it would still take four years minimum before the state could take over the district, though the law and State Board policy provided some interim consequences.

All of the eight districts placed under state "conservatorship" by 2008 suffered from abysmal student achievement in addition to other policy violations, but it was easier to justify the takeover due to cut-and-dry financial or health and safety issues. Furthermore, the state saw its role during conservatorship as bringing the district into compliance with accreditation "process standards" rather than raising student achievement, so state takeover had done little to improve student outcomes for the five districts already released from conservatorship to local control.[38]

Frustrated, the legislature convened a task force in 2008 to study the problem, including learning from Louisiana about its Recovery School District that enabled the state to take over the troubled New Orleans Parish Schools post-Katrina, and replace its traditional public schools with charter schools over time. As a general matter, legislative task forces can be a place where hope goes to die, but this one was bolstered by enough political will to return actionable recommendations.

In 2009, the Mississippi legislature passed the Children First Act, which gave the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) robust new powers to intervene in districts designated as "failing" for two consecutive years under the state accountability model.[39] Children First also created a Mississippi "recovery school district" to try to place student achievement at the center of the takeover process. Importantly, though, Mississippi did not have a viable charter statute in place at the time, and many in state leadership were against the idea of charter schools generally. MDE planned to run the school districts it took over by directly hiring conservators to operate them.

Though narrowly targeted at a small sliver of Mississippi's then-152 school districts, the Children First Act became the first in a series of bills the legislature would pass over the next decade to try to improve schools *beyond* what federal law required. This state leadership became especially important because federal policy became less and less prescriptive as educators and policymakers wearied of the strict requirements imposed by NCLB. Instead, the Obama administration sought to incentivize its policy agenda through the $4.35 billion Race to the Top program as well as the provision of NCLB waivers. From 2009 to 2012, Mississippi adopted policies to compete for these funds and to receive a waiver,[40] but the state never won Race to the Top nor was it ever seriously competitive.[41]

Even so, some of the Obama-era federal policies did play a role in Mississippi's success story. In the two years prior to Race to the Top, prompted by the state's need to revise its accountability system due to the upgraded assessments, the State Board of Education set goals "to reach the national average on national assessments by 2013" as well as "ensure that all students exit third grade reading on grade level by 2020."[42] This was the first time the State Board had ever set goals this ambitious or even suggested that they were possible. The state's Race to the Top application attempted to explain how the state would actually reach these goals beyond complying with previous federal directives.

Most significantly, though myself and other education leaders encouraged Mississippi officials to embrace the Common Core State Standards because they represented a signficant improvement in our learning expectations,[43] there is no question that the possibility of having a more competitive Race to the Top application spurred the State Board to fully adopt the standards in June 2010.[44] Just as crucially, the state agreed to join the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), a move which would dramatically increase Mississippi's student performance expectations.[45] Both these actions would play a foundational role in Mississippi's success, as well as become a test of whether Mississippi could stay the course with meaningful reform.

But even before the backlash against Obama's policies began nationwide and at home, something interesting happened: the dominant education policy agenda in Mississippi began to diverge from the national conversation. Perhaps this was because Mississippi did not win Race to the Top, or perhaps it was because in-state advocates and leaders steered the state in a different direction. Whatever

the reason, Mississippi chose not to spend enormous amounts of political time, energy, and capital on pursuing controversial teacher evaluation, tenure, and compensation reforms or aggressively creating charter schools, though we did finally pass a real law in 2013. (For more detail on Mississippi's efforts to kickstart charters and implement other reforms, see Appendix B.) Instead of the next big idea, we focused on what had already worked in other places, including standards, testing, and accountability; instructional policies for literacy, pre-K, and curriculum; and school turnaround and takeover policies for chronically underperforming schools.

THE STATE LEADERSHIP ERA PART II: 2012-2019

There is only one good thing about being last: someone, somewhere has figured out the solution to the problem already. When Mississippi leaders began to believe that our abominable rankings were not inevitable, we had to confront the multitude of ills we could identify, and evaluate and prioritize the dozens of policy ideas purporting to solve them. We could have ricocheted around with a something-for-everyone agenda, but fortunately, it was apparent to state advocates and leaders that there was a common thread linking the state's many problems — low expectations for everyone.

Adopting the Common Core and the PARCC assessment in 2010 had marked a serious aberration from Mississippi's historical pattern of just-enough-to-get-by policymaking by substantially raising learning standards, assessment quality, and performance expectations, correcting three fundamental, decades-long problems for Mississippi schools. Though the English language arts and math standards were a gigantic leap in quality, they would not have been enough had we continued with our pitiful expectations for performance as measured by the state

assessment. Joining PARCC guaranteed we would no longer be able to hide behind high proficiency rates for mediocre levels of learning. The new test could not be easily gamed by "kill and drill" test prep, as the question formats would require greater critical thinking than old-school multiple-choice tests.

These drastically different standards required new curricula, so schools began to adopt higher-quality, Common Core-aligned reading and math programs as well.[46] Great standards supported by good curricula and rigorous assessments are still not enough, though, if no one is responsible for results. We needed a better accountability system to ensure the standards wouldn't just languish in classrooms. This was the issue the legislature chose to address first, and I believe this decision was key to our state's success. It set the stage for later policy changes to work by putting the right incentive structure in place.

LETTER GRADES FOR SCHOOLS

Our existing accountability system was only three years old in January of 2012, but I was one of many already dissatisfied by how its overly complicated measures obfuscated actual performance.[47] It's worth explaining the messy specifics because they demonstrate how Mississippi's previous practices, which many states still use today, contrast with our new, vastly improved approach.

The system was designed to measure three student outcomes: academic achievement, growth, and high school completion. The achievement indicator gave schools partial credit for "basic" performance — which meant a child's skills were below grade level — through a weighted formula that used an opaque 300-point scale. The growth indicator, unchanged from the early 2000s, not only required advanced mathematics and unreleased data to calculate, but also had no relationship to grade-level learning. It measured growth to nowhere. The state's "high school completion index" gave schools credit for a five-year graduation rate as well as students completing GED programs, a far cry from on-time high school graduation. This had led to a conundrum for the state regarding its pending NCLB waiver, which required Mississippi to hold high schools accountable to a four-year graduation rate for federal purposes.

On top of these myriad problems was the ongoing issue of public confusion over what school ratings meant despite new descriptive labels. The state had abandoned using numbers 1 through 5 as ratings because it was difficult for the public to understand whether a 1 or a 5 was the highest level. However, the state's seven descriptive labels had a similar problem. The top three levels — successful, high performing, and star — were not named after any well-known ranking system. Without knowing that there were two levels above "successful," for example, a parent might believe "successful" was the highest level. The lowest levels were also confusing, slicing the segment of underperforming schools into four with names like "academic watch," "low performing," and "at risk of failing" before, finally, "failing." In short, legislative leaders had interest in adjusting the entire model to make it more straightforward, more transparent, and more rigorous.

Historically, adopting standards and assessments, setting student performance expectations, and devising the details of the accountability system have been the role of MDE for the simple reason that these things are too technical to legislate precisely. Beginning in the 1990s, often due to federal mandates, the legislature had become more prescriptive in telling MDE what it had to do and how, but legislation inevitably must be interpreted, especially when the law contains vague declarations to ensure "high expectations" and "high standards."[48] The average legislator typically neither knew nor was willing to fight about whether the department's interpretations truly met legislative intent. But the 2012 legislature took an entirely different posture towards MDE, embarking on a long era of vigorous, legislatively driven education policymaking.

That year, legislators passed a bill requiring "A through F" accountability labels that mimicked the same grades children receive in school.[49] The new law improved transparency but did not change the underlying weaknesses in how the model assigned ratings. Legislative leaders, though, made it clear they wanted MDE to do something about the system's flaws, so when MDE convened an accountability taskforce in spring 2012 to resolve the issue of federal versus state graduation rates,[50] advocates saw an opening to push MDE into considering a total rewrite.

Schools get additional growth credit for moving the lowest 25% of learners, giving heavy incentive to schools to improve the outcomes of children along the whole performance spectrum and not just right below and above the proficiency line.

The new model that emerged over the next several months solved the problems plaguing Mississippi's previous iteration. Schools could only earn points for meaningful student outcomes. Rather than earning partial credit for less than grade-level achievement, for example, schools earned proficiency points based only on the percentage of students "proficient" or "advanced" on the state exams. The growth calculation shifted from whether a student performed better or worse than expected based on their peer group to whether a student made a "year's worth of growth in a year's time."[51] Schools get additional growth credit for moving the lowest 25% of learners, giving heavy incentive to schools to improve the outcomes of children along the whole performance spectrum and not just right below and above the proficiency line. High schools and districts would only earn credit for graduates who could earn a standard diploma in four years' time. Finally, the model introduced additional attainment measures such as the percentage of

students taking and passing Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or career and technical education credentialing courses and the percentage of children scoring at the readiness benchmark on the ACT.[52]

The new model was far more straightforward, allowing schools to accurately predict their rating once they received their test results; it was more transparent, resulting in a letter grade of A through F for each school and district; and it was more rigorous, requiring schools and districts to help students achieve meaningful indicators of success. The most essential elements of this rewrite became 2013's Senate Bill 2396, which codified the accountability model with unusual specificity.

By raising the bar, the new accountability model also created even more pressure on failing districts, which the Children First Act had decreed could be taken over if they received an F for two consecutive years. In the years that followed, amendments to the act as well as separate legislation allowed the state to take over a district if it received an F in two of three consecutive years, a D or F in four consecutive years, or if more than 50% of schools within a district are an F in a single year or a D for two consecutive years, regardless of the district grade.

When Mississippi finally decided enough was enough, we stopped patting ourselves on the back for too little, too late, and decided that we would instead commit to a new paradigm: expect more of everyone along every dimension and follow evidence about what works as best as we can.

Our new approach to standards, testing, and accountability set the conditions for rethinking what we needed to do in classrooms. The science of reading, evidence-based pre-K, high-quality instructional materials, meaningful coaching and training — it's hard to do these things with purpose and gusto without the consistent, guiding light of high expectations for student performance and the threat of real, not rhetorical, consequences for failure. When Mississippi finally decided enough was enough, we stopped patting ourselves on the back for too little, too late, and decided that we would instead commit to a new paradigm: expect more of everyone along every dimension and follow evidence about what works as best as we can.

It's no coincidence that in the same month the accountability bill went to the governor, the legislature passed three other watershed education bills: the Early Learning Collaborative Act, Mississippi's first state-funded pre-K program; the Literacy Based Promotion Act (LBPA); and the Mississippi Charter Schools Act. Each of these bills showcased the legislature's newfound determination to draw a line on expectations.

THIRD-GRADE RETENTION

The LBPA, for example, was perceived as an accountability law as much as it was seen as a literacy effort. Its most-discussed provision — which required that third graders scoring in the lowest level of performance on the state exam be held back in school — was extremely controversial. According to the then-most recently available state assessment data, 14.3% of third graders had scored in the lowest level and would have been at risk of retention unless they qualified for one of the bill's narrowly drawn "good cause exemptions." (In the years leading up to the 2013 session, only about 3% of third graders were retained annually.) Leaders knew the assessment was expected to become more difficult when PARCC began in 2014-2015, but the legislature ordered the retention policy to start that year anyway, giving the state two years from passage to get ready.[53] Some advocates and many in the education establishment strenuously opposed this requirement, with doomsday predictions of a nearly 30% retention rate being bandied about all the way up until the first test administration in 2015.[54]

To some readers, our legislature's insistence on both the stringent retention policy and the short timeline may seem harsh, reckless even. A retention policy is direct accountability for eight-year-olds, after all, when it is not their fault if they haven't learned to read, and only indirect accountability for teachers and other adults in education who do hold the responsibility to teach reading. But Mississippi's history is important in understanding how we got the gumption, and the votes. We were last. We had been last for as long as anyone could remember. Our students fared poorly in school and beyond, whether they passed to the fourth grade or not,[55] and enough state leaders finally felt the crisis was not inevitable, but a choice.

As State Rep. Rita Martinson (R), who carried the literacy bill in the House, said on the floor in response to questions about alternatives to retention: "I believe that it's time that we stand up and say that we're going to teach children to read, and I'm tired of waiting for the right things to come together. They haven't… We've now gotten to the point where we need to make sure that no child leaves the third grade without being able to read. *…Did you have any [other] recommendations when we've discussed this in the last twenty years?"*[56]

Contrary to some conversations around the Capitol, legislators did not believe the problem was that students or teachers were just not trying hard enough.

Contrary to some conversations around the Capitol, legislators did not believe the problem was that students or teachers were just not trying hard enough. Otherwise, the bill would have been only about retention, when no one was particularly enthusiastic about holding kids back. What won passage were the other provisions establishing a framework for how the state should approach reading difficulties.[57]

First, the bill required school districts to administer a state-adopted universal screener for literacy in grades K-3 up to three times per year, which led to Mississippi finally adopting a kindergarten readiness assessment in 2014, and to regularly report to parents whether this screener identified substantial reading difficulties that might prevent a child's promotion by the end of third grade.[58] The bill also required schools to offer specific services to children who were either identified through the screener or retained at any grade K-3 for reading. It ordered MDE to identify the lowest-performing schools for inclusion in a to-be-developed mandatory state intervention program to help students learn to read. To support MDE in implementing these tasks, it established a state Reading Panel staffed by MDE leadership and state legislators. The legislature appropriated a $9.5 million dollar line item for MDE to implement the law, an unusual move in a tight budget year that signaled the seriousness with which the legislature approached the cause of basic literacy by the end of third grade.

