

MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC K-12 ACCOUNTABILITY GUIDE

A GUIDE TO THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC K-12
ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM TO GRADE SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS



EDUCATION REPORT

OVERVIEW

A cornerstone of the American dream, offering quality education to everyone, regardless of their background, helps level the playing field and provides an opportunity for upward economic mobility. However, that dream is out of reach for far too many students with low incomes, students in rural districts, and students of color.

With the recent release of and possible changes to Mississippi's accountability model, this report is a guide to help parents and communities better understand the background and technical complexity of the state's accountability system.



Accountability models for public K-12 education are a federal government requirement for each state under the “Every Student Succeeds Act.”¹ Under this law, each state has flexibility in measuring student success.



Measuring and reporting the performance of schools and school districts in achieving student success is complex. Mississippi's current accountability model measures school performance based on academic assessments, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and acceleration.



While the state accountability model measures school performance, disparate students, schools, and school district performance outcomes reflect extensive unmet needs among under-resourced communities—not students.²



While accountability models are a complex measure for identifying educational performance, public investment in students, families, schools, and communities is key to strengthening the future of Mississippi.

ACCOUNTABILITY MODELS ARE INTENDED TO MEASURE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Federal Requirements to Measure

One way to track outcomes in the public education system is through an accountability model. An accountability model is a set of policies and practices that state departments of education use to measure and hold schools and districts responsible for raising student achievement and to prompt and support improvement where necessary.³ Accountability models are technically complex systems with a set of indicators used to determine student achievement. The federal government created general guidelines on what states should capture within their accountability models with the intent to measure quality across communities.

The “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA), the federal law governing kindergarten through high school education, requires every state and district to publish a report card. The report cards provide parents and the public with state, school, and district performance and progress information. The thought is that through publicly available annual

report cards, parents and communities can be more informed about how well their local schools and districts are serving their students. Specific technical guidelines on what should be measured in the accountability report card are also spelled out in the ESSA. Under this law, states get to decide the details of their own accountability model as long as the following broad categories are included:

1. Achievement and/or growth on annual reading/language arts & math assessments *
2. English language proficiency *
3. Elementary and middle school academic measure of student growth *
4. High school graduation rates *
5. School quality or student success (e.g. college readiness, chronic absenteeism, and disciplinary measures)

Another caveat within the ESSA is that states must give more weight to the academic factors (denoted by an asterisk) than school-quality factors.⁴ As long as these criteria are met, the state submits the model to the federal government for approval.⁵ In all, federal funding for public K-12 education is tied to the state submitting an accountability model that meets federal expectations and guidelines.⁶





MISSISSIPPI'S COMPLIANCE WITH EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

To comply with ESSA requirements, Mississippi submitted the Mississippi Consolidated Plan.⁷ The Plan combines state law (Miss. Code Ann. § 37-17-6) and the Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards Manual. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the statewide accountability system establishes a set of minimum standards for public schools and districts in our state to ensure that Mississippi students are prepared to compete in a national workforce or go on to postsecondary

education.⁸

Mississippi's schools and their districts are graded annually on an A-F scale.⁹ The grading scale is determined by a minimal number of points required to earn each grade, and the grading scale is different for elementary and middle schools, high schools, and school districts.¹⁰ This report focuses only on district ratings to better understand Mississippi's accountability model.

Grading Scale: (minimum points required to earn grade)

The total number of points earned for all components of the accountability system correspond to a grade on the A-F scale. This chart shows the minimum number of points required for each grade.

GRADE	ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS	HIGH SCHOOLS	DISTRICTS
A	442	754	668
B	377	648	599
C	328	584	536
D	269	510	489
F	<269	<510	<489

Generally, Mississippi's accountability system considers how well students perform on state tests, whether students are showing improvement on those tests from year to year, and whether students are graduating on time.¹¹ Specifically, Mississippi's accountability model measures school performance based on academic assessments, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and acceleration.¹² School districts are assigned a numeric value on a scale of 1,000.¹³

Academic assessments: Mississippi's accountability model places great emphasis on academic assessments or state tests. Statewide tests are used to measure proficiency and growth in proficiency for students in grades 3-8 and high school students taking end-of-course subject area assessments in Algebra I, English II, Biology, and U.S. History.

