

Reading Proficiency and Teacher Retention in Mississippi

by McKenzie Cox

Mississippi has recently improved its reading proficiency scores among fourth-grade students. However, the state still faces a variety of challenges within its public education system including a shortage of educators and room for improvement in reading proficiency across grade levels. Current policy has contributed to improvements, but additional education reforms are needed to address these issues. The analysis explores the question, “How should policymakers further address literacy rates and teacher retention?” through the framework of the policy process model. Recommendations include increasing teacher pay, fully funding the Mississippi Adequate Education Program, and providing government-supported service scholarships.

Keywords: Mississippi education, education policy, reading proficiency, teacher shortage, literacy reform

Introduction

The New York Times called it “The Mississippi Miracle” (Kristof, 2023). An educational phenomenon swept across the state, showing a significant shift in 4th-grade reading performance across all socioeconomic demographics. Students at Edna Scott Elementary in Leland, Mississippi (MS) were previously some of the lowest-scoring students in the Delta in reading proficiency according to an aspiring educator and former school performance and analyst with Delta Health Alliance (full interview available in Appendix). When policy was enacted to allow literacy coaches to provide specialized support for local school districts, the school was allocated multiple literacy fellows. The school recently celebrated a 100% state exam pass rate among the classes paired with literacy fellows. The story of Edna Scott Elementary is not the only one of its kind as schools around the state have experienced similar waves of success after the implementation of state-level education policy reforms.

Historically, MS has struggled to maintain high levels of reading proficiency through public education, and it currently struggles to retain educators (Ballard and Breazeale, 2023). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the recent average score for 8th-grade students was lower than 37 other US states (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). MS teacher pay was

the lowest in the nation just two years ago (National Education Association, 2022). Reading scores from the local and state levels and the personal testimony of those studying to become educators in MS will be used to measure and operationalize this problem. There are a variety of potential causes for these issues in the education system, including lack of state funding and resources, unequal distribution of these resources, and high student-to-teacher ratios. This discussion will examine the question, “How should policymakers further address literacy rates and teacher retention?” through the framework of the policy process model. Policy outcomes should include improving reading proficiency scores across grade levels and increasing teacher retention. Alternatives for addressing these issues are boosting teacher pay, providing additional incentives for prospective educators, shifting the balance of funding from local to state, and increasing discretionary spending per pupil. The intent of this paper is to drive forward the conversation surrounding the betterment of public education in MS and the recruitment of qualified teachers to the state.

Background of Policy

Education Reform Act of 1982

In the 1980s, other southern states commented, “Thank God for Mississippi!” (MS) when addressing their educational deficiencies (Lu, 2017, p.88). In other

words, Mississippi's long-term failure to improve performance kept other states from the bottom of national education rankings. This sparked calls for change and The Education Reform Act of 1982, the state's most expansive and influential education reform (Lu, 2017, p. 1). The legislation's four principal goals were to increase student performance, better individual school performance, create accountability for state involvement and financial planning, and improve professional development for school staff (Mississippi Department of Education, 2002, p. 1). Notably, this created a stronger foundation for state oversight of local school districts through its newly appointed positions and financial allocations. The act also created a performance-based evaluation system for school accreditation, which led to a uniform curriculum for all districts (Mississippi Department of Education, 2002, p. 2). In theory, this uniform curriculum would allow for a fair evaluation of school performance despite content differences; however, inequalities in performance persisted. However, this act served as a landmark for education reform, as it sparked other states in the region to consider education reform in the post-civil rights era (Lu, 2017, p. 1).

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program

Despite this new curriculum uniformity, educators and the general public recognized that schools were still performing unequally due to funding sourced from property taxes (Pittman, 2017, p. 31). Wealthier districts with higher property values had more available funding than schools in less populated and affluent areas. In 1994, the state legislature passed The Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), which established a new formula for funding that begins with the amount of money that each student requires for a satisfactory education and then subtracts the expected local district contribution (Pittman, 2017, p. 38).

This legislation receives mixed reviews: It is praised for ease of understanding and implementation, and it is criticized for its lack of realization. According to a report from the Clarion Ledger, the formula has only fully funded schools twice in its history – both instances during election years (Mitchell 2019). Neither of these acts of legislation, despite their magnitude, increased the national rankings of public education in MS. Therefore, further legislative action and reform were required.

