The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi

Jesuit Social Research Institute
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In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to free basic education and even equal access to higher education based on merit.\(^1\) In Catholic social thought, “integral human development,” as articulated by Pope Paul VI in 1967, includes growth of knowledge as one of the essentials to help people move “from less human conditions to those which are more human.”\(^2\) In the United States, the tradition of free public education accessible to all has long been seen as essential to the development of an informed citizenry and truly effective democracy.

In Mississippi, however, as shown in this report, *The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi*, the quality of public education too often depends on the level of income of the community. Moreover, with higher levels of poverty in black communities, the quality of public education and access to higher education and educational attainment too often hinges on the color of a student’s skin.

This report invites readers to reflect on the inequalities existing across school districts and inequality’s impact on the educational achievement of students, especially low-income students and students of color. The core message—spelled out in specific policy recommendations—is that the people of Mississippi must determine, together, to address a range of issues, including economic injustice for preschoolers, elementary and secondary education quality, teacher salaries, and affordability of higher education. Tackling each of these issues is essential to the economic and social progress of the state.

Special thanks to JSRI Fellow Dr. Nicholas Ensley Mitchell and JSRI Research Assistant Millicent B. Eib for their comprehensive and detailed work in compiling and analyzing the statewide information critical for understanding the inequities in the current education system and its long-term impact on educational attainment and economic well-being. Importantly, they also point us to essential ways forward for a more just society in Mississippi.

We are indebted to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation whose generous grant has made this report possible as part of their well-known concern for vulnerable children and their families. We are also grateful to Warren Yoder of Jackson and to Southern Echo, Inc., The Parents Campaign, and the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative for advice and consultation.

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The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi analyzes the connections between economic and social factors, educational performance, and educational attainment in Mississippi. It is divided into four periods of life: birth to age four, elementary and secondary education, post-secondary education, and the long-term impacts of educational attainment. This report shows that poverty in Mississippi is the greatest detriment to educational performance. This hinders educational attainment and economic security. Moreover, increasing adult educational attainment improves the overall standard of living. Furthermore, this report also shows that communities of color suffer from a level of poverty that harms educational performance and produces lower adult educational attainment rates. This in turn creates more poverty for the next generation of children starting their own educational journey. It concludes that improving adult education attainment requires providing the necessary resources to educate children and alleviate the effects of poverty upon them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The child poverty rate in Mississippi is one of the highest in the nation at 31.55 percent—10.38 percentage points higher than the national average.

The poverty rate for black children in Mississippi—48.47 percent—is 31.97 percentage points higher than the rate for white children.

The median household income in Mississippi is $40,528—$14,794 less than the national average. The white median household income in Mississippi is $23,351 higher than the black median income of $27,174. In Mississippi, the black median household income is more than $13,000 lower than the state average median household income.

Black people in Mississippi have the highest rate of single-parent households in the state at 67.70 percent, which exceeds the national rate for black people of 63.83 percent. The overall state rate for all groups is 45.24 percent and the national rate is 34.77 percent.

The data show a moderate to strong positive relationship between child poverty and the non-white population of a school district.

The data show that only 51.08 percent of children ages 3 and 4 are enrolled in an early education program in Mississippi.

There is a moderate to strong positive relationship between childhood poverty and the non-white population of a school district.

BIRTH TO AGE FOUR: CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The environment into which a child is born has a tremendous impact on that child’s development that can last well into adulthood. Negative factors such as poverty and food insecurity can have significant consequences, particularly in young children, and severely hinder their cognitive and physical growth. Such negative factors disproportionately affect people of color, who generally have lower educational attainment and lifetime income than their white counterparts. Key findings pertaining to this section of the report are highlighted below:
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Home environment continues to affect children into their primary and secondary education years. Those coming from financially secure homes generally perform better on tests than their poorer counterparts. Furthermore, the data show that wealthier districts generally receive higher district accountability scores from the Mississippi Department of Education than poorer ones. High-income school districts usually can make up budget shortfalls with local revenue whereas low-income school districts find this more difficult and sometimes impossible. Key findings pertaining to this section of the report are:

- In Mississippi, the public-school system is made up of 55.81 percent students of color.
- For the 2016-2017 academic year, the economically disadvantaged student enrollment rate in public schools was 74.84 percent. Out of the total number of economically disadvantaged students, 53.78 percent were black and 39.73 percent were white.
- The data show a moderate to strong negative relationship between the non-white population of a school district and that district’s accountability score, 5th grade English MAAP level 3 or above scores, and ACT scores.
- The data show a moderate to strong negative relationship between a school district’s accountability score and the rate of childhood poverty in a district.
- The Mississippi average 2016-17 public-school teacher salary was $42,925, $16,025 less than the national average and the lowest in the Gulf South.
- The data show that students from school districts with higher median incomes generally score higher than students from low-income districts on English and mathematics assessments in 5th grade, as well as on the ACT standardized test for college admissions.
- Only 36.13 percent of kindergarten students in Mississippi scored at or above the state benchmark of 530 on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment in 2018.
- In the 2017-2018 school year, 21.50 percent of black students in Mississippi met the ACT college readiness benchmark for reading and math, 16.60 percentage points below the state average and 33.20 percentage points below the white student average.
- Mississippi’s high school graduation rate is 83 percent, which is 2 percentage points below the national average, but 5 percentage points above neighboring Louisiana.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

A student’s compulsory education period ends in high school, but they may choose to pursue further studies at institutions of higher learning and vocational education. As discussed in the previous section, poverty harms educational performance, which can leave students academically underprepared for college. However, poverty poses an added barrier to access for post-secondary education for families of limited financial means because of the increasingly high costs at institutions of higher learning. Key findings pertaining to this section of the report are highlighted below:

- The average increase for Mississippi public college/university tuition from 2008 to 2018 was $2,364, which was below the national average of $2,651.
- Hispanic people have the lowest rate of bachelor’s degrees or higher of any racial group in the state.
- Black and white high school graduates enroll in post-secondary institutions at nearly identical rates of 67 percent and 68.8, respectively. The state average is 67.1 percent. However, data suggest that the public education system in Mississippi is not adequately preparing black students for post-secondary studies.
THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Educational achievement for all people regardless of race is a central issue hindering long-term prosperity in Mississippi. Currently, communities of color suffer from a cycle of poverty caused by lower educational attainment rates, which in turn creates more poverty for the next generation of children even before starting their own education. Key findings pertaining to this section of the report are highlighted below:

- Individuals with higher educational attainment have higher median incomes, lower unemployment, and lower poverty rates than those with less education.
- Those with lower levels of education generally have lower incomes, higher unemployment, and higher levels of poverty.

Conclusion

It is clear from all four parts of this report that school districts/agencies must be targets for greater investment if the state of Mississippi is to move off the bottom of most social and economic indicators and prosper. This is Mississippian’s shared obligation in justice to the human dignity of state residents and the common good of the state. The consequences of continuing disparities in education, combined with the failure to address the social and economic well-being of Mississippi children and families, can only deepen inequality within Mississippi communities and darken hopes for the future.
The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi is a holistic analysis of the environmental and institutional conditions that affect education equity through the lens of Catholic social teaching. This study begins with a demography of the state’s under age 18 population and goes on to examine the quality of public education provided in all 82 Mississippi counties according to indicators divided into the three periods of an individual’s possible matriculation: early education, primary and secondary education (kindergarten through twelfth grade), and post-secondary education. The report concludes with an examination of the long-term impact of educational attainment on economic security.

For this study “education equity” is defined as a state of education where social categories such as race or income are not an accurate predictor of inequality. “Educational attainment” is defined as the highest year of formal education completed or level of degree conferred. The framework used in this report views all active public institutions and systems of pre-kindergarten through grade 12 education as part of a county’s educational infrastructure. The indicators reflect what is measurable so that policies can be implemented that are designed to close pertinent gaps.

All education is cumulative and educational attainment—from less than a high school education to a doctorate—is the result of a long process that connects higher education to a child’s first words. This report shows that poverty is the greatest detriment to educational performance. This in turn hinders educational attainment. Moreover, increasing adult educational attainment improves the overall standard of living for individuals, families, and communities. Furthermore, the report also shows that communities of color suffer from a level of poverty that harms educational performance and produces lower adult educational attainment rates. This in turn creates more poverty for the next generation of children starting their own educational journey.

A 2019 report from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce explains:

Even when they are equally prepared, children from low-SES [socioeconomic status] families are less likely than their high-SES peers to enroll in post-secondary programs, complete college degrees, or have high SES as young adults. And among low-SES children, additional disparities are apparent by race and ethnicity.³
In order to increase adult educational attainment, early education and secondary education must be improved through a robust allocation of resources, and childhood poverty must be addressed.