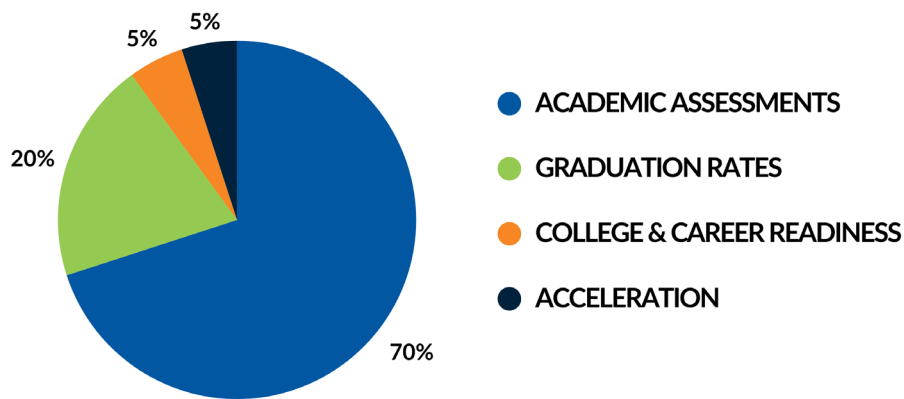
Schools and districts are expected to have an assessment participation rate of 95 percent or greater. This means that 95 percent of the students have to take the state test. The participation rate is to ensure that nearly all students participate in the assessments. This is to safeguard against historical practices of selecting students who test while excluding students who usually have lower scores.

Graduation rates: The next largest accountability category for districts is the high school graduation rates category. This category measures the rate of high school completion for students who entered the ninth grade for the first time over 4 years.¹⁴

College and career readiness: College and career readiness is measured by the percentage of students earning above the benchmark on the ACT.¹⁵ College and career readiness make up 5% of the model.

Acceleration: Acceleration also makes up 5% of the model. This metric is the percentage of students earning and taking college credit (Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual credit college courses) and industry certifications (ie., welding, IT, and construction).¹⁶

Current Accountability Model



MORE THAN SCHOOL GRADES AND RANKINGS, MISSISSIPPI'S CURRENT ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL AND ITS MEASURE OF SCHOOL PEERFORMANCE DO NOT REFLECT THE PLIGHT OF UNDER-RESOURCED, RURAL, AND MAJORITY MINORITY COMMUNITIES.

While the state accountability model measures school performance, one could argue that, in essence, school performance is tied to the economic plight of the community and if communities are being held responsible for providing quality education without equitable resources, the accountability system perpetuates persistent inequities within public education.

Mississippi's current accountability model reflects disparate outcomes between wealthy and less-resourced communities within the state. Research demonstrates that school performance correlates with economic resources.¹⁷ For example, students from families with more resources start kindergarten with skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, persistence, foundational reading, and math skills, while families with fewer resources start behind.¹⁸

In general, Mississippi children continue to face some of the greatest barriers to economic well-being in the country. Mississippi has the highest child poverty in the country and has not shifted from that ranking in more than a decade.¹⁹ Also, Mississippi's poverty rate ranks the highest in the nation with 19.1% of Mississippians living in poverty.²⁰ In Mississippi, over half of the state's counties have had a poverty rate of at least 20% for over three decades.²¹

As a result of persistent poverty, especially along racialized lines, educational disparities are reflected in accountability grades. This does not mean that students are less intelligent than those who have wealth. It means that they are deprived of resources such as having a highly trained, consistent teaching workforce, having engaging and enriching opportunities to learn with access to field trips that supplement their learning, and having basic needs met such as food and shelter. In other words, students from less wealthy communities do not always have the resources to thrive.

Schools without the resources they need to thrive are deemed critical needs schools.²² According to the Mississippi Teacher Corps, Mississippi has several critical needs schools in four distinct geographical areas—North Mississippi, East Central Mississippi, Jackson Metro, and the Mississippi Delta.²³ Signs of a critical needs school include:

- A high percentage of students are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches.
- A high percentage of student's families receive state or federal assistance.
- A high percentage of students and families are eligible to receive medical assistance under the Medicaid program.
- A high percentage of out-of-field teachers and teachers who are not certified or licensed to teach creates unqualified teachers.
- A high turnover rate for teachers and a low retention rate for teachers.²⁴

For example, one critical-need geographical area in Mississippi is the Mississippi Delta.²⁵ The Delta region consists of some of the most concentrated and deepest pockets of poverty not only in Mississippi but in the United States.²⁶ Furthermore, the region serves a majority of African American students.²⁷ The region also, unfortunately, has many school districts with low district accountability ratings.

For the 2022-2023 school year, six public (non-charter) school districts received a “D” or an “F” rating. All of those school districts are located in the Delta.²⁸ However, these schools’ accountability rankings are not indicative of the region’s fight against long-standing racism, segregation, and discrimination. Therefore, as opposed to academic ability or achievement, these outcomes are more of a product of the community’s lack of available economic resources. The resources started to dwindle from white flight after federally mandated integration, decades of divestments from the state to the region, and the diversion of funds from public schools to private schools.”²⁹ In essence, Mississippi’s current accountability model fails to address such realities.