The LPBA may have been the most unyielding new law, but the legislature did nothing in education by half measures that year. The charter bill, which attracted the second-most attention of all the education bills that session, contained sixty pages of enacting text with specifics around the charter school application, the standards for authorizing, how charter schools should be evaluated for performance, what requirements charters needed to abide by, and when schools should be closed. Though less controversial than either the charter bill or the literacy bill, the pre-K bill also drew a hard line on quality that bewildered many in the state's early childhood community. Not only did it require state-funded programs to meet all 10 of the National Institute for Early Education Research's quality benchmarks (making Mississippi one of only five states at the time to do so), but it also considered student outcome measures as one part of an annual evaluation for programs to maintain their funding. Since the pre-K and literacy bills were debated alongside each other, we made a concerted effort to align them, particularly regarding research-based curriculum and readiness assessments, so that the pre-K-3 experience would reflect consistency in the state's approach.

THE SCIENCE OF READING AND OTHER KEY STATE LITERACY POLICIES

It's becoming common for leaders in other states to claim they are "copying Mississippi." Many of these states, though, are picking and choosing the elements they find most politically palatable. Mississippi's reading policy spans not just our law but also the policies that MDE put in place to support implementation.[59] The end result — explained in some detail below — is a multi-layered system in which teachers are intensively trained and use carefully selected materials, and every student receives regular assessments to track their progress. See Appendix C for more information.

Mississippi children take the state kindergarten readiness assessment within the first 30 days of school. (If they participate in a state-funded pre-K program, they take an aligned assessment within the first 30 days of pre-K as well as at its end.) If a child scores below the readiness benchmark, parents immediately receive notification via a state-drafted letter that lists the services the school will provide. Students will take a follow-up diagnostic assessment to identify their areas of weakness and receive an individualized reading plan with their services within two weeks. These students' progress will be regularly monitored via the state's multi-tiered system of support. The school will also prepare a read-at-home plan for parents to use with their child.

After kindergarten entry, students will take a state-approved screener three times per year, with notification and any needed services provided each time. At the end of kindergarten and the beginning of first grade, students will also take a state-adopted dyslexia screener. At the end of third grade, students are promoted based on whether they meet the benchmark on the state English language arts test. Students who do not pass the first time must pass one of two retakes or qualify for one of the other limited good cause exemptions, or they will be retained. Parents of retained students again receive immediate notification as to why and what services their child will receive, which must include intensive reading remediation as defined by state law.

Aspiring elementary teachers in state educator preparation programs take coursework that is aligned to the science of reading (SOR).[60] This coursework is required to explain the decades-long scientific consensus on how humans learn to read, including the conceptual framework of the Simple View of Reading.[61] This framework explains that reading comprehension is the product of word recognition skills and language comprehension. While word recognition includes phonological awareness and decoding skills (phonics is the method by which decoding is taught), language comprehension brings meaning to what has been decoded by employing background knowledge, vocabulary, understanding of language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. Pre-K-3 teachers must be prepared to teach all of these skills, especially the foundational skills of word recognition. All pre-K-3 teachers must pass the state's SOR assessment or the MDE-approved SOR Pathways to Proficient Reading bootcamp for licensure. Once in a classroom, they will receive additional SOR training from their district or directly from the state and have access to ongoing professional development from the state or district- or state-hired coaches. Nearly all will be required to use a state-adopted, SOR-aligned, knowledge-building curriculum.

This intensive approach would be impossible without heavy state-level involvement and support for local districts. MDE funds the statewide K-3 assessment system, which includes the K-readiness assessment, screeners, and diagnostics. They select a list of appropriate screeners for districts not using the state screeners in consultation with the Reading Panel. They track all districts' use of the screeners to ensure compliance with rules about their frequency and utilization in identifying children for reading services. They select SOR training and make it available statewide. In schools MDE selects as literacy support schools, they select both the literacy curriculum and the screeners. They provide mandatory SOR training to both teachers and administrators. They also hire, train, and monitor a coach for every K-3 teacher. Other districts can send their coaches to the same training to benefit from the state system. Pre-K coaches in state-funded classrooms also receive the state training.

RESISTING POLITICAL BACKLASH

The 2013 session made history, but it was only the first step in making change. Between 2013 and 2015, Mississippi experienced an intensifying frenzy of implementation efforts. All of the fundamentals of public school — our standards, our assessments, our expectations for student performance, and our accountability model — had changed for the better. Even the state's goals changed when the State Board of Education adopted a stronger, more specific strategic plan in 2014 after hiring Carey Wright to lead the department in November 2013.[62] How the implementation process unfolded for all of these policies is one of the key secrets to Mississippi's success, but we almost didn't get to see any of the fruits of our labor.

Zeal for change among some corners of our political landscape quickly soured into backlash, fomented by national right-wing conspiracy theories about Common Core as well as undisguised contempt for anything having to do with President Obama. The confluence of this national toxicity with the state's ed reform implementation timelines made for an explosive 2015 session, testing the resolve of Mississippi's leaders. That year was when the state planned to administer PARCC and when the third-grade gate would go into effect for the first time. It was also an election year for all statewide offices, including every state legislator, and the filing deadline fell on March 1, just after the middle of the session. Right-leaning media were running an anti-Common Core story every day to turn up the heat. School district leaders were bemoaning the challenges with the computerized PARCC assessment and the specter of failing 30% of third graders. Governor Bryant, who was running for reelection, was leading a crusade to dump both Common Core and PARCC, and there were rumors our ed reform champion, Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, who was also running for reelection, would attract a primary challenger from the right if he didn't follow along. Rank-and-file legislators who are mostly drawn into politically "safe" districts were suddenly looking over their shoulder at every turn, wondering if they, too, would draw a primary opponent.

Zeal for change among some corners of our political landscape quickly soured into backlash, fomented by national right-wing conspiracy theories about Common Core as well as undisguised contempt for anything having to do with President Obama.

It was a mess. Had we given up at that moment, I doubt anyone would be talking about us now. The reform muscle we had built over the preceding years, and the backbone our leaders had grown, didn't fail us, though, and in the face of misplaced outrage over "Obamacore," it didn't hurt that our champions remained equally as angry over the state's continued low ranking. We managed to hold onto the standards, the third-grade retention policy, the accountability model, and the integrity of the state department of education, but not without a price. Most notably, Mississippi backed out of the PARCC consortium, and the GOP-controlled legislature forbade the department from joining any other state testing consortium.[63]

Still, we ended the 2015 session with our state agenda mostly intact. MDE immediately procured a replacement state assessment that would approximate PARCC in rigor and made as few tweaks as possible to the standards to satisfy the political fervor for burning the house down. We were exhausted, but we had held the line. Within months, politics had moved onto issues that would animate the 2016 presidential election, none of which had to do with K-12 education. Inside the education bubble, the focus turned to how to implement the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed in December 2015.

Once the political temperature normalized, Mississippi quietly kept going with our reform agenda, with both the legislature and MDE working together. The legislature continued to evolve the state takeover process, creating new takeover pathways and reforming the conservatorship process to try to accelerate results. In 2016, on the recommendation of MDE, the state passed an amendment to the LBPA to raise the bar for passage and require a reading intervention plan for every student with identified reading difficulties.[64] The same year, a 2014 bill which required teachers seeking a new elementary education license to pass an exam proving they understood the science of reading went into effect.[65] School grades based on the new assessment "counted" for consequences purposes for the first time as well.[66] In 2018, MDE began a redesign of its process for curriculum approval to ensure districts chose high-quality instructional materials.[67] In 2018-2019, the first full-year cohort of state-funded pre-K students made it to third grade and were part of the first group to face the higher bar for third-grade promotion.[68] Fourth graders that year finally achieved what the State Board had dreamt ten years prior — performance at the national average on the NAEP.

WHAT SUCCEEDED

Considering the context before, during, and after the passage of the LBPA, I find it difficult to ascribe the weight of Mississippi's success solely to the literacy reforms. Were this the case, we would most likely see big shifts in the rate of improvement at the point when the first LBPA-affected cohort took the fourth-grade NAEP and then again when they took the eighth-grade NAEP. Instead, we see far more consistent improvement, with as many big jumps coming before these cohorts took the NAEP as after. A detailed discussion of this issue can be found in Appendix D.

I don't blame credit-literacy-alone adherents for their enthusiasm in telling this story with a singular focus on the science of reading. I, too, believe in the importance of our literacy work and the effectiveness of the "science of reading." What I fear is that when other states ignore our context, they set themselves up for failure. Piecemeal policy gets piecemeal results. What happens when these states that claim to have copied Mississippi can't find success and inevitably begin to doubt both the science of reading and our results?

The evidence that this die may already be cast is readily available without looking at anything other than literacy policies. In October 2025, EdWeek updated a story classifying literacy policy provisions into six buckets: teacher preparation, teacher certification or licensure renewal, professional development or coaching, assessment, materials, and instruction and/or intervention. The "feel good" pieces, like professional development and coaching, ring up the most subscribers at 38 states. The "feel uncomfortable" pieces, like changes to teacher certification or licensure, have half the number of adopters, with only 20.

The most uncomfortable policy plank of all — basing third-grade promotion on passage of a reading test — has very few strict adopters. EdWeek classified 27 states as having a law that "allows or requires" retention for reading deficiencies. A closer look at the data reveals that even when states "require" retention, they often provide far more expansive exemptions than Mississippi does. Several of these exemptions would not ensure a student can read by fourth grade, including completion of a "reading plan" without any follow-up assessment; the judgment of a teacher, principal, or committee; review of a student portfolio; or "progress" after summer school or other intervention.

Mississippi's good cause exemptions are stringent by comparison: They are available for students who have passed one of the two retakes of the state assessment; have limited English proficiency and have had fewer than two years to learn English; have disabilities that make the state assessment inappropriate for them; have disabilities and either have been retained once already or have had two years of intensive reading remediation; or who do not have disabilities but have received intensive reading remediation for two years and were previously retained

twice.[69] This forces the system to focus on demonstrating better-than-basic reading skills for promotion for nearly all kids. EdWeek didn't even track the last "feel uncomfortable" provision, which is mandatory parental notification at multiple points over multiple years, so there can be no surprises when a child still can't read by the end of third grade.

The parental notification and promotion provisions — and the resulting horror of having to tell a parent that their child still doesn't know how to read even after all the documented warning signs — are what gave everyone in our system the drive to implement the law well.[70] If no one in the system is willing to feel uncomfortable for a while, we can't expect to feel good about the results, and yet we continue to make education policy nationwide that requires productive struggle only on the part of children. States should adopt the science of reading, yes, but if they want to really copy Mississippi, they need to ask themselves whether they are truly willing to be accountable for children learning to read, including being willing to do the work to align the system for that goal.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Mississippi pursued a long-term agenda to improve education that included changes to standards, testing, and accountability; consequences for poor performance; evidence-informed instructional policy; and support for implementation, rather than a single focus on reforms to teaching reading.

The state built a strong foundation for further reform by focusing first on foundational issues like expectations for learning and chronically low-performing schools before turning our attention to instructional policy.

Changes in federal policy contributed to Mississippi's reforms early on, but state policymakers' leadership became a decisive factor in our success since 2009.

The determination to stay the course when politics shifted enabled the state to persist long enough to see improvements.

Mississippi's success is best understood as the culmination of reform efforts over time.

III. A TEAM, NOT A SUPERHERO

Mississippi built an informal network of reform champions working in and alongside government to support the state's success. Rather than a single superhero, it was this team, built over time through trusting relationships, that drove change and persisted through moments of political backlash.

Everyone always asks me who Mississippi's superhero was. I understand why. Humans think in stories, and an extraordinary leader triumphing against all odds is a familiar and compelling narrative about how change happens. In fact, we most often think of leadership in this way, as a singular pursuit. Maybe this is why people find it so disconcerting when I tell them that Mississippi didn't have a Superman; we had a team. It was this team that shifted the state's mindset about what was possible, worked to adopt sound policies, kept a steady hand on the wheel during implementation, and held the line when we encountered backlash.

Though Mississippi's Gulf Coast, like New Orleans, was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, it did not become a catalyzing event for educational transformation, nor did it bring us new philanthropy or thousands of talented young people hoping to be part of rebuilding a city, let alone a state. Mississippi, in fact, has never before enjoyed the type of philanthropic largesse, ongoing media attention, or talent explosion experienced by any of the places that rose and fell as education reform darlings over the last century, several of whom have not been as successful as we have. As I recently told Kymyona Burk, the state's first literacy director: In Mississippi, we only have us.

Our process of building collective leadership[71] was not simple. There was no single person, entity, or philanthropist who gathered us, helped us form a plan, and sustained our efforts. It was far more organic than that, with relationships between individuals across nonprofits, the legislature, the state department of education, local school districts, and other state offices growing in number and trust over time. Mississippi is a small state, so it is both possible and likely that everyone could know everyone else involved with state education policymaking. At times, this can lead to groupthink, but it also means that a handful of people working together could truly be the genesis of profound change.

LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP

Mississippi's story begins at the doors of the State Capitol. No single individual in our state government — not a governor, not a state superintendent — could make, and make stick, all the changes that were necessary for reform. Mississippi is a legislatively dominated state with a constitutionally weak governor who has limited control over K-12 education. Instead, power over schools resides in the State Board of Education, which not only appoints the State Superintendent but also governs MDE, including approving all of its policies. The State Board was designed for stability instead of change, with nine appointed members who each serve staggered, renewable, nine-year terms. The governor only appoints five of its nine members, with the lieutenant governor and speaker of the House also getting two each. Unless a governor, lieutenant governor, or speaker serves more than one term, he may not even get to appoint all of his office's seats.[72]

For this reason, legislation can often be the most logical and accessible pathway for educational change in Mississippi. Laws also provide more lasting and powerful directives because they require more voices and more shared power to adopt and amend than administrative policies or programs. The legislature, like the rest of the Mississippi state government, though, is designed to preserve the status quo. Not only do we have a lot of legislators to convince (122 house members and 52 senators for a state of a little less than three million people), but we also have to beat the merciless legislative calendar, which requires general bills to be introduced at the very beginning of a session and to advance very quickly —ranging from a few weeks to a matter of days – within a typical 90-day session to remain "alive."

One of the major problems I encountered when I started lobbying in 2009, the year Mississippi passed the Children First Act, was that the legislature was unaccustomed to driving an education reform agenda, or really any learning-focused agenda at all.

One of the major problems I encountered when I started lobbying in 2009, the year Mississippi passed the Children First Act, was that the legislature was unaccustomed to driving an education reform agenda, or really any learning-focused agenda at all. Although the purpose of the Children First Act was to address underperforming schools, for instance, the critical sections related to state school district takeovers weren't what most legislators focused on.[73] The biggest source of controversy in the bill was instead a provision known as "no pass, no play," which required students to earn a "C" average before participating in extracurriculars like band or high school football. Debates were long and passionate, with a number of legislators believing that the state should not require minimum grades because children "may only come to school for their activities" and "we shouldn't take that away from them."

Outside of conversations about state takeover policy that session, legislators spent little time talking about student achievement or what to do about it. The education committees mostly took cues from the state department of education

on what technical tweaks they should make to solve regulatory problems or address any federal directives. They had little interest in big reforms that would affect all or most school districts.

Part of this problem was the mindset that there was nothing the state could do to get better, as I've already discussed. But another big factor was structural: the Capitol, where knowledge is power in a very literal sense, was an information-poor environment, allowing insiders representing special interests to wield outsized influence on the process. Legislators in Mississippi are part-time, which is not unusual across the country, but unlike in some other state houses, they lack either part- or full-time policy staff or any personal staff at all,[74] a privilege only afforded to the speaker of the House and the lieutenant governor, who traditionally serves as the president of the Senate with the power to assign chairmanships and committees. The Mississippi legislature also does not have a research and policy office that can provide expert education policy advice. This means that every legislator except the Speaker has to rely on their own research efforts, what MDE tells them, or on lobbyists to understand all of the complicated education issues they may vote on. The deference the legislature gave MDE stemmed partly from this information vacuum, since their other option was a lobbyist. Education lobbyists in 2009 generally consisted of three types: stakeholder groups, like the superintendents' or teachers' associations; advocacy groups that represented a particular funder or ideology; and corporate lobbyists.

Of these, the most active lobbyists came from the stakeholder establishment – the superintendents' and the teachers' associations and aligned advocacy groups, which typically opposed big reforms and focused primarily on education funding. Few companies needed to consistently pay for an education lobbyist and, generally, the money involved paled in comparison to the amounts at stake for other issues or even education in other states. Establishment groups had interests on the line in every vote, came to every meeting, and were naturally very vocal about their opinions.

The Capitol was not only information poor and dominated by pro-status quo views; it was also often a complete black box for the public. There were not enough local media to cover the legislative process, and almost nothing was streamed online in 2009. This lack

of transparency gave Capitol insiders even more power. Being physically present at meetings didn't just give lobbyists valuable information not available otherwise; it also helped them influence legislative behavior. Legislators knew that the lobbying corps would largely shape the narrative of their actions because they each had enormous contact lists to disseminate their viewpoint, and meetings were rarely covered in the press. Unless and until an idea became broadly accepted among both the education establishment and political leadership, it was very unlikely that legislators would support it.

That Mississippi's political parties also lacked detailed education agendas contributed to the power imbalance in favor of insiders. The Republican Party in the early 2000s was mostly asleep at the wheel when it came to education. Although Gov. Haley Barbour supported several education policy reforms during his tenure,[75] he never articulated a comprehensive vision for Mississippi public schools. As for the Democrats, they had one agenda, and one agenda only: "fully fund" the Mississippi Adequate Education Program, the state's funding formula for K-12 public schools. The unspoken rationale behind this agenda was that the only problem with Mississippi schools was that they didn't have enough money. The formula was over a decade old by the time I started lobbying and had only been "fully funded" twice, in 2003 and 2007, prior to the Great Recession.[76] Ironically, Dems had held a majority in both chambers every year since Reconstruction except briefly in 2007 and, in theory, could have "fully funded" the formula annually since its 1997 passage but had not. Meanwhile, the Democrats had been slowly losing power over the previous two decades due to party switching or outright defeat at the polls.

By 2009, with a closely divided Senate and a slightly larger Democratic majority in the House, the parties were at a stalemate across a variety of issues, including education. If the House passed a bill on a party-line vote, it was often immediately on life support in the Senate, simply due to politics. Democrats in either chamber had no incentive to buck the party line and focus on other problems in education, like standards or accountability. Republicans also had little political incentive to meet Democrats halfway or to chart their own course on anything since the party continued to gain ground regardless.

The Children First Act — which gave the state its new powers to take over schools in struggling districts — was only possible in this context because it had the support of the governor, MDE, and some of the advocacy groups, while the establishment did not strongly oppose it. After all, it was targeted at a narrow selection of the most chronically underperforming districts. No one in power at the time was trying to muster that kind of broad consensus for deeper reforms, if they even knew what those might be.

When I started Mississippi First in 2008, it was the state's first and only real education policy organization. What I didn't realize until my first session was how much the state needed it to fill the policy and transparency void at the Capitol. By providing credible, research-based advice independent of any of Mississippi's

factions and an entrée to the wider policy conversations happening nationally, I came to occupy a unique role at the Capitol, with relationships built on trust in my integrity and expertise rather than what special interest I represented.

By providing credible, research-based advice independent of any of Mississippi's factions and an entrée to the wider policy conversations happening nationally, I came to occupy a unique role at the Capitol, with relationships built on trust in my integrity and expertise rather than what special interest I represented.

An advocate like me, though, needs to find a champion, as longtime Democratic legislator Cecil Brown advised me early on in my career when I asked him how to pass big legislation.[77] It was this advice of *finding* champions, rather than converting those already in the most powerful positions but who suffered from the wrong mindset, that would change how I approached advocacy for the rest of my tenure at Mississippi First. Finding the right champion was a tall order. We needed someone — or rather, several someones — with the rare combination of political courage, diligence, and belief in reform. We also needed the right political moment for a champion to bring these skills to bear.

Perhaps the most consequential legislator to fit this description was State Senator Gray Tollison (D until 2011, then R), who was in the middle of his fourth four-year term in 2009 and had long served on the Senate Education Committee. Sen. Tollison's command of Mississippi education law and policy was among the best in the state, as he had served for years as a school board attorney in his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi. He was also an uncommon legislator in another way. After I mentioned a study to him in our earliest meeting, he had printed it out, read it, and had questions for me by the next time I saw him. However, much like other reform-minded legislators in the Senate or House, Tollison found himself largely stymied by the system. He could stop or amend bad bills, but he couldn't redirect the agenda.

Everything changed with the 2011 election when Republicans gained a majority in both houses for the first time since Reconstruction, leading to the state's first Republican speaker of the House since that era. The party also won nearly all statewide offices, installing both a new governor and lieutenant governor. The new leadership at the Capitol was open to new ideas. They not only had to prove that they could govern, but they also wanted to draw a stark contrast between the old and the new. The 2011 election ushered in a host of freshman legislators, many of whom were younger than their predecessors and more attuned to the current state of Mississippi's public schools. With leadership changing party hands in the House, and with a new lieutenant governor, the Capitol got a whole new set of chairs and newly constituted committees.

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves (R) appointed Sen. Tollison the chair of the Senate Ed Committee. Education was not the Republicans' home turf, so they were looking for policies to champion other than "fully funding MAEP." I believed a reform agenda, which had been championed nationally and in other states by both

Democrats and Republicans in the early 2000s, could work.

In a stroke of luck, the legislative turnover coincided with when Jeb Bush's organization, ExcelinEd, was hunting for new states. I had met Patricia Levesque, ExcelinEd's Executive Director, in 2009 at one of my earliest PIE Network conferences and found her to be a serious-minded policy professional with a heart for children. She called me after the 2011 election to say that ExcelinEd was interested in Mississippi and asked me what I thought. I was thrilled and asked her to come.[78] I saw the set of policies Bush had championed as governor of Florida — accountability, voluntary pre-K, public charter schools[79] — as aligned with what I believed Mississippi needed. He would also bring star power at a time when I had no vocal allies yet and only a few key legislative relationships. Levesque told me that their protocol would be to reach out to Phil Bryant, the new governor. Bush preferred to make initial contact with governors since he was a former governor and saw it as a professional courtesy. I agreed but encouraged her to meet legislators, especially Tollison and Lt. Gov. Reeves.

The 2012 session felt like an opening act — to what, though, it wasn't yet clear. The only notable reform bill that passed that session was the re-labeling of our accountability categories. But I could already see who the education champions would be and how the education agenda was shaping up in both the House and the Senate the following year.

ExcelinEd's team continued to meet Mississippi politicians and leadership at MDE throughout the spring and began supporting state efforts to rewrite the accountability model by lending Christy Hovanetz, ExcelinEd's accountability expert, to the state task force. In summer 2012, Mississippi First co-hosted an event with the Mississippi Center for Public Policy (MCPP), a conservative "family values" think tank, featuring Jeb Bush. The idea was to signal broad political support for education reform by combining the nonpartisan, public school supporting Mississippi First with MCPP. The Speaker and Lt. Gov. quickly jumped on board to designate the event a legislative hearing for both chambers, paving the way for every member to attend in their official capacity. To my delight, the event was packed even though it was in the "off season." Bush's presentation of "the Florida Story," detailing how reform had driven student success in his state was eye-opening for our legislators.

Suddenly, a real reform agenda seemed within the realm of possibility, and Tollison was ready to shepherd a big package through the Senate the following year with

the full support of Lt. Gov. Reeves. Not to be outdone, Governor Bryant signaled that 2013 would be an "education session" and prepared his own "Education Works" bill that initially included a copy of ExcelinEd's Literacy Based Promotion Act but was later amended to focus only on Bryant's proposals for dropout prevention, a performance-based educator compensation pilot, and a teacher education scholarship. Speaker Philip Gunn also prepared his own policy agenda for the 2013 session, including many of the same education ideas — literacy, pre-K, charter schools — that the Senate championed. As a sign of this unusual consensus, the literacy, pre-K, and charter school bills each had House and Senate versions, increasing the likelihood that something from each bill would pass. The momentum from Bush's visit, the existing political need to round out a robust education agenda, and some healthy competition among state leaders on who could best champion education put the wind at our backs.

Even with strong political support from state leaders, getting good bills over the finish line requires not just legislative know-how but also the stamina to persist through all the twists and turns of the session.

Even with strong political support from state leaders, getting good bills over the finish line requires not just legislative know-how but also the stamina to persist through all the twists and turns of the session. Tollison brought the strength of his 18 years of legislative experience to bear in passing everything through the Mississippi Senate, with help from Sen. Brice Wiggins (R) on pre-K and several Senate co-authors on the Literacy Based Promotion Act, including Sen. Angela Hill (R), who helped Tollison carry it, and Sen. Nancy Collins (R), who had been the primary author of the A-F school accountability rating bill in 2012. Tollison carried both the charter act and the accountability bills on his own. In the House, different members took on the task of carrying the major bills, with Rep. Charles Busby (R) handling charter schools, Rep. Toby Barker (R) carrying pre-K, Rep. Rita Martinson (R) carrying the literacy bill, and Chairman John Moore (R) ensuring the rest made it to conference.

Throughout the session, if I wasn't in Tollison's office, I was running around the building meeting with other legislators. ExcelinEd provided consistent support for the LBPA, but we were mostly on our own for the other bills. Until final passage for each bill, I held my breath, but not only did the pre-K bill pass with over 80% of the vote in both houses with strong majorities from both parties, so did the literacy bill, which even got 95% of the vote in the Senate. The charter bill had the closest vote, just eking by the 52% mark in the House. Remarkably, the accountability bill found no objections in either the House or the Senate on final passage.

Looking back now, it's remarkable to me how much the leadership of individual legislators in a body of 174 people can carry an enormous, and even enormously controversial, piece of legislation through the process. Legislators of both parties answered this call over the years.[80] The courage to be a lone voice, or a loud voice, when it is easier or more expedient to be silent or to go along, is far too rare in our politics. One of the most important instances I ever witnessed was in the 2015 session, when Common Core had become so toxic that almost no one wanted to

speak up for it. One morning, I was sitting in Room 409 of the Capitol just before 9 a.m. when the Senate Education Committee was scheduled to hold its standing meeting. Tollison burst into the crammed committee room, radiating with angry energy and holding what appeared to be a bill. "You!" he pointed at me, "my office!" and stormed out.

