



September 8, 2021

Chairman Dennis Debar, Jr. and the Senate Education Committee  
Mississippi Senate  
c/o Ms. Kristi Ishee

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for taking the time today to consider solutions to one of Mississippi's most vexing problems: the acute shortage of high-quality teachers in classrooms across the state.

We are now all too familiar with the extent of this predicament. Despite a surge in overall college enrollment, the number of educator preparation graduates is down 30% from a decade ago. The pipeline of out-of-state teachers has fallen by 96% and is now virtually non-existent. All the while, a higher percentage of Mississippi teachers are nearing retirement age. The outcome is predictable: with each passing year, the typical Mississippi child has a higher and higher chance of finding themselves in a critical shortage district—well over half of districts now fall into this category.

The nature of this challenge is well established, but, thankfully, so is the approach for overcoming it. Among the public and across all levels of government, there is a bipartisan consensus that we must make teaching more financially viable to attract and retain the teachers that Mississippi children deserve. The only question that remains is how to make the investments necessary. In determining the best course of action, we urge you to consider these three strategies—none of which are mutually exclusive—to continue and expand your efforts to make teacher pay more competitive and attract the highest-quality talent into Mississippi classrooms.

**Strategy #1: Provide a \$3,300 across-the-board teacher pay raise over three years**

Governor Tate Reeves has proposed an immediate \$1,300 bump to the teacher salary schedule in the 2022 legislative session as well as a pair of \$1,000 raises in the next two fiscal years. We fully endorse this proposal, which, building off the raise legislators provided earlier this year, would likely put the average teacher salary in Mississippi above \$51,000 by the 2024-2025 school year. While legislators should consider how regional states—many of which currently have average salaries around \$51,000—will *also* work to remain competitive, there are some clear, immediate benefits to raising teacher pay in this manner:

- **Incentive for new teachers to come to Mississippi:** Depending on the rate of salary increases across the region, the starting salary for Mississippi teachers could surpass the Southeastern average as early as the 2023-2024 school year.
- **Competitive pay across professions:** The average Mississippi teacher would finally earn more than the average Mississippian with "some college" or the average Mississippian with an associate's degree.
- **A higher standard of living:** The average Mississippi teacher with student debt would earn a living wage sufficient to support a child as a single adult.
- **Protection from inflation:** The inflation-adjusted value of a teacher salary would begin to rise for the first time since the Great Recession.

## Strategy #2: Establish a \$3,000 stipend for all teachers in critical shortage areas

Key to understanding Mississippi's critical teacher shortage is the fact that not all districts are experiencing it. We need to boost the overall supply of teachers, but we also need to incentivize employment specifically where it is most needed: in critical shortage districts. Targeting resources in this way offers a cost-effective strategy that will pay immediate dividends:

- **Teachers where we need them:** A stipend of \$3,000 (worth 8% of a starting teacher's salary) would be a powerful incentive to move to the highest-need districts.
- **Cheaper than a commensurate across-the-board raise:** Classifying this compensation as a stipend would save millions of dollars in benefits payments, while restricting eligibility to teachers in critical shortage areas would cut down on the number of annual recipients.

## Strategy #3: Revamp the Critical Teacher Shortage Act to offer undergraduate teacher candidates grants and loan repayment assistance

One of the reasons compensation is so important to the teaching profession is that becoming a teacher is an increasingly expensive endeavor, one that often leaves teachers saddled with excessive student loan debt well into their career. There is also compelling evidence that the rising cost of college has become more of a deterrent to becoming a teacher than the prospect of low wages. Offering a one-two punch of undergraduate grants and loan repayment assistance to eligible teacher candidates can be a compelling bargain:

- **Incentive to enter educator preparation:** Offering grants worth up to 50% of a Mississippi public university undergraduate's annual tuition would be a powerful front-end incentive for students who want to teach but are skeptical of long-term earnings.
- **Incentive to teach where we need them:** After incentivizing entrance into an educator preparation program, offering a back-end incentive to teach in a critical shortage area for loan repayment assistance ensures that recipients remain in our state's educator pipeline and become employed where they are most needed.
- **Lower student debt:** Participants in this program would enter the classroom with substantially less debt than they would have accrued otherwise; this financial freedom may make it easier to stay in Mississippi classrooms where they are most needed.
- **Available funds for a pilot:** A two-year pilot program offering \$8,000 grants and subsequent loan repayment assistance to two successive cohorts of 100 teacher candidates would cost about \$3 million over two years; there is more than enough money remaining in the Mississippi Works Training Fund to fund this pilot. Lottery funds could also be used for a pilot.

Making teacher pay competitive in Mississippi is a crucial step towards strengthening our educator pipeline and ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality teacher. Providing an across-the-board raise, establishing a stipend, and offering targeted financial aid are all excellent strategies to make the teaching profession more financially attractive. We trust that you will make the right decision and invest in our state's future. Thank you for your work on such a pressing issue.

Sincerely,



Rachel Canter  
Executive Director



Toren Ballard  
Director of K-12 Policy