



SELECTING A STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION FOR MISSISSIPPI

Recommendations from Mississippi First

By Rachel Canter

Introduction

On April 21, 2022, State Superintendent Carey Wright announced her retirement effective June 30, 2022, after an eight-and-a-half-year tenure. The responsibility to select Dr. Wright's successor lies with the State Board of Education, the governing body for the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE or the Department). The State Board consists of nine members—five appointed by the governor, including one current teacher and one current administrator, two appointed by the lieutenant governor, and two appointed by the Speaker of the House. The board plans to select a search firm to begin the hiring process this summer with interviews coming in the fall. As we stated in a memo we wrote 13 years ago when Dr. Hank Bounds left the Department, the selection of a new state superintendent will not only be the most important decision the State Board makes *this year*; it will also be the most important decision they will make *in the next several years*.

The choice of a new state chief comes at an important crossroads for the state. Mississippi public schools in 2022 are at a vastly different stage than they were in 2013. Immediately prior to the pandemic, Mississippi fourth graders met the national average in reading and math, the highest-to-date scores following a long, slow climb over a 20-year period. In the last decade, when our gains accelerated, Mississippi adopted several important reforms, including new, rigorous state learning standards and assessments, a new accountability system, and a host of watershed education laws and policies.

Dr. Wright played a heavy role in implementing these policies and enabled Mississippi to stay the course after adoption despite strong political headwinds, particularly on standards.

During her time at the helm of MDE, Dr. Wright also managed the Department through the transition to the federal Every Student Succeeds Act and led through the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic. As she prepares to take her final bow in June, Dr. Wright can take pride in many accomplishments.

Mississippi will need to choose its next education chief wisely if it hopes to continue the upward trajectory we have enjoyed over the last decade. In this brief, **we articulate the four characteristics we believe are required for the next state superintendent**. We also advise the State Board to engage as many stakeholders as possible as the hiring process unfolds to ensure the final candidate is set up for success.



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WHAT THE STATE BOARD SHOULD SEEK IN A NEW STATE SUPERINTENDENT

1. A vision for public education that builds on progress

In 2013, when Dr. Wright took the helm, Mississippi needed a paradigm shift in how it approached public schools. Nearly nine years later, the state has built a strong foundation and has started to see success, particularly prior to the pandemic. We need a leader who can recognize how far we have come and chart a course to take us the next mile, all while continuing to respond to the needs of the moment. An ideal candidate would demonstrate the following:

Commitment to Mississippi’s signature policy advancements—Mississippi has started to accumulate national accolades for its forward-thinking policies after many years of being a national punchline. A great state superintendent candidate must show their desire to protect and advance these policies, especially the state’s work to improve literacy through policy and practice informed by the science of reading; implement the state’s nationally recognized pre-K law; and promote strong standards, rigorous assessments, and meaningful and fair accountability. The next chief should also continue Mississippi’s newest achievement, begun in response to the pandemic, to close the digital divide and support schools in integrating technology.

Willingness to tackle old and new problems that threaten to hold Mississippi back—No status quo is ever perfect, and Mississippi is far from where we need to be. We need a new state superintendent who will take on the tough challenges of the next decade, including reversing the shrinking educator pipeline and making the teaching profession more sustainable; addressing the effects of long-term population decline on the quality of education children receive, especially in small or rural school districts; and finding ways to provide all children greater access to the resources they need to be successful post-pandemic, including access to year-round school, virtual course choice, dual enrollment, high-dosage tutoring, and telehealth, to name a few.

2. A record of successfully leading change

As Mississippi enters a new phase of growth, we need a leader who knows how to shepherd both the Department and schools through change—whether due to planned improvements or the uncertain times we live in. We believe such a leader will demonstrate the following:

History of meaningful, measurable achievements from systems change work—Mississippi not only deserves a leader who can point to actual outcomes in previous roles but one whose achievements were not merely the lucky byproduct of an already great status quo. To move forward, Mississippi must continue to evolve both its policies and the way that the Department and schools operate. The right leader for the role will be able to show how their work to change systems led to positive outcomes for students, schools, and communities.

Ability to effectively manage a large organization—As the head of MDE, the state superintendent's greatest lever for change is how well the Department implements policy. The chief must have both the management skills and the desire to effectively run a large organization. A charismatic figurehead may be able to excite stakeholders for a time, but if that leader has neither the interest nor ability to do the work of change, stakeholders will become disillusioned and may even turn against the leader's policy initiatives or their entire vision. It is easy in high-stakes interviews to mistake likability with competence, but an effective leader can show how they put the processes and procedures in place to implement the plan they craft. The Mississippi Department of Education is a large and sometimes cumbersome state agency that frequently suffers from a lack of resources to carry out its responsibilities. It requires decisive, consistent internal leadership, even with a great team, to function well. An ideal candidate needs to care about, and show they can be successful, at this aspect of the job.