All in all, the accountability model reflects the economic plight of communities they serve. In Mississippi, as referenced in the Delta but in other areas across the state, too, economic disadvantage occurs in under-resourced areas, rural areas, and majority-minority communities. In other words, an unintended consequence of publicly available data about a school district is that the model in itself does not provide context on the disparate starting point for which these districts are to provide learning opportunities for their students. Future publications will dive deeper into addressing disparate outcomes within the accountability model.

SCHOOL DISTRICT	% BLACK	RATING
YAZOO CITY MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT	98.18 %	F
WEST BOLIVAR CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT	95.20 %	F
EAST TALLAHATCHIE CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT	87.34 %	F
NORTH BOLIVAR CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT	98.33 %	D
CLARKSDALE MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT	96.27 %	D
HUMPHREYS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	97.27 %	D

NO MATTER THE ACCOUNTABILITY GRADE OR MODEL, INCREASED INVESTMENTS IN STUDENTS, FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES ARE NEEDED TO ENSURE QUALITY, EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL.

Strong public schools and pathways to opportunity are the result of policy decisions we make together to build a fair and equitable society. Mississippi's accountability model provides one method of measuring school performance. However, no matter the accountability grade, the model now, or revised, targeted investments that support students, schools, families, and communities are needed. But it doesn't happen by accident. Successful, high-quality public K-12 schools are made with prepared children who grow up in well-supported families with well-resourced schools in strong, vibrant communities.

Support Student Success

Expand state-funded, quality early pre-k programs: Critical investments begin as early as birth. After their basic needs are met, children then need access to well-funded wrap-around 3-year-old and 4-year-old pre-k programs. These programs improve emotional and cognitive development and learning to form relationships outside the home. To our state's credit, Mississippi is one of only five states that meets all ten of the benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for minimum quality standards in state-funded pre-k programs. While quality standards are high, lack of state funding prevents many districts from implementing high-quality pre-k programs. State-funded pre-k serves only 8% of the state's four-year-olds due to lack of funding.²⁹ For 2021-2022, NIEER ranked Mississippi 37th in providing access to state-funded pre-k programs.³⁰ Our state would benefit and maximize equitable opportunities if we invest in the front end of the educational system.

Provide Access to Qualified Teachers: Teachers contribute significantly to a student's academic and personal growth, and teachers help students reach their full potential. In fact, teacher quality is so important, that it is considered the strongest school-related factor influencing student achievement.³¹ Qualified teachers bring expertise beyond a textbook. They can provide context, individualize support, and create learning environments that foster a culture of academic curiosity.³²

Eliminate Corporal Punishment: Practices like corporal punishment disproportionately impact students of color.³³ Students miss out on valuable learning time within their classroom and at the extreme end may lead to dropouts. While 31 states have abolished corporal punishment, the practice remains a state-sanctioned form of discipline within Mississippi schools.³⁴ Also, despite similar levels of misbehavior, Black children are disciplined at higher rates than white children, even for the exact same behavior.³⁵ Racial disparities in discipline often expand beyond corporal punishment to suspension rates and expulsion rates creating a school-to-prison pipeline. Also, though the presence of law enforcement in schools has been increasing, there is no evidence that school-based law enforcement makes schools safer.³⁶ Instead, racial disparities in school discipline are further exacerbated.³⁷ Ending corporal punishment would certainly contribute to student success.

Build Equity into Educational Opportunities

Fully fund the Mississippi Adequate Education Program: Mississippi ranks 47th among states, in per-pupil school spending. We know adequate school funding yields better student achievement based on past results. Following full funding of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program in 2008 and near-full funding in 2009, Mississippi students had the highest gains in fourth-grade reading in the nation. Since then, Mississippi's schools have been underfunded by \$3 billion since 2008.³⁸ Overall, Mississippi's public schools need more state investment if we truly want our students to have the best chance for success in their futures.

Increase meaningful access and affordability in our higher education system: For economic prosperity, lawmakers must strengthen community colleges and make four-year institutions affordable. Unfortunately, too many Mississippi families are priced out of opportunity. Without the support of state investment, the burden of education falls upon working families, especially Black families and other families of color. These families rely on loans to fund their education, creating an entrenched system of debt rather than a pathway to prosperity.³⁹ The average student loan debt in Mississippi is higher than the nationwide average.⁴⁰ More than half of Mississippi college students graduated with an average of \$29,714 in student debt in 2020, according to the Institution for College Access and Success.⁴¹ While the state offers financial aid, qualifications such as a 29 ACT score tend to disproportionately benefit white, wealthier students which further widens the racial wealth gap.⁴² In all, affordable higher education options would support income and race equity in our state.