Policy and education experts began to question whether existing reforms could truly be evaluated in a way that was cognizant of the socioeconomic context of the region, raising issues for the policy evaluation stage. For example, Burbage (2008) raises the question, "Can the impact of adequacy-based education reform be measured?" using MS and other economically similar states as points of comparison. Investigations such as these pushed the dialogue surrounding education reform in the South to include more specific indicators in policy formulation.

Current State of Policy

Literacy-Based Promotion Act

A more recent act of education reform emerged from the same principles as the Education Reform Act of 1982. The Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA) was passed in 2013 and was implemented during the 2014-2015 academic year to require that students scoring at the lowest level of achievement for 3rd-grade reading would not be promoted to the 4th grade (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). Since its enactment, the LBPA has been a living reform. It has been amended multiple times to include the Individual Reading Plan program, increase expectations for 3rd-grade benchmarks, and introduce literacy coaches to support districts across the state (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). Education experts believe that this was a key contributing factor to the so-called Mississippi Miracle boost in reading scores among elementary school students.

Increases in Teacher Pay

The state legislature passed the largest raise for public school teachers in the state's history in March of 2022, with an average \$5,151 increase (Ballard and Breazeale, 2023). Schools in lowest bracket of accountability ratings experienced high teacher turnover in the 2023 school year (Ballard and Breazeale, 2023). This implies either that raises were insufficient for the increased cost of living or that teachers are concerned with more than financial compensation.

Teacher pay remains a contentious issue in the state, comprising a significant portion of the questions in the state's 2023 gubernatorial debate. This reflects the public's perception of the issue's

importance and the election's role in agenda-setting for potential future reforms. Incumbent Republican Governor Tate Reeves emphasized the significance of the recent teacher pay increase stating that he was "proud" of the teachers and students who "worked so hard," resulting in the Mississippi Miracle (Reeves and Presley, 2023). Democratic challenger Brandon Presley responded, "I think we're measuring wrong on where we're going in teacher pay," arguing that the state needs to focus on meeting and exceeding the national average rather than the regional average for these salaries (Reeves and Presley, 2023).

Future Directions

Now that the state has climbed in rankings, the next steps for reform are unclear. Those formulating policy must consider the successful and unsuccessful elements of previously mentioned reforms, according to the selected evaluation criteria, along with proposed policy alternatives.

Policy Alternatives

Increasing the State's Funding Responsibility and Boosting Teacher Pay

Increasing state funding for education is a policy proposal that has gained traction. A higher percentage of state funding for public education can increase equity and student outcomes (Moser and Rubenstein, 2002, p. 70). For Mississippi (MS), this would involve shifting from shared local and state funding responsibility to predominantly state-based funding and adjusting the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP).

North Carolina (NC) is a state that receives the majority of its educational funding from the state government. Its regional similarities to MS make it a point of comparison. The state provides 70% of its total education budget, and local contribution varies depending on the fiscal capacity of the district (Jones, 2003, pp. 2-3). NC did not greatly outperform MS' 2022 8th-graders in reading proficiency scores, but previous data shows a larger disparity, with NC readers scoring measurably higher (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

An increase in state funding would allow for fulfillment of the MAEP formula and investments to improve the classroom experience such as new technology for students. It could also be used

to increase teacher pay as a method of retaining educators.

As mentioned previously, MS recently approved the largest single-year pay raise in state history. The average teacher pay was the lowest in the nation just two years ago at \$46,862 (National Education Association, 2022). Making further increases to teacher pay to meet or surpass the national average could make MS more appealing to educators and more competitive nationally. However, it should be noted that with the national average sitting at \$65,293 (National Education Association, 2022), this would be a significant financial undertaking for a system already stretched for funding.

Providing Additional Incentives for Prospective Educators

Another policy alternative includes providing additional incentives for those considering careers in education. The goal of this policy is to recruit more educators, decrease the teacher shortage, and lower student-to-teacher ratios to provide more individualized attention for students. Potential incentives, separate from increased salaries, include service scholarships; loan forgiveness; and reducing barriers to entry.

Service Scholarships

Scholarships for undergraduate students requiring a certain number of years as a public-school educator can incentivize additional students to work in education, therefore reducing the teacher shortage. The North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program (NCTFP) provides annual renewable scholarships of \$6,500 to students in exchange for four years working in an NC public school (Podolsky & Kini, 2016, p. 5). NCTFP accounts for approximately 10% of the state's credentialed educators (Podolsky & Kini, 2016, p. 5).

