



Student performance in MS stagnant, despite funding changes

By [Steve Wilson](#)

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With most things in life, spending more means getting more in return. But government schools might be another matter.

College preparatory test data shows more money doesn't necessarily buy better student performance in Mississippi.

Mississippi student performance as measured by the ACT test remained largely constant from 1996-14, according to [data](#) from ACT Inc., which administers the ACT test for college admissions for high school juniors and seniors.

The average composite score by Mississippi students on the ACT test — which measures a student's readiness for college in reading, mathematics, science and social studies — has hovered around 18.8, a couple of ticks behind the national average of 21. It parallels a national trend in which performance on the ACT test has been static despite taxpayers [spending more than \\$607 billion](#) nationwide on schools.

According to ACT Inc., 100 percent of Mississippi juniors and seniors took the test.

Mississippi schools were fully funded under a complex funding formula called the [Mississippi Adequate Education Program](#), which, one might assume, would lead to increased test scores.

But as ESPN's Lee Corso would say, "Not so fast, my friend."

Mississippi saw no spike in scores in 2003 or 2007 — years when the Legislature allocated the entire MAEP amount requested by the state board of education. Nor was there a bump down the road. In the past three budget cycles, the Republican-led Legislature has increased the K-12 budget, but there has been no increase in ACT scores.

The data is corroborated by a Cato Institute [study](#) by Andrew Coulson that showed, despite large increases in education spending nationally, performance as measured by the SAT test — the other primary college assessment test — remained stagnant.

Still, a statewide push is under way to increase the share of the budget devoted to schools. This fiscal year, K-12 consumed more than 40 percent of the budget.

A [constitutional amendment](#) will appear on the 2015 ballot after it received the required number of [certified signatures](#). It would force the Legislature to fully fund the MAEP amount and give the chancery courts in the state injunctive power to force it to comply.

Under present law, the Legislature is not compelled to fund the MAEP amount requested by the state's education department. It would mean millions more for K-12 that would like necessitate draining the state's rainy day fund, tax increases, cuts in other agencies or a combination of the three.

The state's fiscal picture could be hurt even more if a lawsuit over MAEP funding is successful. Former Gov. Ronnie Musgrove is assembling school districts to file a lawsuit against the state. If the suit succeeds, it would force the state to pay districts for the shortfall from past years and could mean taxpayers could be on the hook for millions, if not billions.

Even with data backing up the case of education reformers, refuting the arguments about increasing government school funding isn't easy.

“You say that you really care about kids, but you don't want to make the same mistake over and over, which is piling money into a monopoly system that has not worked for kids,” [Neal McCluskey](#), associate director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom, said in a phone interview with Mississippi Watchdog. “You've got to fundamentally change the system to where parents and kids have the power, because now they are subjects to a system where they have no control.”

Where would that money go? According to a recent [report](#) by [State Auditor Stacey Pickering](#)'s office, administrative spending in Mississippi has outpaced classroom spending every fiscal year except 2004-05. McCluskey says the reason administrative costs have increased is twofold: more federal mandates and parents asking for more from local schools.

“The federal government makes huge numbers of demands, has a huge amount of programs and, for the most part, they expect states to administer those programs,” McCluskey said. “They pay for states to hire a whole bunch more bureaucrats and administrators. But we've seen people demand more from schools — more counselors, more nutrition programs, more bells and whistles. This is a problem because people don't recognize how much they're paying for these extra services and how much they're getting for them.”