I had known him long enough and well enough at that point to know he wasn't angry with me, but nonetheless, my heart was pounding as I stumbled into the chairman's office, wondering what could make him so furious. He slammed the bill on his small conference table in front of me. "Fix this," he commanded. I stared at the text for a few moments before it clicked — it was a bill to repeal Common Core and replace it with God-knows-what designed entirely by a politically appointed panel.[81] I calmly took out a red pen from my purse (keeping one handy was an old habit from my English teacher days) and began striking through text and writing amendments. I was moving as quickly as possible, but with every second that went by, Tollison was delaying the meeting. He was still angrily pacing the room minutes later when the arm-twister-in-chief for the lieutenant governor burst through the door to demand why Tollison was holding the meeting.

The question sparked a shouting match. Apparently, the right-most flank in the Senate had offered a deal to the lieutenant governor the night before: make concessions on Common Core, and we'll stop attacking you. (Keep in mind that Lt. Gov. Reeves was running for governor and wary of a challenger in the primary.) Tollison had not been invited to that meeting, it seemed, and had not seen the actual text, which had been written by the anti-Common Core crusaders, until that morning. An obvious threat hung in the air. Tollison could go along or be removed as chair.

But Tollison didn't back down. "This is crazy shit, and I don't do crazy shit," Tollison told him.

When the staffer wasn't getting anywhere with Tollison, he turned his fire on me, "And who do you work for now?" Another obvious threat — he planned to call my boss and have me fired for aiding and abetting Tollison. "The same place I've always worked," I told him, "Mississippi First." He slammed the door when he left.

I went back to editing while Tollison juggled talking things through with me and taking edits to the drafting office for printing. Although neither of us were truly happy with the outcome,[82] we had pulled together an amended committee substitute that prevented a wholesale rewrite of the standards by a politically motivated committee and gave MDE, under Carey Wright's leadership, more power to control the process, much to the dismay of the dealmaking Common Core antagonists on the committee.[83]

After the meeting, Tollison went straight to the lieutenant governor's office for an audience. He never told me exactly what happened, but he kept his chairmanship. Mississippi First put out a strong statement opposing the bill and went to work in the House to hamstring the effort further.[84] The bill would ultimately pass two

months later in a much watered-down form, so watered down in fact that in a great twist of irony, Governor Bryant would veto it because it didn't do enough to destroy the standards.[85]

Years later, on the day the 2024 NAEP data was released in 2025, I ran into now-Governor Reeves at the gym. He went out of his way to speak to me after a hard workout about NAEP and what it had taken for us to achieve success. "You know who I can't stop thinking about today?" He asked me. "Gray Tollison."

"No one thought this was possible," I told him, "But us."

I had thought of my friend Gray, too, that day, and I wondered if Lt. Gov. Reeves was remembering that closed-door meeting in 2015 or simply Tollison's long record of support for educational improvement. "No one thought this was possible," I told him, "But us."

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

When the governor signs a notable bill, people line up for the photo op but quickly disappear as soon as the ink is dry. Implementation is neither glamorous nor exciting, but policy is not self-executing. It requires humans in the right seats at the right time with the right goals doing the right work to come to fruition. This is the least talked about aspect of Mississippi's story and one of the least considered generally among education policy wonks: the implementation process matters enormously to whether policy "works," and the people leading the implementation are the most important factor.

At the time that the Mississippi legislature decided to lead with a student achievement focus, MDE was in transition. Dr. Lynn House had become the interim State Superintendent in 2012 after the departure of the prior state superintendent. Dr. House's leadership was quietly transformational for Mississippi. As Deputy Superintendent, she had pushed for the state's adoption of Common Core and participation in PARCC and heavily promoted them publicly. Her focus on state support for early Common Core implementation planted the seeds of the department's shift to service instead of compliance. She also hired Kim Benton to be the director of school turnaround and then elevated her to Interim Chief Academic Officer when House became the Interim State Superintendent.

Dr. Benton had led the successful turnaround of a high-poverty elementary school in her hometown of Meridian, Mississippi, before eventually coming to MDE. Her energy, focus, and belief in children shaped the federal school turnaround work at the department. When Dr. House picked her to serve as CAO, it put Dr. Benton in exactly the right seat at the right time, when the state needed an effective, child-centered leader to make sense of the raft of reform bills coming out of the legislature. Dr. Benton led the earliest implementation efforts of the LBPA and the pre-K law, while staying the course on Common Core and rigorous state assessments in the critical months between the end of the session in April 2013 and Carey Wright's start date that November.

By the time Dr. Wright took the helm in November 2013, Dr. Benton and the fledgling MDE team[86] had already lain important planks of the foundation for the next phase of the department's lifecycle. Dr. Wright came in with a vision to complete this transformation by reorganizing the department[87] around new outcomes-focused, strategic goals, which she helped the State Board create and adopt. Critically, she also initiated a public process of annually reporting on the state's progress against those goals using extensive data and metrics. Under Dr. Wright's leadership, MDE continued to evolve its implementation strategies, tactics, and support for all of the state's new laws and policies and began to document these plans in public-facing toolkits, guides, and reports. Many of MDE's implementation strategies, like the literacy coaching model, became essential aspects of these policies' effectiveness.

Many of MDE's implementation strategies, like the literacy coaching model, became essential aspects of these policies' effectiveness.

In general, largely due to Dr. Wright's strong support of the reform agenda, Mississippi never suffered from malicious compliance by the department – the phenomenon where bureaucrats implement legislation in a way that undermines its intentions – despite the demands many of these new laws placed on MDE to dramatically change its practices. The legislature, for its part, maintained a steady focus on student achievement without wide swings in the types of policies that it passed, which allowed the department the time and space to fully develop plans, implement them, and then make adjustments or ask for legislative tweaks to ensure the policies produced gains. This did not mean that the legislature always saw eye to eye with MDE, but the two mostly worked out their differences without sacrificing children to politics. Remarkably, this long partnership persisted, for example, even when relations between MDE and Governor Bryant soured over Common Core.

OTHER STATE AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

News articles from the time regularly mention the legislature and MDE, but some of the most important members of the team were people in leadership roles in state nonprofits and local school districts. In Mississippi, relationships are how everything gets done, and I regularly worked with a core group of reform-minded leaders, often behind the scenes, to resolve problems, think through improvements, and gather data on the effects of our efforts. This informal network provided continuity to the process through different political eras and as politicians rotated in and out of offices or staffers moved on from MDE or other government offices.

For literacy, one of the state's top experts was Kelly Butler, the brains behind the Barksdale Reading Institute. BRI, founded in 2000 by a $100 million investment to the University of Mississippi from Jim and Sally Barksdale, had nearly 15 years' worth of experience trying to support Mississippi schools in implementing scientifically based reading instruction, particularly through coaching and curriculum, by the time the LBPA passed.[88] Kelly had taken the lead in pushing


Hh
Rr
Center

higher ed to better prepare future educators to teach reading through two coursework studies as well as organized professional growth opportunities for faculty. Among many other roles, she served as a bridge between Bryant's office and MDE on reading when politics went awry in the critical first years after passage and served on the Reading Panel. Another state literacy expert was Dr. Angela Rutherford, who pioneered several literacy initiatives while serving as a professor at the University of Mississippi. Like Kelly Butler, Rutherford was also on the Reading Panel and now leads the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading in the state.

School district leaders, too, were especially important in convincing their peers that change was possible and showing them how to achieve it. Bonita Coleman, who led Ocean Springs School District and served on Wright's leadership council for superintendents, and Glen East, who led Gulfport School District, showed that implementing reforms could make a good school district into a great one. East recently served as the Chair of the State Board of Education. Todd Klunk at the Kellogg Foundation, one of the few providing philanthropic support, worked closely with myself and others on strategic investments like supporting pre-K coaches until we could get a legislative appropriation. In an age of transactional politics, building a broad network of trusted partners can still make the difference between big change and yet another failed reform.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Mississippi's improvement was a team effort, with leadership spanning the statehouse, state offices, the Mississippi Department of Education, local school districts, and in- and out-of-state nonprofits.

The Mississippi state legislature launched the state's transformation by passing reform legislation, while the Mississippi Department of Education implemented and improved upon legislative efforts.

Even though success required collective leadership, individuals inside and outside of state government who put children above politics had a profound effect on the state's trajectory.

Relationships built on trust over time provided Mississippi's reforms longevity.

IV. A NATIONAL REASON FOR HOPE

For many, many people, Mississippi represents everything they think is wrong with America. We're ignorant, we're poor, we're racist. We're first in all the bad things, and we're last in all the good things. That's our national reputation in every way — or was, when I started Mississippi First in 2008. When it comes to Mississippi and our people, we're counted out and counted last, if we're even counted at all. And because of this strange space we occupy in the American psyche, we fall into a bicoastal blind spot, even when we have a good story to tell.

This Mississippi moment we're having is both long overdue in its timing, and annoyingly predictable in its execution. A brief story: in 2010, I went to a PIE Network conference in Nashville. Mississippi First was barely two years old, and we were operating on less than $100,000 a year. I was paying for essentially everything I needed for my work out of my own salary, or going without. I wouldn't even have health insurance until I got married in 2011. Mississippi has no large foundations and no wealthy people who give appreciable amounts to K-12-education-focused organizations not named after or controlled by themselves. I realized I had to play the national foundation fundraising game at a time when all national foundations that even had a glimmer of a hope of funding policy advocacy in Mississippi were transitioning away from taking unsolicited proposals, and it was impossible to casually meet ed reform funders in Jackson, Mississippi. On top of it, we had no "track record" yet because we were so new, and I was a complete unknown as a young founder. I also kept telling people something that seemed completely audacious at the time — that our vision was to make Mississippi first in education.

PIE kindly comped my hotel room, and I paid for gas to drive the six hours from Jackson to Nashville. I knew this would be a rare opportunity to meet program officers from several large, national education reform foundations who may give us some change from their desk drawers. I was right. I managed to pigeonhole a program officer from a very large, very well-funded, and very active international foundation who was funding elsewhere the exact same work I wanted to do in Mississippi. He was tall, so I had to look up at him as I asked excitedly what we needed to do to be considered for a grant. I'll never forget how he looked down

his nose at me as he sneered, "Mississippi's just not doing anything interesting enough for us to fund." Never mind the fact that this foundation was in the midst of making a series of bets on new organizations in places that had yet to move the needle, or that the reason it gave advocacy grants at all was to encourage states and cities to do what it considered interesting. The idea that Mississippi might *become* interesting with some support was so absurd to this man that he could not even bother to be polite to me about it.[89]

I would have some version of this gut-punch conversation with national funders, national consultants, national media, national researchers, and even national ed reform organizations for my full 17-year tenure as leader of Mississippi's only education reform policy and advocacy nonprofit. With few exceptions,[90] Mississippi was rarely interesting enough to fund or write about or study. This only began to change with Emily Hanford's 2018 podcast "Hard Words," which featured some of Mississippi's literacy work, long after our climb on NAEP was apparent but before our gap-closing jump in 2019. A year later, she followed up with an op-ed in the *New York Times* pointing to Mississippi's success and suggesting that the literacy work played a prominent role. Being acknowledged in the *New York Times*, and for reading no less, gave elites permission to wonder about us, so in 2023, after we didn't completely collapse on the first NAEP post-COVID, there was a trickle more interest. Now, there's a deluge of think pieces, op-eds, blog posts, and magazine articles written about us, but with relatively little context from people directly involved in the state's transformation.

The narrative of how Mississippi changed educational outcomes will not come from NAEP data points, or legislation, or policy manuals. It has to come from people with a knowledge of the context, and those people are Mississippians.

This blind spot hinders the nation's ability to understand how we can best improve education for all children, especially those without any of life's advantages, because the narrative of how Mississippi changed educational outcomes will not come from NAEP data points, or legislation, or policy manuals. It has to come from people with a knowledge of the context, and those people are Mississippians.

The same prejudice that animates this stubborn insistence on telling our story without our voices is why Mississippi's transformation ultimately had to come from inside the state. We know. We know y'all expect little of us and our children; many of y'all can't even believe our data is real. As long as we also expected little from ourselves, we weren't going to improve. It took a small number of us deciding that not only could things be different, but they had to be, and we would do whatever it took to help children succeed. We didn't think about the odds; we thought about the goal. And thank God we didn't think about the rest of y'all and what you thought of us.

Oddly, the fact that Mississippi is so little regarded nationally may in fact become the nation's saving grace. I recently met a state board of education member from elsewhere who asked me about how we went about changing reading instruction.

When I told her that one critical piece was that our department had to build capacity for school districts that didn't have any to spare, she sighed and said, "Well, that's never going to happen here." I looked at her and asked, "Do you think people thought it would happen in Mississippi?"

That question is why I have so much hope for the rest of the nation in a moment when the national data looks grim. Nationally, NAEP scores are the worst they've been this century, with 30 years of gains all but erased. Neither of America's political parties seems up to the challenge of leading public schools out of the quagmire they are in, with national Republicans focused on private school choice and Democrats too busy telling everyone what they are against to take a stand on what they are for. Although literacy policies have caught fire, almost no one is talking about the nation's disastrous decision to give up on accountability and high expectations for student learning.

If we can improve so dramatically, so can the nation. The formula is easy to understand and hard, but possible, to follow: coherence in policy design, careful implementation work, collective leadership, and persistence, persistence, persistence.