The University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University host the MS Excellence in Teaching Program (METP), which is a partnership to provide cost-of-attendance awards for students majoring in education fields and committed to serving 5 years in an MS public school ("Mississippi Excellence," n.d.). The program is not funded directly by the state government but by the Robert M. Hearin Support Foundation of Jackson, MS ("Mississippi Excellence," n.d.).

Loan Forgiveness for Teachers

Loan forgiveness is one way to incentivize individuals to go into education. A benefit of this program over service scholarships is that it does not require an individual to commit to a career in education before completing their undergraduate degree, which could entice college graduates to enter education later in their careers. For example, the Florida Critical Teacher Shortage Program provides loan forgiveness of up to \$5,000 for undergraduates and \$10,000 for postgraduates, which has allowed the state to fill many teaching positions in specialized subjects (Podolsky & Kini, 2016, p. 3).

Reducing Barriers to Entry

In response to the teacher shortage, Oklahoma no longer requires teachers to have a college degree (Balingit, 2022). This allows additional individuals willing to serve to enter the workforce and increase the number of educators. This has raised concerns regarding poor quality of instruction, which could decrease reading proficiency test scores, student outcomes, and safety of students.

Recommendations

To increase reading proficiency and teacher retention rates, a three-pronged approach is necessary. Mississippi (MS) should increase teacher pay, fully fund the MS Adequate Education Program (MAEP), and increase the availability of government-supported service scholarships. These actions will incentivize individuals to pursue careers in education while increasing state accountability regarding contributions to public school funding, which will provide a higher quality of instruction to increase reading proficiency test scores. This policy proposal will be evaluated using criteria identified by Kraft and Furlong (2020): effectiveness, efficiency, equity, liberty, and political feasibility.

Effectiveness

“I think there are lots of ways that the education system can be improved including teacher pay, additional incentives, and importantly more funding for schools in general,” said an aspiring Mississippi public school educator in her interview (full transcript available in Appendix). She believes that fellow aspiring teachers feel the same way.

Research shows that higher salaries for teachers are an effective way to increase retention and the quality of instruction (Hough and Loeb, 2013, p. 10). By increasing the state teacher pay to at least the national average, educators will be more likely to remain in the state. This will help reduce the teacher shortage and provide more individual instruction, which will aid in increasing reading proficiency levels and test scores. As stated previously, the MAEP formula has only been fully funded twice since its inception (Mitchell 2019). Encouraging the government to enforce its legislation to fund public education under its own formula will increase the resources available to school districts and the overall educational experience for students.

“The Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP), I think, has definitely reinforced my desire to become an educator,” said the interviewee. This indicates that service scholarships are an effective way to incentivize students who are on the fence about education. “It was a huge factor in me wanting to teach in the Mississippi Public School System,” she elaborated. The METP program is relatively small in scale and is not supported by the government. However, it could be made more expansive and opened to other campuses with state funds, effectively working to reduce the teacher shortage. Therefore, the government should consider establishing its own program similar to METP, perhaps on a smaller financial scale, that would offer scholarships in exchange for 5 years in the MS Public School System.

Efficiency

This proposal requires a significant financial investment from the state government. However, it is not unlike the financial contributions of other states towards their public education program. For example, continuing to use North Carolina (NC) as a point of comparison, the state contributes 70% of its total education budget and has higher teacher pay (Jones, 2003, pp. 2-3). In order to remain competitive with other states in the region for student outcomes and teacher retention, MS needs to match the funding and educational resources of states like NC.

METP provides a full cost of attendance award for a group of aspiring teachers at The University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University (“Mississippi Excellence,” n.d.). Although a state-sponsored award of this magnitude would require

a large expenditure, research suggests that the scholarship does not need to be all-inclusive to be effective. For example, the NC program provides annually renewable scholarships of \$6,500 and its graduates account for 10% of the state's teachers, which is a larger portion than METP (Podolsky & Kini, 2016, p. 5). Decreasing the award size will increase efficiency.

Equity

There are concerns that the MAEP funding formula is not equitable. However, much of these disparities stem from the lack of promised investment. Additional funding from the state government would increase the equitableness of the public education system by allowing for additional resources for students with physical or learning disabilities, flexibility to better address poverty's effects in the classroom, and smaller class sizes for more individualized attention (Parents' Campaign, n.d.). These outcomes will help increase reading proficiency levels and better the working conditions for educators.

