

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce  
Every Student Succeeds Act Hearing**

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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify about Mississippi's work to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). I look forward to sharing my perspective as state superintendent of education for Mississippi. I am also president-elect of the board of directors of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

ESSA has given Mississippi the opportunity to create a plan specifically designed for the students in our state. At the same time, the law provides guardrails to ensure our work is appropriately targeted toward improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all students and all schools.

In Mississippi, we sought broad input from stakeholders over an 18-month period to craft a plan tailored to the needs of our students. We approached this process as an opportunity to connect and build upon the goals and strategies that are embedded in the Mississippi State Board of Education's Strategic Plan, while leveraging the opportunities and expectations of ESSA.

Mississippi's State Board of Education's Strategic Plan maps out a targeted approach to preparing students for college and careers and provides a firm foundation on which to build a strong plan to implement ESSA. Our state plan is called *Mississippi Succeeds*. We concluded our final public comment period on July 16, and are now in the process of preparing our plan for submission to the U.S. Department of Education in September.

The Mississippi Department of Education has a history of working with a broad-based network of stakeholders who are actively engaged in policy advisement, development and implementation in our state. To gather input for our *Mississippi Succeeds* plan, we used our existing partnerships, formed new relationships and actively sought public comment from a wide and diverse range of individuals and groups.

We launched a statewide listening tour in August 2016, which consisted of 15 public meetings throughout the state, six regional meetings with district superintendents and an online survey. The public meetings were held in the afternoon and evening in rural, urban and suburban communities, and participants included parents, college students, teachers, school and district staff and administrators, college and university faculty and staff, members of educational associations and advocacy groups, business leaders, school board members and public officials. Among our most active participants were advocates for underserved, majority African-American communities in rural, low-income areas of the state, parents of students with disabilities and teachers of English learners. Mississippi has a small, but growing, population of English

learners, and most of the teachers of English learners who participated in our feedback sessions were the only people in their schools whose work was dedicated to English learners.

Through these meetings and the online survey, we gathered 7,300 feedback points through facilitated roundtable discussions about stakeholders' priorities for student achievement, school quality and effective teachers and leaders. Key stakeholders also participated in the various workgroups we formed to work out the details of each section of our state plan. The overarching themes that arose from the meetings inform the work of the Mississippi Department of Education as well as our ESSA plan.

Our ESSA advisory committee remains an active group and includes educators, policymakers and advocates, as well as the leaders of state agencies that are devoted to education, health and workforce development. This includes the community college board, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, and the departments of health, mental health and human services. Other advisors include state leaders and legislators and representatives from the Mississippi Economic Council, the Mississippi Association of Educators, Parents for Public Schools and the NAACP. We also sought regular input from our Superintendents' Advisory Committee, Principals' Advisory Committee, Mississippi Teachers' Council and our state Governor Phil Bryant. Our existing collaboration with Mississippi's Workforce Investment Board ensured that our plan was aligned to our statewide effort to prepare Mississippi students for higher education, postsecondary opportunities and high-skill, high-wage jobs. We will keep all of our partners engaged in the implementation of our state ESSA plan through our regular meetings with stakeholders and the ESSA advisory committee.

The robust participation of stakeholders helped Mississippi develop a strong plan to meet the requirements of ESSA. I am especially excited about the following aspects of our plan:

- Our Teacher Leadership Initiative will provide effective teachers with opportunities to teach students and collaboratively lead colleagues to improve their practice.
- Our early childhood education expansion will support early childhood educators in a variety of pre-K settings statewide to implement developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms. This expansion is made possible through a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Our school improvement efforts will include a focus on building local capacity through professional development for teachers and administrators, improved community support through P-16 councils and other groups, and strengthened parent engagement through school-based activities. Mississippi will take advantage of the flexibility that ESSA provides by including student subgroup performance to identify schools for school improvement support. This will have the greatest impact on African-American students, who make up our state's largest underperforming subgroup.
- Our Career and Technical Education expansion will provide continuous computer science education to students in grades K-12 and provide high school students with the opportunity to graduate with a Career and Technical Education diploma endorsement that is of equal value to an academic endorsement.

- As a long-term goal, Mississippi aims to eliminate the proficiency gap between African-American students and all students entirely, so that the proficiency rate for all student subgroups increases to 70 percent by 2025.

All of these initiatives are dependent on federal support for public education. As a state chief, I understand that federal resources are limited and that states must be effective stewards of tax dollars. Mississippi's ESSA plan is built around the targeted and efficient use of federal funds to make the maximum impact on student achievement, especially for the most disadvantaged students. The proposed cuts to the federal education budget would greatly harm our ability to implement key programs under ESSA. In particular, the proposed cuts to Title II programs would devastate our efforts to improve teacher preparation and quality, particularly in high-need school districts that struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers.

Mississippi has implemented aggressive reforms in recent years, including a literacy initiative to ensure students are proficient readers by the third grade and the implementation of the state's first publicly funded pre-K program. These and other reforms, such as the implementation of high academic standards for all students, have pushed student achievement in Mississippi to improve at a faster rate than in many other states. We are excited about the opportunities that ESSA provides and continued federal support will help us build upon this momentum.

Mississippi's ESSA plan is built upon a strong foundation that includes rigorous academic standards for all students, aligned assessments to track student achievement and an accountability model that clearly measures the performance of our schools and districts. Our plan also builds upon the significant investments Mississippi has made in early childhood education, literacy, career and technical education, advanced coursework opportunities for students, and professional development for teachers. All of these initiatives have broad stakeholder support and have resulted in improved student outcomes.

Students are achieving more because Mississippi's leaders and education stakeholders are committed to a singular vision of preparing our students for the future. The Mississippi State Board of Education, state elected leaders, the Mississippi Department of Education and local school districts and communities have joined forces to enact bold education reform efforts that are producing unprecedented outcomes. The changes have been aggressive, and teachers, administrators and communities have embraced the state's vision to make major student achievement a reality.

Our *Mississippi Succeeds* plan to implement ESSA will expand the state's education reform efforts to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students. Mississippi's future will be shaped by the students of today, and we are deeply committed to equipping them to learn, build, create, serve and innovate. We believe in the capacity of our students to achieve their highest goals and in the ability of our teachers and schools to guide them to a successful future. ESSA is at the heart of our work.