For me, the national moment feels eerily similar to the defeatism that I faced in Mississippi in 2008 before I found my team. No one believed in Mississippi but us. If we can improve so dramatically, so can the nation. The formula is easy to understand and hard, but possible, to follow: coherence in policy design, careful implementation work, collective leadership, and persistence, persistence, persistence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to PPI colleagues **Jordan Weissmann** for editing this report, **Alyssa Brown-Ruiz** for copy editing this report, and **Madeline Tong** for assisting with graphs and citations. Special thanks to **Mississippi First** for providing photos to illustrate this report.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Canter is the Director of Education Policy at the Progressive Policy Institute. In her role at PPI, Rachel advocates effective education policies as informed by her nearly two decades of experience successfully leading change for public school children in Mississippi. She aims to reignite the nation's commitment to providing every child an excellent public education and seeks to build a broad coalition for improving public schools.


READING WILL TAKE
YOU EVERYWHERE!

APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF MISSISSIPPI POLICY PILLARS AND REDESIGN QUESTIONS

1. STANDARDS, TESTING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

REDESIGN QUESTIONS	POLICY (YEAR ADOPTED)
WHAT DO WE EXPECT STUDENTS TO KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO IN EVERY SUBJECT IN EVERY GRADE AND BY THE END OF HIGH SCHOOL?	Coherent, rigorous learning standards (2010; 2011)
TO WHAT LEVEL OF RIGOR DO WE EXPECT STUDENTS TO PERFORM? HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN THEY REACH IT?	A challenging bar for grade-level proficiency on an aligned annual state assessment (2010; 2015)
HOW ARE WE MEASURING WHAT MATTERS? ARE WE BEING HONEST ABOUT OUR RESULTS?	A transparent, growth-focused accountability system that eschews input-based fluff (2012)

2. CONSEQUENCES FOR POOR PERFORMANCE

REDESIGN QUESTIONS	POLICY (YEAR ADOPTED)
WHAT DO WE DO WHEN SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS SHOW SIGNS OF POOR PERFORMANCE?	Expert, support-focused intervention from the state department (2013)
HOW DO WE HOLD ADULTS ACCOUNTABLE WHEN POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE PERSISTS DESPITE SUPPORT?	State takeover policies based on the accountability system with a clear exit strategy when performance improves (2009 and beyond)

3. EVIDENCE-INFORMED INSTRUCTIONAL POLICY

REDESIGN QUESTIONS	POLICY (YEAR ADOPTED)
WHAT DOES EVIDENCE TELL US ABOUT HOW WE SHOULD TEACH READING AND MATH?	Scientifically based reading instruction (2013) Emerging scientifically based math instruction (2025)
HOW DO WE ENSURE INSTRUCTION FOLLOWS EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE AND MEETS STATE EXPECTATIONS FOR CONTENT?	High-quality, vetted instructional materials aligned to state standards (partially implemented in 2013; adopted for all subjects in 2018; implemented in 2021)[91]
WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE TELL US ABOUT EFFECTIVE PREVENTION OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES?	Evidence-based pre-K programs (2013)
WHAT DO WE DO WHEN CHILDREN STRUGGLE TO LEARN?	Multi-tiered system of supports (2013)[92]

4. SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

REDESIGN QUESTIONS	POLICY (YEAR ADOPTED)
HOW DO WE ENSURE DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS HAVE THE GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT THEY NEED TO MEET OUR EXPECTATIONS?	Service-focused state department of education (2014)
HOW DO WE ENSURE DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS HAVE THE RESOURCES THEY NEED TO MEET OUR EXPECTATIONS?	Weighted student funding formula (2024)
HOW DO WE ENSURE GREAT EDUCATORS FOR EVERY CLASSROOM?	Expert educator training and coaching (2013)
HOW DO WE KNOW THAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS HAVE ACCESS TO QUALITY SUPPORT, EITHER THROUGH THE STATE OR OTHERWISE?	Tight quality control for all funded initiatives (2013)
HOW DO WE EVALUATE OUR EFFORTS AND GET BETTER OVER TIME?	Continuous improvement mentality backed by transparency in reporting state progress (2014)

APPENDIX B

WHY OTHER REFORM IDEAS YIELDED LITTLE SUCCESS

Teacher evaluation and charter schools were two of the most popular education reform ideas of the 2000s and 2010s. Neither played much of a role in Mississippi's turnaround.

Mississippi was not ready to have the same conversation around teacher evaluations or compensation as other states because we were missing too many other fundamental policies, namely the sound standards and aligned assessments that using test data in evaluation require before compensation can even become a focus. Furthermore, we used no single educator observational rubric statewide and had no value-added model. Beginning in 2010, through a Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, Mississippi did pursue revisions to its teacher and principal evaluation systems that I supported, starting with the development of a valid observational rubric for statewide use. Neither the performance-based compensation component nor the "student growth model" of teacher effectiveness required by TIF ever made it past the pilot phase due to delays in our timeline clashing with the need to pilot PARCC in 2014-2015 and then the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act. By that point, Mississippi had neither the interest nor the incentive to continue down a path that had been marked with so much turmoil in other states.

Tenure reform was also not as much of a concern in "right to work" Mississippi as it was in, say, New York City or California. Our Educator Employment Procedures Law, which dictates tenure, does allow for teachers to be non-renewed or terminated based on a number of factors (see Miss. Code Ann., Educator Employment Procedures Law, §§ 37-9-101 – 113). The Children First Act further exempted districts in conservatorship from the EEPL, so this low bar wasn't even a barrier to turnaround efforts. The bigger contextual problem for any interest in tenure reform was that Mississippi's low-performing schools suffered from teacher shortages. Except in extreme cases, removing poorly performing teachers was not going to improve the quality of education offered in them since schools might replace fired teachers with a long-term substitute, increase class sizes, or simply not offer the course at all.

Mississippi did not pass a real charter school law until 2013, a bill I helped author. Between bill passage and fall 2019, Mississippi had only opened six charters due to the difficulty in launching new schools and a lack of in-state philanthropic capacity to support them. My work to support the fledgling charter sector was some of the hardest I encountered in my nearly 17 years leading Mississippi First. It also came with few political upsides for my other work, as my advocacy for charters was viewed with near-universal suspicion by the education establishment, almost every Democrat, and even some rank-and-file Republicans who were reluctant "choice" supporters at best.

While charters can often be a powerful tool for reform efforts, Mississippi's specific circumstances limited the difference they could make.

APPENDIX C

KEY FEATURES OF THE LITERACY BASED PROMOTION ACT AND STATE READING POLICY[93]

<table>
<tr><th>CHILDREN WILL</th><th>TEACHERS WILL</th><th>MDE WILL</th></tr>
<tr><td>ALL</td><td>PRE-SERVICE</td><td>STATEWIDE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Take the state kindergarten readiness assessment within the first 30 days of school</td><td rowspan="2">Take SOR-aligned educator preparation coursework in all state-approved programs</td><td>Fund a statewide K-3 assessment system, including KRA, screeners, and diagnostics</td></tr>
<tr><td>Take a state-adopted screener three times per year in K-3</td><td rowspan="2">Select a list of appropriate screeners for districts not using the state screener</td></tr>
<tr><td>Take a state-adopted dyslexia screener (end of K & start of 1st)</td><td rowspan="2">Pass the state's SOR assessment or the MDE-approved SOR bootcamp for licensure</td></tr>
<tr><td>Be promoted in third grade based on the reading assessment (limited good cause exemptions)</td><td>Track districts' use of screeners (selection, frequency, use in identifying children for reading services)</td></tr>
<tr><td>WITH A READING DEFICIENCY</td><td>IN-SERVICE</td><td rowspan="2">Select SOR training and make it available statewide</td></tr>
<tr><td>Receive immediate parental notification via state-drafted letter that lists services</td><td rowspan="3">Receive SOR training from their district or the state</td></tr>
<tr><td>Take a follow-up diagnostic assessment to identify areas of weakness (and a dyslexia screener)</td><td>Train district-hired coaches</td></tr>
<tr><td>Receive an individualized reading plan within 2 weeks</td><td>LITERACY SUPPORT SCHOOLS</td></tr>
<tr><td>Receive regular progress monitoring</td><td rowspan="2">Use state-adopted, SOR-aligned, knowledge-building curriculum</td><td rowspan="2">Mandate SOR training for teachers and admins</td></tr>
<tr><td>Receive a read-at-home plan</td></tr>
<tr><td>WHO ARE RETAINED</td><td rowspan="3">Receive ongoing professional development from the state or coaches (district or state)</td><td rowspan="2">Hire, train, and monitor coaches</td></tr>
<tr><td>Receive parental notification as to why and what additional services their child will receive</td></tr>
<tr><td>Receive intensive reading remediation as defined by law</td><td>Mandate coaches in all K-3 classrooms</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td>Mandate curriculum and screeners</td></tr>
</table>

Mississippi also has several closely related policies that support effective reading instruction.

CLOSELY RELATED LAW OR POLICY	ALIGNMENT
EARLY LEARNING COLLABORATIVE ACT (STATE-FUNDED PRE-K PROGRAM) AND OTHER SCHOOL DISTRICT PRE-K PROGRAMS	• Entry and exit assessment aligned to the K-readiness assessment • Evidence-based curricula for literacy and math • Coach for every ELCA classroom (cross-trained on SOR) • Access to statewide SOR training • SOR licensure requirement
HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	• State-adopted list of curricula • District grants to purchase materials; difficult process to select off list • State rubric-based for K-2 on text quality, complexity, and alignment to standards; foundational skills development; knowledge building; and coherence • State selection from list in literacy support schools
MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS	• State-required and monitored MTSS process • Literacy and math screeners required 3 times per year • Evidence-based interventions for all children in Tier II or III of MTSS • Alignment between the individual reading plan and MTSS

APPENDIX D

WHY THE LITERACY BASED PROMOTION ACT OF 2013 ISN'T THE WHOLE STORY

Mississippi's NAEP data tell a story of long-term, gradual improvement, rather than a single miraculous moment, suggesting the reforms state lawmakers passed in 2013 were only one of many driving forces. Taking the math data first, Mississippi's scores in fourth and eighth-grade math consistently and steadily trended upward since 2000. The rate of change did not accelerate much until the 2019 testing cycle, when both fourth and eighth graders sharply improved over 2017 levels. Eighth graders that year were 2015's fourth graders, a cohort who had not experienced the third-grade gate and may not have experienced any reading reform at all, as I discuss below. However, they were Mississippi's then-highest-performing fourth graders on the math NAEP, giving them more foundational skills than any previous eighth-grade cohort. There's also the question of whether one can argue that better reading skills were the only thing holding back the state's math achievement. While there is data that stronger reading skills can improve math scores,[94] it is difficult to argue that the dramatic improvement in math standards and instruction, as well as expectations for student performance in this period, would not have mattered but for the LBPA.

Ironically, our NAEP reading data may provide the clearest evidence that the literacy reforms don't tell the full story. Although the LBPA took effect on April 18, 2013,[95] the first cohort of fourth-grade NAEP test takers affected at scale by the law's mandates did not take the assessment until 2017.[96] This timeline seems to be a point of contention among observers and at least one researcher since many of the LBPA's mandates were required to start "upon passage" in April 2013, one month before Mississippi schools concluded the 2012-2013 school year. As a result, the first year of implementation fell in the 2013-2014 school year, when the 2015 fourth-grade NAEP cohort would have been in third grade. No state department of education, though, can implement a complex policy at scale in just a few months, so many of the law's requirements were phased in between fall 2013 and spring 2015, when the law required the third-grade retention policy to begin. Crucially, this means that none of the 2015 NAEP fourth graders had been subject to reading-based promotion.[97]

How much the other provisions of the LBPA affected the 2015 NAEP cohort is important because Mississippi's average scale score grew by six points on the NAEP between 2013 and 2015, the largest single-year jump between testing cycles on the fourth-grade reading exam in state history, and over a third of the gains Mississippi made between 1998 and 2019.[98] Between 2017 and 2019, Mississippi gained another four points, the second-largest leap in state history and the one that closed the state's gap with the nation. If one can point to the LBPA and its implementation as the primary cause of the gains between 2013 and 2019, when Mississippi gained 11 of its 16 fourth-grade reading points, it seems like a slam-dunk correlation.

The trouble is that most of the LBPA implementation activity in the 2013-2014 school year happened at the state level, including hiring and training state department staff and the very first literacy coaches, establishing the Reading Panel to recommend regulations to enact the law, and procuring science of reading training.[99] Exactly how much changed in most of Mississippi's K-3 classrooms in 2013-2014 *as a result of the LBPA* is hard to measure. The state's science of reading training for both educators and literacy coaches began in January 2014 after the state selected the eight-module LETRS training through the procurement process. However, only K-3 teachers in the literacy support schools (only 50 at first) were required to participate, so they were given priority through spring 2014 alongside the state's first 29 literacy coaches hired in 2013-2014 to support them.[100] The pre-K-3 assessment system that included the required universal screener for literacy schools and later included a kindergarten readiness assessment was not selected until March 2014.[101] To ascribe the 2015 gains to the LBPA, we would have to believe 29 reading coaches in 50 schools for less than a year was enough to move the state average by six points.[102]

The first fourth-grade cohort who would have experienced most of the reforms we now consider part of Mississippi's literacy policy, including the third-grade gate, took the NAEP in 2017. By then, Mississippi had already gained 75% of the points (12 of 16, between 1998 and 2017) we needed to reach the national average. I do believe that the literacy reforms are part of the reason we bent our curve more sharply upward in 2019 but, again, this was one piece in the story of reform.