Evidence of attracting and retaining high-quality staff—A great leader needs a team to be successful. The quality of the team a leader builds is as important as the quality of the leader in creating positive change. Agency staff perform the day-to-day work of the Department, and without qualified people, the Department cannot effectively fulfill its responsibilities. A candidate who burns through talent or who cannot seem to attract staff for important vacancies in their current or previous roles should raise red flags for the hiring committee. The Board should pay special attention to how candidates plan to attract and retain talent.

Capacity to provide a steady hand through crises—The specific challenges of the 2020 global pandemic blindsided everyone in education, but the leader of a state agency like MDE must expect disruptions at some point during their tenure. Before the pandemic, for example, Mississippi experienced Hurricane Katrina which forever changed life on the coast, including the work of schooling. At any moment, the state could experience devastating tornadoes or even, God forbid, a mass school violence incident. A steady hand through crisis is a skillset that all education leaders need to have, but the state superintendent sets the tone for the entire system. The Board should look for evidence that a candidate has navigated challenging circumstances well.

Dedication to longevity—The state needs a leader who has experience not only initiating change projects but staying long enough in a role to see those changes come to fruition and make a positive impact. Too many education leaders start a flurry of new initiatives to seem like they are addressing problems only to leave their posts before those projects risk failure or even really get off the ground. This is especially the case with chiefs of state departments of education as well as the nation's largest school districts, who often have tenures as brief as two to three years. Mississippi enjoyed a long period of stability under Dr. Wright and should seek a leader who has a desire to persist in the role for five or more years.



Mississippi needs a leader that has a vision for progress and can successfully lead change.

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3. A commitment to transparency, evidence, and continuous improvement

As Mississippi emerges from the pandemic, it will be more important than ever for us to accurately assess where our students are, implement evidenced-based practices to accelerate their learning, and evaluate our progress before deciding what to do next. To be successful, we need a leader who can demonstrate the below:

Commitment to transparency—A decade ago, Mississippi’s state data overinflated student performance, making it look like our children were far more prepared for the next grade level or stage of life than they were. Our assessments and accountability system now more closely track with national data to give us a real picture of student performance. Though our accountability system is not perfect, we must resist the urge to return to the days when we simply lied about how students were doing. Such leadership always comes from the top, with the state superintendent playing a critical role in standing strong for transparency. The next state superintendent must also model transparency in how the Department operates and makes decisions. Being open with data and decision-making will instill confidence in the Department and reduce the power of conspiracy theories about public schools.

Support for evidence-based interventions—Mississippi has moved far in embracing evidence-based interventions in the last decade. Chief among these has been work to integrate the science of reading into teacher preparation as well as classroom instruction and materials. Mississippi’s pre-K law also requires evidence-based curricula, as available, and the Department has more broadly begun promoting high-quality instructional materials across grades and subjects. The next leader must be committed to sustaining and deepening this trend if Mississippi wants to continue our progress.

Desire to improve data and data systems—If there is one area where Mississippi continues to struggle, it is that it has no functioning state longitudinal data system (SLDS).¹ Alone, the Department does not have the ability to fix this problem. However, it can and should clean up the data problems that exist within its locus of control. In late 2021, the Department released an RFP to hire contractors to rebuild many of the currently outdated and clumsy data systems it houses, including the Mississippi Student Information System, the Educator Licensure Management System, and others. We have hope for these projects, but they will require the next leader to give them special attention through the transition to ensure they live up to their promise. We also need a leader who will continue to push for better data collection (the right data, not simply more data) and to improve the new data systems over time. Lastly, we need a leader who will make a strong case for entirely revamping the SLDS and its governing board so that we can finally have one that works.

Belief in continuous improvement—Advocates often struggle to acknowledge that the ideas and policies they champion may fail to work as expected, whether due to design or implementation. The next leader of the Department should be dedicated to continuous improvement above all, willing to make changes over time if necessary. This means a leader who can put a process in place to track implementation of important initiatives and use that evidence to guide decisions. Currently, the Department has no public-facing dashboards or other tools to show its progress, and to our knowledge, the Department also does not use dashboards internally at any scale. The new state chief should place a focus on changing this so that the Department can better measure its strategies over time and help promising practices succeed.

¹ We know about LifeTracks. We stand by our statement.

4. A collaborative mindset

Children thrive when they are at the center of a system of supportive people and institutions. Schools, families, health providers, and community organizations—to name a few—must all work together for children to reach their highest potential. Schools are a primary pillar of any system for children and must approach their work with a collaborative mindset. MDE, as the main regulatory agency for public schools in Mississippi, must model collaboration if it expects schools to engage with other partners. This means working well with peer agencies, the legislature, state policymakers, advocacy organizations, and other providers to streamline administrative policies, eliminate duplication, and better integrate resources and services. It also means maintaining open lines of communication and managing relationships, even in difficult political times.

Conclusion

Selecting a new state superintendent is both exciting and risky. Mississippi must keep moving forward, and the next state chief is a key part of ensuring continued progress. We look forward to working with the State Board in whatever capacity we are called upon to support a successful search.