Multiple studies confirm the strong relationship between educational attainment and standard of living. A 2013 report by the Economic Policy Institute notes that:

States can build a strong foundation for economic success and shared prosperity by investing in education. Providing expanded access to high quality education will not only expand economic opportunity for residents, but also likely do more to strengthen the overall state economy than anything else a state government can do.4

Furthermore, the impact that education has on any community is cyclical. A child born into an environment is educated both formally and informally in that environment well into adulthood. The education an individual receives has a major effect on their standard of living as an adult, which subsequently becomes the environment in which their children begin their own educational matriculation.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that access to education along with food, work, water, clothing, and shelter is necessary for a human being to lead a truly human life.5 The lack of educational equity, culminating in low educational attainment, has helped create Mississippi’s social and economic problems. This report concludes that by addressing issues within the home environment, such as poverty, while also improving aspects of the public education system, Mississippi’s leaders can foster educational equity in the state and improve the overall standard of living for its citizens.
The educational process begins at birth, long before a child attends kindergarten, which is typically at age five. The period from birth to age four is critical because of rapid physiological and cognitive development, which can be significantly impacted by a child's environment. Factors such as poverty can have an especially negative effect on young children and their ability to grow and develop the cognitive skills that are crucial for future academic success. A 2016 report from the National Education Association explains,

Poverty influences emotions, shapes behaviors, changes the structure and processing of the brain, affects cognitive capacity, and influences attitudes. Poverty's impact on the brain is especially seen in the student's executive function skills: attentional skills, working memory, ability to prioritize, and ability to self-regulate.6

Children who are hungry, sick, homeless, poor, or abused have a harder time learning than those who are well-fed, healthy, sheltered, financially secure, and safe. This is not because of some innate deficiency on the part of those who lack life’s necessities; rather it is because young people cannot learn adequately if they lack these necessities.
Demographics and Family Structure

Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the country, with the highest share of people living below the poverty line. It is also a racially diverse state, with the largest black population by share in the country. It is important as well to note the demography of the school-age population in the state and to explore economic and racial disparities across various indicators.

Figure 1.1 shows the child population (under 18) by race/ethnicity in Mississippi. According to the American Community Survey (ACS) 2016 5-year estimates, white children make up the largest racial group in the state at 48.70 percent. Black children make up the second largest group at 42.41 percent, followed by children of other racial/ethnic groups (Indigenous, Asian, two or more races, and other racial/ethnic groups were combined for statistical significance) at 4.86 percent. Hispanic/Latino children make up the smallest share at 4.03 percent.
Mississippi also has a higher rate of children living in single-parent households, defined as male- or female-led homes with children under 18, than is found nationally. That rate also is higher for families of color. Studies have shown that children raised in single-parent homes generally complete less K-12 schooling and have lower rates of college completion than their peers who come from two-parent homes. Furthermore, single-parents tend to have less free time and fewer financial resources, making it a challenge to balance work and childcare and harder to find time to educate children.

Figure 1.2 shows the rates of single-parent households among racial/ethnic groups in Mississippi and the United States according to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates. In Mississippi, the average rate of all children living in single-parent homes is 45.24 percent, 10.47 percentage points higher than the national average. White children have the lowest rate of single-parent households in Mississippi and the United States at 28.47 percent and 27.55 percent, respectively. Children of other racial/ethnic groups have the third-lowest rates of single-parent households at 38.79 percent in Mississippi and 33.24 percent nationally, after Hispanic/Latino children at 37.19 percent and 39.93 percent, respectively. Black children have the highest rate of single-parent households at 67.70 percent in Mississippi and 63.83 percent nationally. The rate of single-parent households for black children in Mississippi is more than 20 percentage points higher than the state average for all children, and almost 40 percentage points higher than the rate for white children.
Household Income

The median household income in Mississippi is one of the lowest in the country, and this is especially true of households of color. Household income of families with children can serve as an indicator of children’s environment. Households with higher incomes can insulate a child from major stressors that can be harmful to development, such as poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and restricted access to healthcare. Furthermore, parents in households with higher incomes tend to have higher educational attainment and are better positioned due to their financial and educational circumstances to create the environment that can allow their children to thrive.