Liberty

Depending on implementation, this proposal could increase taxes either for certain or all individuals in the state, which restricts economic liberty (Ganaucheu, 2022). Contrastingly, better financial compensation for teachers will increase their liberty as they would no longer be confined to living with below-average means or working additional jobs. Furthermore, the future liberty of students will improve as they have opportunities to pursue higher education at increasing rates and the ability to qualify for higher-paying jobs.

Political Feasibility

Portions of this program are politically feasible. Based on the history of the MAEP, it may be difficult to provide fully realized funding (Mitchell 2019). On the other hand, the state recently passed the largest single-year teacher pay raise in its history, showing the issue's importance in the policy agenda (Ballard and Breazeale, 2023). Other southern states have implemented service-based scholarship and loan forgiveness programs, so this is a potentially feasible solution in MS as well (Podolsky & Kini, 2016).

Conclusion

Historically, Mississippi (MS) has struggled to maintain high literacy rates, and it now faces a critical educator shortage. In order to increase reading proficiency and teacher retention, the state should make the recommended reforms: increasing teacher pay, fully funding the MS Adequate Education Program, and providing government-sponsored service scholarships to incentivize students to pursue careers in education. These actions will increase the quality of education in MS and therefore increase reading proficiency levels and teacher retention rates.

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Appendix

The following entry is the transcript of the author's interview with an aspiring educator and member of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program.

Interviewer: I would like to introduce our interviewee. She is a third-year student at The University of Mississippi studying Secondary Education and Public Policy Leadership. She is part of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program and previously interned with the Delta Health Alliance analyzing literacy reforms and improvements at Edna Scott Elementary School in Leland, MS. Is all that right?

Interviewee: Yes. Thank you. I'm looking forward to talking this through with you.

Interviewer: Thank you for your time. So, could you tell me a little bit about your internship with Delta Health Alliance?

Interviewee: Of course. So, the Delta Health Alliance is an organization in the Mississippi Delta that does many things. But the part that I interned with them

was for literacy, specifically for third graders, but they also do things regarding food insecurity in the Delta, health clinics, and different things along those lines. But I spent the large part of my summer in Edna Scott Elementary School working with third graders to kind of assess what the literacy scores for their entire class would look like at the end of this next school year when they take the literacy assessment.

Interviewer: How would you say that Edna Scott Elementary compares to other schools in Mississippi or in the Delta?

Interviewee: I would say that from my experience, the only other schools that I've seen in Mississippi as opposed to Edna Scott have been located in Oxford and then in South Mississippi in the Columbia area. And I would say there was not a lot of diversity in the school district. In the school district I was in, it had been affected by white flight. But as far as just the teachers there on the content they were covering, I really enjoyed the curriculum that we use. It was not given to us by the state; it was something developed by the Delta Health Alliance, something that their literacy fellows kind of use throughout the school year. The area I was in was one of the more impoverished areas. I didn't get to see any other schools—other elementary schools in the Delta—really in depth besides Hollandale Elementary, which I got to spend one day in after my literacy camp ended. But I really enjoyed that a lot. I know that they were really excited this past summer when I got there, because their last class, they had all passed that the reading tests that third graders take, which was really exciting, because the literacy fellows they are given the school's lowest scoring students, and getting them all to pass was a huge achievement.

Interviewer: In comparison to other schools in the region, would you say that Edna Scott's literacy scores were higher or lower than the average?

Interviewee: I never really got to compare those scores to other schools in the area, but we did get to compare our group scores to scores from the years before at those literacy camps. So basically, what I did during the summer is we broke up into groups, and we had a lot of different instructional things we would do throughout the day, like movement and different things we would incorporate into class. But

when it came to literacy, we divided up into three stations. And we had vocabulary, reading pace and accuracy, and then a phonetic station. And so we had each of these stations kind of tallied up each day. And then at the end of the summer, we had this big presentation that we would do that we would give to the CEO of the Delta Health Alliance. And we compared the scores to last year and some years before, and they had been higher.

Interviewer: And so as an aspiring educator, I would really like to talk about your experience in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program. How has that impacted your desire to go into education, education policy or any of those areas? And how has that impacted your college experience?