Fourth graders in 2018-2019 had not only experienced five full years of literacy reforms; they also benefited from five years of better, more coherent standards and higher-quality curriculum in both reading and math. Their schools and teachers had five years to adjust to far more rigorous state assessments and performance expectations, and four years to adapt to the new accountability model. By then, the State Board had been pursuing a goal of reaching the national average for over a decade and had adopted a far more robust strategic plan with even more precise and ambitious goals. The state department, too, had fully changed its approach to support, rolling out a broad catalogue of professional development, coaching, toolkits, guides, and other systems across all subject areas and grade levels.[103] State law had completely revised the takeover process for the lowest-performing districts, and the state had become more directive in schools flagged as chronically underperforming or whose districts were at risk of takeover. In other words, those Mississippi fourth graders experienced the culmination of multiple years of work to implement reforms begun more than a decade earlier.

Notes and References

1 Kelsey Piper, "Illiteracy is a Policy Choice," *The Argument*, September 25, 2025, https://www.theargumentmag.com/p/illiteracy-is-a-policy-choice; Karen Vaites, "The Southern Surge Watershed," *School Yourself*, October 23, 2025, https://www.karenvaites.org/p/the-southern-surge-watershed; Chad Aldeman, "There Really Was a 'Mississippi Miracle' in Reading. States Should Learn From It," *The 74*, February 25, 2025, https://www.the74million.org/article/there-really-was-a-mississippi-miracle-in-reading-states-should-learn-from-it/.

2 Mississippi ascribes to what is known as "the Simple View of Reading," which the Reading League explains as *Word Recognition X Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension*. More information about the science of reading can be found in "Science of Reading: Defining Guide," The Reading League, accessed February 11, 2026, https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/. See also "How to Build Strong Readers: Mississippi's Guide to Developing Literacy Skills from Birth through Grade 12," Mississippi Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/OAE/Literacy/ms_structured_literacy_model_final_1.8.21_2.pdf.

3 Sara Schwartz, "Which States Have Passed 'Science of Reading' Laws? What's in Them?," *Education Week*, October 09, 2025, https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

4 Three-cueing is the practice of encouraging students to guess unfamiliar words by looking at "meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues," rather than the letters. For more information about its problems as a teaching technique, see "Why the Three-Cueing Model Hinders Reading Proficiency," Kentucky Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/CommitteeDocuments/86/28546/27Feb2024%20-%20Why%20Three-Cueing%20Hinders%20Reading%20handout.pdf.

5 See, for example, State Senator Gray Tollison, Chair of the Senate Education Committee to the *Hechinger Report* in 2013: "We've given lots of money and yet the results are flat lining," he said. "We have limited resources. But we, more than any other state with limited resources, need to target that money where we'll get the most effective use." From Jackie Mader, "The Literacy Crisis: Searching for Solutions in Mississippi," *The Hechinger Report*, March 11, 2013, https://hechingerreport.org/the-literacy-crisis-searching-for-solutions-in-mississippi/.

6 I largely discuss the pre-COVID period because the nation fell so substantially post-COVID. It is worthwhile to note that Mississippi has largely recovered from the pandemic, and since the nation has not, we are now in a close race in eighth grade math and nearly there in eighth grade reading. We have surpassed the nation in fourth grade reading and are on a trajectory to surpass it in math.

7 "2019 Reading Mississippi Grade 4 Snapshot Report," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 11, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014MS4.pdf.
"2019 Mathematics Mississippi Grade 4 Snapshot Report," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 11, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020013MS4.pdf.

8 "2019 Reading Mississippi Grade 8 Snapshot Report," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 11, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014MS8.pdf.
"2019 Mathematics Mississippi Grade 8 Snapshot Report," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 11, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020013MS8.pdf.

9 Score comparisons use NAEP's national public average scale scores and NAEP's Mississippi average scale scores. Not all scale score differences between years or jurisdictions are statistically significant. To recreate these graphs and test for statistical significance, use the NAEP data explorer tool.

10 "The Nation's Report Card: 2024 Reading Snapshot Report for Mississippi Grade 4," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2024/pdf/2024220MS4.pdf.
"The Nation's Report Card: 2024 Mathematics Snapshot Report for Mississippi Grade 4," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2024/pdf/2024219MS4.pdf.

11 "The Nation's Report Card: 2024 Mathematics Snapshot Report for Mississippi Grade 8," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2024/pdf/2024219MS8.pdf.

12 "The Nation's Report Card: 2024 Reading Snapshot Report for Mississippi Grade 8," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2024/pdf/2024220MS8.pdf.

13 Chad Aldeman made a useful graph showing how Mississippi shifted the curve for students along the performance spectrum: Chad Aldeman, "Mississippi Raised the Floor (and the Ceiling)," Alderman on Education, February 28, 2026, https://www.chadaldeman.com/p/mississippi-raised-the-floor-and?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=997417&post_id=189489606&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=5l77uu&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email.

14 Matthew Chingos and Kristin Blagg, "States' Demographically Adjusted Performance on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress," *Urban Institute*, January 29, 2025, https://www.urban.org/research/publication/states-demographically-adjusted-performance-2024-national-assessment.

15 Michael Hiltzek, "How Mississippi Gamed its National Reading Test Scores to Produce 'Miracle' Gains," *LA Times*, July 3, 2023, https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2023-07-03/how-mississippi-gamed-national-reading-test-to-produce-miracle-gains. The analysis on which this article is based has since been retracted. See Kevin Drum, "Mississippi Revisited: The Mississippi Reading Miracle Looks to be Real After All," Jabberwocking.com, July 15, 2023, https://jabberwocking.com/mississippi-revisited-the-mississippi-reading-miracle-looks-to-be-real-after-all/.

16 I responded to this canard at length in 2023, and others — including Matt Barnum, then at *Chalkbeat*, and more recently, Kelsey Piper and Karen Vaites at *The Argument* — have reached similar conclusions. See Rachel Canter, "The Truth About Mississippi's NAEP Gains," Mississippi First, July 5, 2023, https://www.mississippifirst.org/the-truth-about-mississippis-naep-gains/; Matt Barnum, "Mississippi Made Big Test Score Gains. Here's What to Make of Them," Chalkbeat, July 18, 2023, https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/7/18/23799124/mississippi-miracle-test-scores-naep-early-literacy-grade-retention-reading-phonics/; Karen Vaites and Kelsey Pipier, "Is Mississippi Cooking the Books?," *The Argument*, October 7, 2025, https://www.theargumentmag.com/p/is-mississippi-cooking-the-books.

17 Reliable data for the 1980s is difficult to come by, but data from the 1990s suggests that Mississippi improved somewhat in the earliest years of NAEP to the extent that we were tied with *more* states for last place after inching up our scale scores. The Mississippi Department of Education also reported in a 2002 brief that Mississippi had improved against the normal curve equivalent of its 1990s-era nationally normed assessments by the end of the decade. See NAEP data as well as Mississippi Department of Education, *Progress Report of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982*, March 18, 2002, https://da.mdah.ms.gov/musgrove/pdfs/23586.pdf.

18 Mississippi's first system assigned one of five accreditation levels and required the public reporting of district information via a "report card." See Jerry G. Mathews et al., "Predictors of Public School Accreditation in Mississippi: Analysis of the School Report Card," Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Francisco, California, April 1995, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391839.pdf.

19 Initially, Mississippi administered the Stanford Achievement Test, a norm-referenced basic skills exam, in grades 4, 6, and 8. From 1994 to 1998, the state shifted to giving the Iowa Test of Basic Skills each fall in grades 4-9. See the Mississippi Department of Education, "Progress Report of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982," March 18, 2002, https://da.mdah.ms.gov/musgrove/pdfs/23586.pdf, as well as Jerry G. Mathews et al., "Predictors of Public School Accreditation in Mississippi: Analysis of the School Report Card" linked above.

20 Richard Coley and Margret Goertz, "Educational Standards in the 50 States: 1990," *Educational Testing Service*, August 1990, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/j.2333-8504.1990.tb01347.x?msockid=30e70f21462562e41fa81afe4747632a.

21 Ina V. S. Mullis et al., "NAEP 1992 Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States," National Center for Education Statistics, 1993, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED369067.

Ina V. S. Mullis et al., "NAEP 1992 Mathematics Report Card for the Nation and the States," National Center for Education Statistics, 1993, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED360190.

22 Mississippi Legislature, *Mississippi Student Achievement Improvement Act (SAIA) of 1999,* S.B. 2156, Regular Session 1999, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/1999/pdf/SB/2100-2199/SB2156SG.pdf.

23 SAIA established a new criterion-referenced testing program called the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT). For the first time, students would have to achieve a (very) minimum level of competency in grades three and seven to earn promotion to the next grade. High school graduation requirements also became harder: students would be newly required to pass the state's Algebra I, Biology I, and US History end-of-course exams, and a to-be-developed English II exam that would replace the state's minimum competency exam, the Functional Literacy Exam.

24 Reviews by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute from the time (2000 and 2006 reviews of the 1996 and 2000 standards, respectively) show progress in English language arts (C to a B) and significant backsliding in math (A to a D). Much of the higher grade Fordham gave the 2000 ELA standards comes from the sheer number of supplementary materials MDE produced to "[make] the standards more comprehensible." Standards should not need such extensive supplementing to make sense. Based on my own experience teaching seventh grade from 2004-2006 using the 2000 standards, I was never given these supplements and was left to guess what the English language arts standards might mean based on either the textbook my school district had purchased or released items from the MCT. My favorite nonsense "competency" (as standards were termed) was that students would "[d]iscover the history and inherent beauty of cultural expression in language and literature." The "suggested" objectives for this standard included vague drivel like "[students will be able to] recognize interrelatedness of language, literature, and culture" as well as seemingly unrelated concrete tasks like "[students will be able to] identify the tone of a written passage." Grammar competencies were even more meaningless — "demonstrate continuous progress toward control of penmanship, grammar, mechanics, sentence structure, and usage" — with objectives that simply said, "apply correct grammar skills in speaking and writing." The 2006 ELA standards, which Fordham rated a "D" and labeled "among the worst in the country" are actually an improvement, in my opinion, because they at least list some literary analysis and grammar skills. See the following:

Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr., "The State of State Standards 2000," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, January 15, 2000, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/state-state-standards-2000; Petrilli and Finn, "The State of State Standards 2006," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 29, 2006, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/state-state-standards-2006; Sheila Byrd Carmichael et al., "The State of State Standards – and the Common Core – in 2010," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 21, 2010, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/state-state-standards-and-common-core-2010; "Mississippi Language Arts Framework with the Process of Instructional Intervention, 2000," Mississippi Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED466795.pdf; "Mississippi Language Arts Framework, 2006," Mississippi Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://sos.ms.gov/ACProposed/00012659B.pdf.

25 "Overview and Inventory of State Education Reforms: 1990 to 2000," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 11, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003020.pdf.

26 C. Solomon, L. Jerry, and A. Lutkus, "The Nation's Report Card: State Mathematics 2000, Report for Mississippi," U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 2001-519 MS, August 2001, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2000/2001519MS.pdf; Nada Ballator and Laura Jerry, "NAEP 1998 Reading: State Report for Mississippi," U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 1999-460 MS, March 1999, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt1998/99460ms.pdf.

27 School-level ratings were not implemented until fall 2003 based on 2002-2003 data.

28 For more information about NCLB, see "Fact Sheet: No Child Left Behind Act," January 8, 2002, George W. Bush White House Archives, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020108.html.

29 Mississippi has been reporting some student outcome data by school district since the 1990s via the Mississippi Report Card. NCLB newly required this data to be reported by subgroup as well as by grade and subject.

30 "The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2009 Snapshot, Mississippi, Grade 4," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2009/2010460MS4.pdf
"The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics 2009 Snapshot, Mississippi, Grade 4," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2009/2010454MS4.pdf
Math 8, 2009: "The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics 2009 Snapshot, Mississippi, Grade 8," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 26, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2009/2010454MS8.pdf

31 To isolate whether NCLB drove gains between 1997 and 2007, researchers Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob examined the differential effects of NCLB between a set of states that had school-based accountability systems prior to 1997 and those that did not and found a strong causal case for NCLB math improvement at fourth grade. (Mississippi had mostly input-based district accountability and no school-level accountability.) See Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob, "The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Student Achievement," Working Paper 15531, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009, https://doi.org/10.3386/w15531. In 2015, researchers running more tests established a positive effect at eighth grade. See Manyee Wong, Thomas Cook, and Peter Steiner, "Adding Design Elements to Improve Time Series Designs: No Child Left Behind as an Example of Causal Pattern-Matching," *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 8, no. 2, (2015): 245-279, https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2013.878011.