This report now will examine the overall median household income by race/ethnicity in Mississippi, followed by the median household income of families with children under age 18 by school district in the state.

Figure 1.3 shows median household incomes by race/ethnicity in Mississippi and the United States. According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, the overall median household income in Mississippi is $40,528, almost $15,000 less than the national average. The white median household income is the highest in the state and nationally at $50,525 and $61,018, respectively. The Hispanic/Latino median household income is the second highest at $37,891 in Mississippi and $44,254 nationally. The black median household income is the lowest in Mississippi and the United States at $27,174 and $36,651, respectively. In Mississippi, the black median household income is more than $13,000 lower than the state average median household income and more than $23,000 lower than the white median household income.
Figure 1.4 shows the median household incomes in the top quintile or 20 percent (green) and bottom quintile or 20 percent (red) of families with children under 18 by school district in Mississippi. The top quintile ranges from $94,526 (Madison County School District) to $52,222 (Franklin County School District). The bottom quintile ranges from $28,531 (Western Line School District) to $14,491 (West Bolivar Consolidated School District).

The state median household income of families with children, according to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, is $41,111.

Note: Figures represent the averages within a school district. Green represents the top quintile or 20 percent. Blue represents the state median (as calculated from district averages), and Red represents the bottom quintile or 20 percent. All numbers are rounded to the nearest dollar.
Poverty and Food Insecurity

Just as the median household income in Mississippi is one of the lowest in the country, its poverty rate is one of the highest. This again is especially true for people of color. Poverty can be one of the most harmful detriments to a child’s physical and cognitive development and can have lifelong consequences. Poor children are generally exposed to higher rates of violence, medical insecurity, housing instability, and food insecurity than non-poor children are.

As the American Psychological Association reports,

“Low food security and hunger can contribute to toxic stress—the strong, unrelieved activation of the body’s stress management system.”

Exposure to toxic stress can slow or damage the physical development of a child’s brain and body and impede a child’s ability to focus and learn. Additionally, poverty and food insecurity may subject a child to ridicule and bullying since they often carry a stigma in American culture.

Figure 1.5 shows the child poverty rates by race/ethnicity in Mississippi and the United States, according to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates. The overall child poverty rate in Mississippi, defined by children under the age of 18 living below the federal poverty line, is 31.55 percent, 10.38 percentage points higher than the national child poverty rate. The poverty rate for black children in Mississippi and the nation as a whole is higher than the overall rate at 48.47 percent and 37.42 percent, respectively. In Mississippi, the black child poverty rate is 16.92 percentage points above the overall state rate, whereas the white child poverty rate is 15.05 percentage points below the overall rate. Stated another way, of the 231,522 children living in poverty in Mississippi, 64.94 percent (150,355) of them are black, 25.36 percent (58,719) are white, 4.88 percent (11,302) are children of other racial/ethnic groups, and 4.81 percent (11,146) are Hispanic/Latino.

Child poverty and food insecurity rates are strongly connected; they are both disproportionately represented amongst people of color, and they both negatively affect learning. The 2017 food insecurity report from Feeding America notes that food insecurity and poverty are more prevalent in some racial/ethnic groups than others, and that, “persistent-poverty counties include a disproportionate share of counties with majority non-white populations, highlighting the deep and pervasive nature of the systemic challenges faced by many minority communities.” In Mississippi, the overall food insecurity rate is the highest in the country at 19.2 percent. The rate of food insecurity for children in Mississippi is even higher at 22.9 percent. The county with the highest rate of child food insecurity is Issaquena County where 38.30 percent of children are considered food insecure.
Early Childhood Education

While studies have shown that enrollment in early childhood education programs can have a positive impact on a child’s academic success and future educational attainment, such programs also serve as a valuable childcare option for working parents.19

In Mississippi, options for early education are largely limited to families with the ability to pay for private/parochial school programs or low-income families eligible for state and federally funded programs which often have long waitlists.