Interviewee: The Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP), I think, has definitely reinforced my desire to become an educator. It's a program that has placed me in the classroom on the first day of freshman year. And so I've been able to observe teachers and observe those classroom settings. And it's kind of just helped me realize early on my direction where I think that the typical education student doesn't get to see that classroom setting until the end of junior year. So that's something I'm very much appreciative of. With METP, we take this one-hour class each week. Each semester, we're here and it focuses on a different topic. But I very much enjoy the different speakers that they'll have come in, like we've gotten to hear from a former Mississippi Governor and people in other places related to education policy. I remember specifically that class that was very policy-centered really impacted me a lot – just talking to me about how teachers could be involved in policy later on. But METP has given me a great network for later on. It's cool to be able to talk to people in other cohorts who graduated like a few years ago, but I still know that I can ask them questions when I'm starting my teaching with this cohort aspect. When my cohort, cohort nine, begins teaching, we will all just have this community where we can be texting each other when we're freaking out on that first day of school, or we have an issue come up throughout the semester. I think that is something that will be very important to me surrounding my first year of teaching. And I'm thankful for METP giving me that.

Interviewer: The techniques that you've learned from the literacy fellows that you saw in that program—are those things you plan to incorporate in your own classroom one day?

Interviewee: This is something I need to think more about because third grade is not an age I ever plan to teach. So, I know I want to be in high school. Definitely. For some reason, though, I was like 'these kids are so grown up.' I didn't realize that every third grader already has a phone and can probably use it better than I can. But I think just learning from the teachers themselves and the relationships that they had with the students, all these students definitely came from different backgrounds. There was one student in particular who just kept on acting out in different ways. And just I really admired watching the literacy fellow I was placed under just working to build a relationship with him and understand, you know, what he was feeling and why he was doing what he was doing instead of just getting frustrated and yelling at him, which I know there are going to be students like that at every grade level, and just taking the time to work with the student is something that I hope I have the patience to do at that point. I plan to implement certain instructional elements I learned in my own classroom one day.

Interviewer: I'm kind of circling back to METP. Do you think service-based scholarships or programs like that are an effective way to incentivize people to go into education?

Interviewee: That is a great question. I know for me, I think it was a huge, huge factor in me wanting to teach in the Mississippi Public School System, just knowing that. I have another major as well, and knowing that METP would pay for both of those and anything else I wanted to pursue here, I very much was like, 'I'll go teach for five years for that.' With the quality of students I've met in the program, I definitely think so. Although there is a thesis that an METP student completed on how effective METP is at having educators stay in the field. And I haven't read it, but someone summarized it for me. And I think they said it was low. It was done by Abby Johnston if you ever want to look at that. But we did have our 10-year reunion like two weeks ago. And I will say there were some cohorts,

or you didn't see a lot of people there. Now, that 10-year reunion probably did happen at a time where there was nothing big going on in Oxford, and they weren't going to pay for people's housing. So maybe just note that people, the teachers from cohorts that have graduated, didn't want to come up here for a weekend just for the reunion. But there was a good group of people there – just like not everybody. So I do believe that shows that there are some people who after completing the program did not complete those five years.

Interviewer: And just curious, based on your experience in Public Policy Leadership and METP, you have a knowledge of the teacher shortage and what that looks like in the state. Do you think there's a more effective way to address that than METP?

Interviewee: I haven't given much thought to that. That's a great question though. To me, METP seems like the program that is best fit to do that. But as far as what I can do, what I can see as far as policy goes, I think there are lots of ways that the education system can be improved including teacher pay, additional incentives, and importantly more funding for schools in general. I know something with Mississippi right now is the funding we have that goes towards poverty in our school systems funds all poverty the same even though some schools have a larger depth of students experiencing poverty than others. And so, I know that's something other southern states have changed, but Mississippi has not with our education funding formula, our funding formula has only been fully funded twice since it was put into place. And so really, I think that is one thing that does need to be prioritized just to incentivize good teachers to come to these areas and teach.

Interviewer: Last question: What do you think about states like Oklahoma that no longer require teachers to have a college degree as a way of addressing the teacher shortage?

Interviewee: I'm going to say I don't—I don't really agree with it. I think there are some things that I've been able to learn in the classroom. And then also, just with my observation hours that I think are very important just for being in the classroom. I've enjoyed a class this year that taught us the history of

education from when it started in the US to now. And I think just furthering that education can be helpful in the classroom. But now, in my past two years, I've observed under teachers who are alternate route educators, so they do have college degrees, just not in education, and I've felt they're phenomenal teachers. So, I don't think that needs to fall in education, though. I do think like for Math Education majors, they're learning math that they are never going to teach. And so, I think that's kind of interesting, but I'm not a math major. But I don't know how I would feel necessarily about learning all these things like higher level math concepts that I won't actually be using when I enter my classroom, but who knows?

Interviewer: Thank you for this. I really appreciate you and your time.