32 The case for a causal relationship between NCLB and increased national (or state) reading achievement is more tenuous than for math. Researchers in 2015 found "consistent but statistically weak evidence of a possible, but distinctly smaller, fourth-grade reading effect." See Wong, Cook, Steiner "Adding Design Elements to Improve Time Series Designs: No Child Left Behind as an Example of Causal Pattern-Matching." Other researchers found NCLB increased reading performance on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study test, which is a low-stakes assessment like NAEP. See Randall Reback, Jonah Rockoff, and Heather L. Schwartz, "Under Pressure: Job Security, Resource Allocation, and Productivity in Schools under No Child Left Behind," American Economic Journal: Economic Policy 2014, 6(3): 2007-241, accessed February 28, 2026, https://www.columbia.edu/~rr2165/pdfs/Under_Pressure_AEJ.pdf. Another possible causal explanation is Reading First, an initiative within NCLB, but while the program's rigorous evaluation showed evidence of improving first graders' decoding skills in 2007, it showed no effect on reading comprehension in first, second, or third grade. See Beth C. Gamse et al., "Reading First Impact Study Final Report," National Center for Education Evaluation, Institute for Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/resource-library/report/evaluation-report/reading-first-impact-study-final-report. If Mississippi had a uniquely effective Reading First program, that might explain some of the fourth grade reading progress, but the causal relationship requires too many unverified assumptions.
The Barksdale Reading Institute also worked on reading since 2000 through grant programs, training, and demonstration classrooms, but there are no studies evaluating the program's impact on statewide test scores or NAEP. Ultimately, it may be impossible to pull apart the causal roles of NCLB, Reading First, BRI, or some other initiative. Based on my personal experience in this time period, which coincided with my time in the classroom, I believe NCLB had the greatest impact on how seriously districts tried to improve learning.

33 Mississippi's system of standards and assessments failed the peer review process. See Raymond Simon to Hank Bounds, June 30, 2006, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), U.S. Department of Education, https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/laws-preschool-grade-12-education/preschool-grade-12-policy-documents/mississippi-assessment-letter. In this process, expert reviewers examine evidence that the state meets federal requirements. The U.S. Department of Education does not directly review either standards or assessments for quality. See "Standards and Assessments Peer Review Guidance: Information and Examples for Meeting Requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," U.S Department of Education, April 28, 2004, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED483111.pdf.

34 NCLB's consequences ladder was not designed with a rural state context in mind as it was easy to wiggle out of almost all of them. Nothing happened in Year 1. In Year 2, schools had to offer in-district transfers, but there were almost never applicable transfers in Mississippi because either districts were too small to have multiple schools

at a particular grade level or all of the schools were on the list. Mississippi also did not have any charters at this time. In Year 3, schools had to provide "supplemental education services (SES)," which mostly meant afterschool tutoring. This was the only real consequence Mississippi schools faced as they had to spend money to hire outside SES providers, but this program was so rife with fraud that it spawned multiple investigations nationwide. In Year 4, a school could just change their curriculum (which at this point meant buying a new textbook) and satisfy the requirement. In Year 5, schools had to promise to restructure in Year 6.

35 Mississippi Legislature, *Mississippi Student Achievement Improvement Act (SAIA) of 1999*, S.B. 2156, Regular Session 1999, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/1999/pdf/SB/2100-2199/SB2156SG.pdf.

36 See *Miss. Code Ann.* § 37-17-6 (1991), Westlaw, accessed February 28, 2026, and *Miss. Code Ann.* § 37-17-6 (Supp. 1994), Westlaw, accessed February 28, 2026.

37 Before the Commission on School Accreditation could make a declaration of emergency under the 1999 revision, a school had to achieve a "Priority School" designation by having the lowest level of absolute performance and not meeting minimal growth expectations. A district then had three years to help its school escape Priority status by exceeding the school's growth composite by 10%. This meant a district would not face takeover even if it had one of the state's very lowest-performing schools rotating in and out of priority status, so long as the status was not consecutive for too long.

38 See Dustin Barnes, "School Takeovers: Which Mississippi Districts Have Faced This Before?," *The Clarion-Ledger*, September 15, 2017, https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/09/15/jps-takeover-mississippi-districts-before/670739001/; Jackie Mader, "State Takeovers: A Fix for Failing School Districts?," *Mississippi Free Press*, March 26, 2015, https://www.mississippifreepress.org/state-takeovers-a-fix-for-failing-school-districts/; "History of Districts of Transformation," Mississippi Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://mdek12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2026/01/History-of-District-of-Transofmation.pdf.

39 Mississippi Legislature, *The Children First Act of 2009*, S.B. 2628 (as sent to governor), Regular Session 2009, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2009/html/SB/2600-2699/SB2628SG.htm. A 2010 amendment required automatic removal of the local school board and the local superintendent when the state took over a district.

40 Mississippi applied for a waiver in February 2012 and received it in summer 2012. See R.L. Nave, "Miss. Gets No Child Left Behind Waiver," *Mississippi Free Press*, July 20, 2012, https://www.mississippifreepress.org/miss-gets-no-child-left-behind-waiver/.

41 Mississippi placed 34th of 36 applicants in the second round, the only round it applied for. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_to_the_Top#Awards. See also "Race to the Top Program: Executive Summary," U.S. Department of Education, November 2009, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED557422.pdf. See information about how RTT drove policy adoption: William G. Howell, "Results of President Obama's Race to the Top: Win or Lose, States Enacted Education Reforms," *Education Next* 15, no. 4 (2015): 60-64, https://www.educationnext.org/results-president-obama-race-to-the-top-reform/.

42 "Transcending the Past, Transforming the Future," Race to the Top Application from Mississippi, submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, June 1, 2010. See also Ida Brown, "Rating System Slated to Put Miss. Schools on National Level," *The Meridian Star*, November 1, 2009, https://meridianstar.com/2009/11/01/rating-system-slated-to-put-miss-schools-on-national-level/ as well as Jon Kalahar, "State Education Looks to Raise Bar in Classroom," WLBT, July 25, 2008, https://www.wlbt.com/story/8737534/state-education-looks-to-raise-bar-in-classroom/. Most information from this time period about the Mississippi State Board of Education is no longer available online. Some history is contained within the history section of "Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards, 2012, Revised," Mississippi Department of Education, August 2013, https://sos.ms.gov/ACProposed/00020430b.pdf.

43 Sheila Byrd-Carmichael et al., "The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 2010, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/state-state-standards-and-common-core-2010.

44 Mississippi Legislature, Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER), *The Common Core State Standards: Mississippi's Adoption and Implementation*, January 06, 2015, https://www.peer.ms.gov/sites/default/files/peer_publications/rpt582.pdf.

45 "Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales: Results From the 2013 NAEP Reading and Mathematics Assessments," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 11, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/studies/pdf/2013_Mapping_Factsheets_MS.pdf.
See results from 2015 NAEP for comparison: "Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales: Results From the 2015 NAEP Reading and Mathematics Assessments," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 28, 2026, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2018159.pdf.

46 See "Proposed Recommendations for State Accountability and Assessment Transitional Timeline Presented to the State Board of Education," Mississippi Department of Education, Office of State Superintendent, April 19, 2013, https://mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/MBE/MBE%20-%202013%20%284%29/tab-05-april-2013-rev3.pdf and "Mississippi ESEA Flexibility Request," Mississippi Department of Education, February 12, 2012, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/MS-ESEA-Flexibility-Request-2012.pdf.

47 For a full explanation of QDI and the other components of the Mississippi accountability system in this time, see "Understanding the Mississippi Statewide Accountability System, 2011 Edition," Mississippi Department of Education, July 22, 2011, https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/Offices/MDE/OA/ODSP/understanding_the_accountability_system_2011.docx.

48 Mississippi Student Achievement Improvement Act (SAIA).

49 The 2012 A-F accountability renaming bill collapsed the lowest three descriptive categories into an "F." See Mississippi Legislature, S.B. 2776, Regular Session 2012 (as sent to governor), https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2012/html/SB/2700-2799/SB2776SG.htm.

50 See "Summary of State Board of Education Agenda Items," Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Education Accountability, July 19-20, 2012, https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/MBE/MBE%20-%202012%20%287%29/tab_32_july_2012.pdf.

51 For students below proficiency to earn growth credit, they must move closer to proficiency from one year to the next by crossing the midpoint of a proficiency band or into a higher proficiency band. See "Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards, 2012, Revised," Mississippi Department of Education, August 2013, https://sos.ms.gov/ACProposed/00020430b.pdf.

52 "Summary of State Board of Education Agenda Items," Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Education Accountability, April 19-20, 2013, https://mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/MBE/MBE%20-%202013%20%284%29/tab-04-april-2013-rev.pdf.

53 After passage, MDE decided to use the state screener, a version of the STAR assessment, for determining retention in the 2014-2015 year since we would not have scores for PARCC until well after spring 2015, and STAR provided a knowable and reasonable benchmark for success.

54 Nancy Loome of the Parents' Campaign, one of the primary opponents of the literacy law, told a reporter in February 2015, "'We are setting these kids up for failure.'" See Jerry Mitchell, "Miss. Third-grade Gate: Fear of Failure," *The Clarion-Ledger*, February 14, 2015, https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/02/14/miss-third-grade-gate-fear-failure/23443737/. See also Paul Boger, "3rd Grade Reading Gate is Reality in Mississippi," *Mississippi Public Broadcasting*, April 14, 2015, https://www.mpbonline.org/blogs/news/3rd-grade-reading-gate-is-reality-in-mississippi/. Earlier reporting also noted detractors due to Mississippi's inability to fund a reading coach for every classroom. See Jeff Amy, "Questions Hang over Details of Miss. Reading Plan," *The Dispatch*, March 30, 2013, https://cdispatch.com/news/questions-hang-over-details-of-miss-reading-plan/.

55 It was hard to imagine the situation becoming worse. See Jackie Mader, "The Literacy Crisis: Searching for Solutions in Mississippi," *Hechinger Report*, March 11, 2013, https://hechingerreport.org/the-literacy-crisis-searching-for-solutions-in-mississippi/. Retention research at the time also showed that it likely did no harm and may provide some benefits in the short-term, especially when applied in the same way as Florida had, which was the closest example for Mississippi. See Marcus A. Winters and J. P. Greene. "The Medium-Run Effects of Florida's Test-Based Promotion Policy," *Education Finance and Policy* 7, no. 3 (2012), 205-330, https://sites.bu.edu/marcuswinters/the-medium-run-effects-of-floridas-test-based-promotion-policy/. See also Wei Wu, Stephen G. West, and Jan N. Hughes, "Trajectories of Math and Reading Achievement in Low Achieving Children in Elementary School: Effects of Early and Later Retention in Grade," National Institute for Health, Manuscript submitted for publication, February 2008, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2329586/pdf/nihms37588.pdf and *"Grade Retention and Social Promotion,"* White Paper, National Association of School Psychologists, 2011, https://www.nasponline.org/x32088.xml.

56 House floor debate on the adoption of the Conference Report for S.B. 2347, Mississippi College video starting at 11:50: https://law-db.mc.edu/legislature/bill_details.php?id=1576&session=2013.

57 Mississippi Legislature, *Literacy Based Promotion Act,* S.B. 2347 (as sent to governor), Regular Session 2013, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2013/pdf/history/SB/SB2347.xml.

58 Mississippi law has required literacy and numeracy screeners since the 2008-2009 school year to identify children with "literacy and numeracy difficulties" as part of an effort to support children with dyslexia and other related special education needs. (See Mississippi Legislature, H.B. 1058 (as sent to the governor), Regular Session 2007, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2007/html/history/HB/HB1058.htm#history.) Because this law resulted in too much variation across districts, the state still had no common data source for kindergarten readiness or literacy progress in the early grades as of 2013. The LBPA's screening language mandated a single, state-selected screener for all children in literacy intervention schools while still allowing other schools to select from a state-approved list with at least four options. In 2014, Mississippi passed a law to clarify that all schools must administer a single, state-selected and funded kindergarten readiness assessment. Districts not using the K-readiness-aligned state screener otherwise must test at kindergarten entry twice — once on the state assessment and once on their selected screener. See the Mississippi Legislature, S.B. 2572 (as sent to the governor), Regular Session 2014, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2014/pdf/SB/2500-2599/SB2572SG.pdf and Mississippi Legislature, *The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013,* S.B. 2395 (as sent to the governor), https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2013/pdf/history/SB/SB2395.xml.

59 To understand the breadth of how the state supports literacy, see https://mdek12.org/literacy/.

60 See Kristin Javorsky et al., "Effectiveness of Early Literacy Policies When Statewide Efforts Support Them," Journal of Education Practices and Trends, Volume 1, July 2024, https://www.sreb.org/post/effectiveness-early-literacy-policies-when-statewide-efforts-support-them. See also Scott Hughes, "Mississippi Momentum: Bringing the Science of Reading to Teacher Preparation, The Final Evaluation Report," Cradle to Career Policy Institute, University of New Mexico, September 2020, https://ccpi.unm.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2020%20Mississsippi%20Momentum%20Report%2010082020.pdf.

61 Read more found in "Science of Reading: Defining Guide," The Reading Leading, accessed February 11, 2026, https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/. See also "How to Build Strong Readers: Mississippi's Guide to Developing Literacy Skills from Birth through Grade 12," Mississippi Department of Education, accessed February 28, 2026, https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/OAE/Literacy/ms_structured_literacy_model_final_1.8.21_2.pdf.

62 "Miss. Board of Education Releases Strategic Plan," The Clarion-Ledger, December 18, 2014, clarionledger.com/story/news/2014/12/18/miss-board-of-education-releases-strategic-plan/20617217/.

63 We would also end up with three different state assessments in three years, two years of using the state's universal screener for the third-grade gate, and another year of grading schools but allowing them to "keep" their 2013-2014 letter grade for consequences purposes. We further introduced a loophole in the state's graduation requirements that would allow students who did not pass one of the state end-of-course exams to factor in their course grade to qualify for graduation.