It is also important to note that some parents choose not to enroll their children in early education programs, but rather opt to keep them at home or with relatives in the years before a child reaches the age to attend kindergarten. Despite policy efforts to increase access to early education in Mississippi, families who neither qualify for low-income programs nor can afford to pay private/parochial pre-school tuition are left with few options. According to ACS 2016 5-year estimates, just over half (51.08 percent) of children ages three and four are enrolled in an early education program statewide.20
Birth to Age Four: Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

The conditions into which children are born and their exposure to early education should be key concerns for policymakers when planning long-term economic development in Mississippi. It also should be a key concern for ordinary citizens because this time in a child’s life is crucial for future success. In their 2017 report "Workforce of Today, Workforce of Tomorrow: The Business Case for High-Quality Childcare," the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation explains:

**Developmental gaps between higher and lower income children have been observed among children as young as 9 months old. By 18 months, toddlers from low-income families can already be several months behind their more advantaged peers in language development.**

This not only applies to education but to children’s general well-being. Children from birth to age four are most susceptible to external factors because their bodies and minds are developing rapidly in direct response to their environment.

The data in this study show a moderate to strong negative relationship between median income and child poverty, and the same between median income and single-parent households. There is also a moderate to strong positive relationship between a district’s non-white under-18 population and a district’s childhood poverty rate. This means that, in Mississippi, children of color have more exposure to the detriments of poverty when compared to white children.

All of these indicators—child poverty, single-parent households, and the median household income for families with children—are metrics of the home environment. The home environment matters as much, if not more, than the school environment because students spend more of their time at home. Poverty has a clear negative impact on childhood development, the effects of which can follow an individual into primary and secondary education, higher education, and adulthood.
The following action steps should be undertaken in order to address the issues pertinent to early childhood education:

### Child Poverty

The primary means of addressing childhood poverty is to address the income of the working poor. It is not enough for an individual to work a full-time job—the job must pay a wage that allows the individual to meet their financial obligations and unexpected expenses such as medical emergencies. Mississippi lawmakers must replace the minimum wage with a living wage, which according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator is $11.04 for a single adult and $21.69 for two adults with one child.\(^{22}\)

The current federal minimum wage in Mississippi is $7.25, which is above the poverty wage of $5.84 for a single adult but below the poverty wage of $9.99 for two adults with one child.\(^{23}\) Increased wages mean more local economic activity and an increase in the standard of living. Mississippi lawmakers should join twenty-nine other states by creating a state earned income tax credit, a proven bi-partisan program which “makes work pay” by returning more income to the working taxpayer.

### Food Insecurity

For many low-income families, food security is dependent upon a combination of government services and philanthropy. In order to directly address food insecurity, both federal and state lawmakers must guarantee that Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch programs will be fully funded and never be subject to budget cuts.\(^{24}\) Federal and Mississippi lawmakers must tread lightly concerning adding work requirements to SNAP benefits because they can result in families in need of food assistance being deemed ineligible.\(^{25}\) Nevertheless, relying on government programs like SNAP to address hunger is inadequate.\(^{26}\)

Food banks, food pantries, and other models also play an important role in addressing food insecurity. These programs were designed to provide short-term assistance to food insecure families; however, they are increasingly being used for long-term assistance. Access to food programs is a concern for both urban and rural populations.\(^{27}\) In order to address the growing need for assistance, public-private partnerships should hold regular food drives and provide mobile food pantries in order to reach communities with little access to food assistance. However, Mississippi’s socio-spatial reality complicates the food security picture.

Hossfeld and Mendez write:

> The food environment of the state is characterized by high persistent poverty, low healthy food access, and a primarily rural landscape with low vehicle access, a USDA measure that captures the percentage of housing units located more than 20 miles from a grocery store, without access to a vehicle. Mississippi has 167 census tracts that are considered food deserts, located in 63 counties or 77 percent of the state. Of these census tracts, 103 have low vehicle access. Transportation, then, is an added burden in accessing healthy food.\(^{28}\)

Furthermore, in some rural counties with high poverty there are no grocery stores, so individuals receiving SNAP must travel to neighboring counties to use their benefits. Clearly, state lawmakers should take appropriate legislative measures to encourage the creation of local food markets in each county to provide access to nutritious food for rural populations such as incentivizing local residents to create community gardens, farmers markets, and local food markets. These measures will simultaneously address food insecurity while generating local economic activity.
Early Education and Childcare

