

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce Hearing
Protecting Privacy, Promoting Policy: Evidence-Based Policymaking and the Future of Education

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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify about how education data and research can drive classroom, school, district, and state efforts to provide a quality education for all children. I look forward to sharing my perspective as state superintendent of education for Mississippi. I am also president of the board of directors of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Data and research are at the heart of Mississippi's work to improve educational outcomes for students and to prepare them for college and the workforce.

Mississippi's Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), called LifeTracks, is a key component of how we use data and research to drive our work at the local and state level. The system is based at Mississippi State University and provides answers to critical research questions that help our state make strong policy decisions that are based in evidence. Each of Mississippi's key stakeholder organizations that represent education, health and workforce development has the ability to use certain parts of LifeTracks to support and evaluate their programs. After a thorough review, they are granted secure access and can use this system to provide hard evidence that shows whether or not a particular program is effective.

The power of this system is significant. Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant has leveraged LifeTracks to strengthen the state's workforce development efforts by using the system to track high school and college graduates and statewide job opportunities.

The Mississippi Department of Education also puts data and research at the center of our work. One of the primary goals of our State Board of Education's Strategic Plan is ensuring that every school and district is using quality data to make decisions that drive instruction. This has strengthened our statewide data systems, as well as our data governance and privacy policies and practices. We are very sensitive of the need for data privacy at the school, district, state and federal level. That is why we have several layers of protection of student data. We routinely test internal systems to ensure that student data transfers take place over encrypted channels. Student files from school districts can only be uploaded through a secured site. Our data loss prevention policy ensures that employee social security numbers are not transmitted via email. If data need to be shared with external sources, we outline in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) exactly what pieces of data are shared and who can view it.

Data and research inform nearly every decision we make to improve Mississippi's educational system. Our *Mississippi Succeeds* plan to meet the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is grounded in research and includes specific targets to close achievement gaps. One of our key strategies to improve classroom instruction is providing evidence-based professional development to teachers and administrators. Examples of this include using assessment and accountability data to inform decisions about instruction, overall school programming and strategies to improve outcomes for underperforming student subgroups.

At the state level, we use data and research to make decisions about program quality and continuation and to make the case for expanding programs that work. Let me give you one example. Today, Mississippi is known as a national leader in early childhood education, and has been recognized by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for meeting all 10 quality standards for preschool. We weren't here just four years ago, but we got here quickly because of how we used data to drive better decisions for all children. How did we do it?

Mississippi now evaluates kindergarteners at the start of the school year to determine if they are ready for school. We then link their scores back to their 4-year-old setting – whether that setting is a public or private provider. Based on this information, we know that students who attend public or private pre-K are more likely to start school prepared. We also have used this data to foster meaningful conversations among public schools and the private providers and Head Start centers in their communities so they can work together to better serve all preschool students before they enter public school, especially students of color and students from low-income families who have not had access to high-quality preschool in the past. The results are in the numbers. Mississippi has increased its focus on improving access to high-quality early childhood education for all children, and with early education partners to improve their instructional programs.

Our partnerships with the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southeast and the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) have enabled Mississippi to significantly advance our evidence-based work at the state, district and school and school level. These organizations provide valuable technical assistance and perform research that supports our work. One of the most powerful studies that REL-Southeast did for Mississippi was about the literacy training we were providing to teachers throughout the state. REL researchers observed and videotaped teachers who had participated in our training to determine whether the teachers had retained the knowledge they had gained during the training and were implementing what they had learned in their classrooms. The REL study let us know that the money we spent on the training was well spent because it showed that teacher knowledge and student proficiency both increased.

The Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) supports our work in numerous areas including school improvement, educator quality and talent development. SECC staff work directly with our state department staff and school district staff to build their capacity to use data to drive instructional decisions as well as management decisions. One example is the Talent for Turnaround Leadership Academy, which is a national effort that focuses on the recruitment and retention of quality teachers in high-need areas. As a result of this work in Mississippi, one school district started looking at and analyzing its teacher retention data because it had a high

rate of turnover. The district then started to hold exit interviews with teachers before they left. In this small district, the exit interviews retained four teachers who had planned to resign.

Other data-driven initiatives with SECC include a six-state effort to improve early literacy instruction, which includes a systematic review of the literature on the effectiveness of early language and literacy instructional practices. The second project involves developing Professional Learning Community (PLC) materials to support evidence-based literacy strategies in early childhood classrooms.

The examples I have cited represent a small fraction of how education data and research are driving Mississippi's efforts to provide a quality education at the state, district, school and classroom level for all students.

Mississippi has built a strong foundation for its public education system that includes rigorous academic standards for all students, aligned assessments to evaluate student achievement and an accountability model that clearly measures the performance of our schools and districts. We use data and evidence-based research in every part of our work because we know that high-quality data is necessary to provide the insights and understanding education leaders need to make the best decisions for students.

I am excited about the progress of the many initiatives we have in place that are changing the trajectory of education for all students in Mississippi. Every indicator we measure is on the rise, including for those students who have been traditionally underserved. We know this because we monitor the progress of students in every subgroup. Mississippi is committed to the continued use of research and data to drive our spending, policy and program decisions so that we will continue to improve our effectiveness and advance student outcomes.