64 Mississippi Legislature, *Literacy-Based Promotion Act* S.B. 2157 (as sent to the governor), Regular Session 2016, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2016/pdf/history/SB/SB2157.xml.

65 Mississippi Legislature, *Literacy-Based Promotion Act* S.B. 2572 (as sent to the governor), Regular Session 2014, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2014/pdf/SB/2500-2599/SB2572SG.pdf.

66 Carey M. Wright, "Mississippi Schools, Districts on the Road to Higher Achievement," *Clarion-Ledger*, July 21, 2016, https://www.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/columnists/2016/07/21/mississippi-schools-higher-achievement/87386498/.

67 Carey M. Wright, "Mississippi State Board of Education Strategic Plan 2016-2020, Year 3 Status Report," Mississippi Department of Education, February 15, 2018, https://mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/SSE/Strategic%20Plan%20Status%20Report_SBE_Feb%2015%202018_FINAL.pdf.

68 "Majority of 3rd Graders Meet Higher Standards to Pass Reading Test," Mississippi Department of Education, May 24, 2019, https://msachieves.mdek12.org/majority-of-3rd-graders-meet-higher-standard-to-pass-reading-test/#:~:text=The%20passing%20score%20has%20been%20raised%20one,of%2094.1%25%20to%20a%20low%20of%2032.4%25.

69 Between one-third and 45% percent of children who qualify for a good cause exemption do so by passing one of the two retakes. See the Literacy-Based Promotion Act Annual Reports here: https://mdek12.org/publicreporting/reports/.

70 We provide parents with a high level of transparency about their child's reading progress that enables families to understand the likelihood of passage or failure on the third grade assessment. This early and often notification, which takes the form of a letter directly to parents, gives parents the information to demand more for their children.

71 Special thanks to Wendy Kopp who gave me this term in an October 2025 conversation.

72 Mississippi has only had two women serve in any of these three offices. Both, Evelyn Gandy and Amy Tuck, were lieutenant governors.

73 The takeover provisions generated plenty of angst among legislators whose school districts were likely to be affected, but these were a much smaller number than those concerned about high school football.

74 An administrative assistant is assigned to groups of legislators based on their office location.

75 Barbour championed the Education Reform Act of 2006 (Mississippi Legislature, *Education Reform Act of 2006 (as sent to the governor),* S.B. 2602, Regular Session 2006, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2006/html/SB/2600-2699/SB2602SG.htm#:~:text=AN%20ACT%20ENTITLED%20THE%20%22MISSISSIPPI,of%20its%20children%20and%20youth) that emphasized dropout prevention and was a key advocate for the Children First Act. He was deeply invested in NAEP, giving it broad legitimacy in the state as a measure of our educational progress, and later served on the National Assessment Governing Board from 2019-2023.

76 The legislature adopted state budgets in FY2009 (2008 session) and FY2010 (2009 session) that reflected an intent to "fully fund" the formula. In 2008, this was based on revenue projections the state did not realize due to the 2008 financial crash. In 2009, lawmakers were maybe too optimistic about the pace of economic recovery. Governor Barbour eventually cut the education budget in both years due to a lack of revenue. This is why people around the Mississippi Capitol always say the formula was only fully funded twice.

77 Rachel Canter and Micayla Tatum, "Transforming Pre-K in Mississippi: The Story of the Early Learning Collaborative Act," *Mississippi First*, May 23, 2023, https://www.mississippifirst.org/reports/transforming-pre-k-in-mississippi-the-story-of-the-early-learning-collaborative-act/.

78 I have no illusions that my enthusiasm was make-or-break for ExcelinEd, just that I was surely one of their first receptive calls.

79 These were the policies anchoring the "Florida Story" on which all of Bush's presentations were based when he came to Mississippi. Bush had also supported Florida's "special-needs" scholarship for private school tuition. This was the one policy on which my opinion diverged from Excel's work. However, they were not looking to advance private school choice in Mississippi as an immediate matter and respected my difference of opinion.

80 Among legislators showing notable education leadership: Former State Senators Willie Simmons and John Horhn, both Democrats, crossed party lines to vote for the charter bill in 2013 as did Democratic State Representatives Deborah Dixon and Chuck Espy. Democratic State Senator David Blount, who never saw eye-to-eye with me about public charter schools, nonetheless worked with Mississippi First on the 2022 teacher loan repayment program and supported other educational improvements on which we found common ground. Republican Richard Bennett, who served as House Education Chair for approximately six years, carried many education bills in the term immediately following complete turnover in the offices of Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Speaker. He also ably mentored Republican Kent McCarty, who quickly became the House's education champion after his election in 2019. In recent years, McCarty has shouldered important battles for pre-K, school funding, teacher pay raises, and more. In fact, I feel confident that the 2024 school funding rewrite would not have happened without him.

81 The vehicle was Senate Bill 2161 with additional rewrites to make it more extreme. The deal had been to have Tollison pass it through as a "committee substitute" which means a bill full of amendments to the introduced bill without having to pass each one separately. Committee substitutes are not filed until passed by the committee, so the version online is the amended substitute, not the one Tollison handed me when I entered his office.

82 We kept the original committee substitute's language to abandon PARCC and to allow MDE to combine grades and the subject area tests for high school graduation. Tollison believed we couldn't save PARCC since the governor had already forced MDE to cast it aside for 2015-2016 using state purchasing rules, and MDE had already begun to procure a new assessment. MDE had also already agreed to the graduation loophole to abate the pressure to get rid of the subject area tests entirely. I wanted to strike both of these things, but Tollison (probably rightly) believed we had a better shot at saving the standards if we left them unchanged. He reminded me that our primary goal was to do what it took to save the standards, which would dictate to some extent any new assessment's rigor, so I did my best to devise language to provide political cover for that goal.

83 For more about how the language we concocted was received, see Emily Le Coz, "Full Repeal of Common Core Fails in Miss. Senate," *USA Today*, February 11, 2015, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/11/full-repeal-of-common-core-fails-in-miss-senate/23268913/.

84 Mississippi First had a purpose-built website, CommonCoreMS.org, for our work on the standards. It was taken down shortly after 2015. A version of one of our many pro-Common Core statements from this time period can be found here chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/MS_Common-Core-Statement.pdf, as well as an op-ed (https://eu.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/columnists/2015/01/25/canter-column-common-core-broccoli/22238775/) I wrote in January 2015.

85 Geoff Pender, "Bryant Vetoes Common Core Bill; Reeves Criticizes Move," *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 23, 2015, https://www.clarionledger.com/story/politicalledger/2015/04/23/bryant-common-core/26251623/?gnt-cfr=1&gca-cat=p&gca-uir=true&gca-epti=z114843v114843d--48--b--48--&gca-ft=151&gca-ds=sophi.

86 Key individuals Dr. Benton hired during her tenure included Kymyona Burk, the state's first literacy director; Jill Dent, the state's director of the Office of Early Childhood; Nathan Oakley, first hired to be Director of Curriculum and Instruction, who eventually became Chief Academic Officer after her; Robin Lemonis, the state's student intervention services director who later became the special education director; and Tenette Smith, who served as the first assistant director of literacy before taking on the director role. Another notable MDE staffer was Associate Superintendent Trecina Green under Dr. House, whom she tasked with much of Common Core's early rollout.

87 The Mississippi legislature passed a 2014 law granting MDE a time-limited exemption from State Personnel Board policies to allow Dr. Wright to remove staff who no longer fit the needs of the new department. This facilitated the reorganization Dr. Wright announced in 2014. See Mississippi Legislature, House Bill 454, Regular Session 2014, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2014/pdf/history/HB/HB0454.xml.

88 BRI was charged in 2000 with working with the state's 70 lowest-performing schools. Their model included not only coaching and curriculum but also training, student screening, differentiated instruction, and interventions. BRI also loaned MDE two senior staff between 2013 and 2015 to assist the department with early implementation efforts.

89 I find it telling that, as of April 2025 when I left my role, Mississippi had apparently never done anything interesting enough for this foundation to fund, even though our work aligned with its priorities and we were seeing results. In the 15 years since that conversation, the foundation changed its strategic focus multiple times, and each time, grantees whispered that what had presaged the change was that the foundation had felt disappointment in the outcomes of its investments and the wider world of education reform for not being able to deliver. Having had an extremely negative experience with a national funder who did fund Mississippi at one point, I have mixed feelings about whether money from people who show such little respect for us would have been helpful or harmful.

90 Among those who have been helpful to me and Mississippi First in particular: Todd Klunk and Jon-Paul Bianchi of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; ExcelinEd, especially Patricia Lesveque, Christy Hovanetz, and Mary Laura Bragg; the PIE Network; David Wakelyn, formerly of NGA; Fordham Institute, particularly Mike Petrilli; Kate Walsh, formerly of NCTQ; Andy Rotherham, Jen Schiess, Bonnie O'Keefe, and Matt Richmond of Bellwether; Helene Stebbins of the Alliance for Early Success; Kati Haycock, formerly of EdTrust; and Bryan Hassel of Public Impact. I have surely left national partners off this list. My many apologies.

91 Many districts moved to better curriculum organically as a result of the state adopting more rigorous standards and a harder assessment. Schools designated as literacy support schools, as well as state-funded pre-K programs, were required to use state-chosen materials beginning in 2013.

92 Several people have asked me about the role of "high-dosage tutoring" (HDT) in Mississippi's educational turnaround. Much like the science of reading, HDT has become a new, big idea that many states are claiming to implement, and many more advocates are evangelizing. Also much like the science of reading, few are implementing HDT with fidelity at scale. Mississippi had no HDT statewide initiative in part because we did not have the state funds to launch one. However, the Mississippi Department of Education did put effort into creating a "playbook" for school districts on how to properly implement HDT in 2022 after ESSER funds became available. Mississippi views HDT as part of a quality MTSS process which the state has placed emphasis on since 2013. In October 2025, the state also approved a list of evidence-based intervention programs for use with students needing Tier II and Tier III services. See more information about MTSS, HDT, and other Mississippi intervention services here: https://mdek12.org/elementaryedu/interventionservices/.

93 ExcelinEd has also created a checklist of "18 early literacy fundamental principles" based in part on Mississippi's experience. They rated Mississippi as having "partial implementation" on some items. Our only "not implemented" is because we have not banned three-cueing since that came in vogue after we passed our laws. My list is based on my knowledge of Mississippi policy rather than their list, but the two align. See "Mississippi: 17 out of 18," Early Literacy Matters, ExcelinEd, accessed February 28, 2026, https://earlyliteracymatters.org/state/mississippi/.

94 "Can Reading Instruction Improve Math Learning in the Primary States?," Shanahan on Literacy, accessed February 12, 2026, https://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/can-reading-instruction-improve-math-learning-in-the-primary-grades.

95 Mississippi Legislature, *Literacy-Based Promotion Act*, S.B. 2347, Regular Session 2013, https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2013/pdf/history/SB/SB2347.xml.

96 Although our eighth grade reading jump happened that year, the eighth graders had not benefited from the policy as they were already in fourth grade when the bill passed.

97 As a K-3-focused law, the LBPA's supports do not apply to fourth graders.

98 Between 2015 and 2017, when the original LBPA requirements would been fully phased in and test takers would have had at least two years of implementation, Mississippi only gained a single scale score point, which was not a statistically significant change.

99 A brief implementation timeline:

April 2013 – MDE assessed its capacity to implement LPBA; determined the state would need to hire and train new staff, including literacy coaches, and procure training and assessments

June 2013 – Opened the application to hire literacy coaches (24 hired, 5 more added throughout 2013-2014); held the first meeting of the Reading Panel

July 2013 – Hired first state literacy director

Summer 2013 – Identified the first literacy support schools (50)

January 2014 – Procured LETRS; trained throughout the spring and beyond, beginning with literacy coaches and literacy support school staff

March 2014 – Selected STAR for the K-3 assessment system including the state-funded universal screener and the pre-K entry and exit assessments

July 2014 – Updated K-3 assessment system to include STAR as the state kindergarten readiness assessment

August/September 2014 – STAR used for the first time as the K-readiness assessment

2014-2015 school year – Additional literacy support schools identified (87 total), more literacy coaches hired and deployed (51 total)

January-March 2015 – NAEP administered for 2014-2015 fourth graders (2013-2014's third graders)

Spring 2015 – STAR administered as third grade gate assessment for the first time

100 MDE hired 24 literacy coaches in July and August 2013 and another five by the end of the 2013-2014 school year. "Strong Leaders: Mississippi Turns Literacy-Based Promotion Act for Third Graders into Action," Mississippi Department of Education and Southeast Comprehensive Center, February 2016, https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/Offices/MDE/OAE/OEER/Literacy/LBPA/SECC_MDE_Strong_Readers_Strong_Leaders_Report_final_22916.pdf.

101 "Renaissance Learning Approved as Mississippi's K – 3 Assessment System Provider," Renaissance, March 28, 2014, accessed February 12, 2026, https://www.renaissance.com/2014/03/28/renaissance-learning-approved-mississippis-k-3-assessment-system-provider/.

102 This is not to say these coaches didn't work wonders from their first day on the job; just that change takes time!

103 "Miss. Dept. of Education Eyes Expanded Outreach," *The Clarion-Ledger*, April 17, 2014, https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2014/04/17/mississippi-education-outreach/7836713/.

The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
1919 M Street NW,
Suite 300,
Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org