



Advocates claim Mississippi K-12 education is chronically underfunded

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The fight over funding for Mississippi K-12 education is heating up. There's a ballot initiative and a lawsuit on deck, along with bumper stickers and pithy slogans.

On one side, advocates for higher spending on K-12 claim schools are chronically underfunded. What does that really mean?

Mississippi has a complex, brain-busting funding equation called the [Mississippi Adequate Education Program](#) ^[2] to ensure each school district gets enough money for a "successful level of student performance as established by the State Board of Education." Each year, the Board of Education uses the equation to calculate the amount of money it requires from the Legislature. Only twice, in 2003 and 2007, has the education department received the full amount under the MAEP from state lawmakers.

The amount is often millions more than what the Legislature allocates and this year is no different. The governor's budget request allocates \$2.187 billion, an increase from last year's allotment, but more than \$260 million less than what the education department [seeks](#) ^[3].

Former Gov. Ronnie Musgrove is assembling school districts to file a lawsuit against the state, which would force it to pay districts for the shortfall from past years. That could mean taxpayers could be on the hook for millions, if not billions.

But is there really a shortfall in K-12 funding? Or is it more a case of the Board of Education not getting everything it wants?

According to state law, just like with any other state agency, the Legislature isn't bound by MAEP guidelines to fund education. A ballot initiative by the organization Better Schools, Better Jobs wants to change that with a constitutional amendment that would force the Legislature to fund K-12 using the MAEP formula.

A tweak to the formula by the Legislature in the upcoming session could be in order, in addition to more restrictions on where the money can be allocated. According to a recent [report](#) ^[4] filed by [State Auditor Stacey Pickering](#) ^[5]'s office, administrative spending has outpaced classroom spending every year except 2004-2005.

“We’re going to be looking at all of our options,” [Mississippi Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves](#) ^[6] told Mississippi Watchdog. “We as conservatives take a different approach than just throwing more money at the problem. Our Republican-led Legislature is going to spend more money in the 2015 session on K-12 education than ever before in the history of our state. We’re mandating that more and more of that money go to the classroom and less and less of that money going to administration.”

Even though K-12 spending has increased each of the past three years and is now more than 40 percent of the budget, education advocates say that isn’t enough. The advocates say more money for schools will yield better student performance and preparation for life. It’s a powerful message that’s hard to fight.

“The reality is they don’t have the time or the inclination, mainly the time, to look at the details of every single policy issue they’re confronted with,” said [Neal McCluskey](#) ^[7], the associate director of Cato’s Center for Educational Freedom, in a phone interview with Mississippi Watchdog. “People tend to think, not illogically, that if I spend more money on something, I tend to get something better.

“If they buy a car, a cheap car, it won’t last as long and won’t have as many amenities as I want. If I spend more, I’ll get a longer-lasting car with more stuff. They tend to think education would work the same way and what they don’t realize is you end up feeding bureaucracies and a monopoly that actually makes things worse.”

Explaining how the MAEP works isn’t an easy task: average daily attendance times base student cost plus at-risk component minus local contribution plus 8-percent guarantee equals the [MAEP](#) ^[2] formula allocation. Then, only after add-on programs — transportation, special education, gifted education, vocational education and alternative education — are added to the formula allocation, do you get the final MAEP funding number.

Understand? If you don’t you’re far from alone.

The base student cost is figured using numbers from districts determined to be successful and efficient in four areas of school operations. Those numbers include teachers per 1,000 students, teacher/administrator staff ratio, maintenance costs and ancillary personnel such as librarians per 1,000 students. This figure is recalculated every four years and indexed to inflation calculated by the state economist. The 8 percent figure is added to what a district received from the state in 2002.

For the at-risk component, 5 percent of the base student cost is multiplied by the number of students participating in the [National School Lunch Program](#) ^[8].

The formula has serious issues, however, as shown by the report from the state auditor’s office. The at-risk component is a part of the formula that could see the highest growth in MAEP allocation, thanks to the federal government’s [Community Eligibility Provision](#) ^[9] to the National School Lunch Program.

Before the CEP, students had to file paperwork to become eligible for free or reduced lunch. Now, if enough students qualify according to federal poverty statistics, whole schools and even districts —53 school districts and 506 individual schools in Mississippi alone — could have free lunches for all of their students. According to the report, preliminary calculations using numbers from all districts eligible for the CEP could mean the MAEP allocation could increase 10 percent or even more.