Expand Community School Models that Help Families and Kids Thrive: Student success is impacted by factors that happen within and outside of school. Community schools are public schools and a core element of an equity strategy. What makes community schools unique is the combination of four key pillars that together create the conditions necessary for students to thrive. The pillars are:

1. Integrated student support
2. Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities
3. Active family and community engagement
4. Collaborative leadership and practices

Community schools can address systemic barriers that limit opportunities for students and families—often based on race and class—ensuring fair access to support that will prepare students for future success. Community schools pay explicit attention to challenges children face—such as lack of stable housing, inadequate medical and dental care, and hunger. They coordinate the delivery of services to avoid duplication and maximize student support. Studies show that every \$1 invested in a community school strategy results in up to a \$15 return to the community.⁴³ While community schools alone cannot compensate for years of disinvestment in low-income communities and communities of color, they hold considerable promise for mitigating the impact of this disinvestment and creating high-quality, equitable schools.

Provide Competitive Pay for Educators: Lawmakers need to invest in developing educators who are paid fairly for their essential role in developing future leaders. Too many educators have to have more than one job to make

ends meet. While Mississippi's educators received one of the largest pay increases in 2022, Mississippi's teachers remain among the lowest paid in the region without enough resources to cover their basic needs.⁴⁴ According to the Southern Regional Education Board, the average teacher salary in Mississippi during the 2019-2020 academic year was \$46,843, which lagged behind the average of \$55,205 for teachers in the 16 states of the regional organization.⁴⁵ As such, increased teacher pay contributes to quality education across the state.

Strengthen Families and Communities

Implement a State Livable Wage: As 1 of the 5 states without a minimum wage, Mississippi applies the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 to workers. The federal minimum wage has not changed since 2009, and if the minimum wage had been raised at the same pace as productivity growth since the late 1960s, it would be over \$20 an hour today. Along with adopting a state minimum wage, Mississippi lawmakers should consider gradually raising the minimum wage to \$15 to help women and families adequately cover basic needs. Providing a livable wage to Mississippians would help reduce childhood poverty and secure more educational resources for students and their families.

Implement a State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC): Tax credits have been proven to help reduce poverty, benefit families with children, and push back against racial inequality. Tax credits help boost the economic security of working families by offsetting the taxes that workers in low-wage jobs pay. Refundable credits allow taxpayers to receive a refund for the portion of the credit that exceeds their income tax bill. Studies have shown that families with EITC and CTC improved educational outcomes for young children in low-income households.⁴⁶

Tackle Food Insecurity through SNAP: Safety-net programs like the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are critical programs that help reduce poverty and hardship in Mississippi. By providing cash support for Mississippians with low wages, these and similar programs reduce the extent and severity of poverty, lessen hardship and hunger, promote equity, protect the overall economy, improve health outcomes, improve childhood outcomes, and more.⁴⁷

Enact Revenue-Raising Tax Policies: State lawmakers have approved over \$1 billion in tax cuts since 2012. Not only have these tax cuts mainly benefited the wealthy and corporations, but they have also inhibited the state's ability to fully fund public schools. Many state lawmakers continue to push for the full elimination of the state income tax. We know that further cuts to Mississippi's income tax system will be worse for the state. As such, state lawmakers should seek to strengthen, not weaken the state's individual income tax system. Tax plans—even those that are equitable and that would provide tax relief for low-and middle-income earners—should include policies that increase state revenue to help fully fund critical state programs and services and support much-needed state investments, especially for public schools. Altogether, higher state revenue means that state lawmakers would have the resources to meet the immediate needs of Mississippi families and invest in our future, especially education.



Implement Paid Family and Medical Leave: Under the federal Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), an employee can receive up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for a newborn, family member, an adopted or foster child, or to attend to the employee's own serious medical health condition during 12 months. Eleven states have now offered state-paid family leave programs to offer these same benefits to their employees. Sixteen states require paid sick leave. Three states offer paid parental leave for state employees, and several states offer school leave for parents to attend school-related events and activities for their children.⁴⁹ Flexible leave schedules and policies would allow parents to be more active and involved in the schooling process without the worry of providing for their family.

Increase Safe and Stabilized Housing: Safe and stable housing provides long-term benefits to school-aged children. Safe, stable environments limit disruptions like school changes and strengthen cognitive development. Studies show strong evidence of the benefits of “housing first” interventions that provide supportive housing to individuals with chronic health conditions, including behavioral health conditions.⁵⁰ When children's basic needs such as stable housing are met, studies show that children in high-quality housing perform better in school.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Measuring and reporting the performance of school districts is a complex task. Accountability models, a requirement of the federal government, are intended to measure student success. The Mississippi accountability model measures school performance based on academic assessments, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and acceleration.⁵² Historically disenfranchised communities and critical needs districts consistently receive lower accountability grades. Research suggests that the disparate performance outcomes reflect extensive unmet needs among communities with low income, not their academic abilities.⁵³ While accountability models are a complex measure for identifying educational outcomes, public investment in education, families, and communities is key for strengthening the future of Mississippi.



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