The most direct step that Mississippi lawmakers can take to provide universal access to early education is to allocate the necessary state and local funds to build and staff early education centers in both rural and urban areas as fully functioning parts of the state public education system and under the oversight of local education agencies. The ultimate goal for state lawmakers should be to have early education centers available at every elementary school in the state that are academically aligned so that students are prepared for third grade assessments. This will provide parents, including single parents, with options for safe and sanitary childcare during their working hours while providing children with important educational exposure. There has been positive activity in this regard from state lawmakers and education policy makers. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, there are currently 14 early learning collaboratives in the state. This is an important program that should be expanded through appropriate legislation and appropriations. In addition to state programs, the federal government should expand funding for the Head Start program and the Child Care and Development Fund.
At age five, children in Mississippi typically begin formal education, usually in kindergarten. Elementary and secondary education (K-12) are critical periods in an individual’s matriculation because it prepares them for post-secondary education at a university or trade school. With the exception of homeschooling, Mississippi families have two options for their children: public education, including charter and lab schools, or private education, which also includes parochial schools. Private schools tend to have access to greater resources, selective admissions, and the ability to offer a wider range of extracurricular programs than public schools. In Mississippi, private schools are also largely attended by white students. According to 2015-2016 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 94.44 percent of kindergarten through twelfth grade students attend public school in Mississippi, and just 5.56 percent attend private school.30 Of the students who attend private school in the state, 82.73 percent of them are white, whereas 17.27 percent are non-white.31

Since over 90 percent of Mississippi’s K-12 students attend public schools, this section will examine data pertaining to Mississippi’s public education system. There are a multitude of public education agencies operating in Mississippi’s 82 counties. Public education consists of a combination of county school districts, municipal districts, sub-county districts, and agricultural schools. This section examines only the 142 county and municipal districts in the state.
Public School Characteristics

In Mississippi, for the 2017-2018 academic year, the majority of kindergarten through twelfth grade students who attend public school in the state are non-white, with white students making up 44.19 percent of the enrollment, and non-white students making up 55.81 percent.32 Black students make up 48.54 percent of the total student population. According to the Mississippi government database Lifetracks, for the 2016-2017 academic year, the economically disadvantaged student enrollment rate in public schools was 74.84 percent. Out of the total number of economically disadvantaged students, 53.78 percent were black and 39.73 percent were white.13

School District Accountability Grades

The Mississippi Department of Education assesses public school districts annually based on factors related to student performance and assigns a numerical score and corresponding letter grade. The Mississippi Statewide Accountability System assigns a performance score and corresponding grade of A, B, C, D, or F to each school and district using the following criteria:

- Proficiency/Performance on State Assessments
- Growth
- Participation
- Graduation Rates
- College and Career Readiness
- Acceleration

For the 2017-2018 school year, the state received a “C” grade.14
Student Expenditures, Teacher Salaries, and Staffing

Schools cannot educate the students in their charge adequately without proper funding. In Mississippi, the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) determines funding. The formula seeks to compensate for disparities in local resources in order to provide students with an equitable education. The formula itself consists of two parts.\[^{35}\] First, the MAEP allocation is determined by weighing average daily attendance, growth in average daily attendance over the last 3 years, the base student cost, local contributions, the number of students deemed at risk, and a hold-harmless guarantee equal to 2002 funding for programs replaced by the MAEP.\[^{36}\] Second, once the MAEP allocation has been calculated, funding is provided by the state for add-on programs such as special education, alternative education, transportation, gifted education, and career and technical education.\[^{37}\] The formula is equitable when funded fully, but if it is not fully funded (as has been the case in most years since 1997), the MAEP and add-on amounts are reduced.\[^{38}\]

This underfunding places a heavier burden on poorer districts because they do not have the local resources or industry to justify increasing the local contribution. Consequently, these poorer districts may not be able to supplement what they get from the MAEP.
Figure 2.1 shows the per-pupil expenditures in the top quintile (green) and bottom quintile (red) for kindergarten through twelfth grade public school districts in Mississippi. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the state district median for per-pupil expenditures is $10,288. The top quintile ranges from $21,609 to $11,634. The bottom quintile ranges from $9,108 to $7,852.

Note: Green represents the top quintile or 20 percent. Blue represents the state median (as calculated from district figures), and Red represents the bottom quintile or 20 percent. All numbers are rounded to the nearest dollar.
One of the more urgent problems facing public education, both in Mississippi and in the United States as a whole, is that of teacher staffing and retention. Fewer teachers lead to less overall instruction and guidance within a school, as well as larger class sizes. Several factors contribute to the problem of teacher shortages, but among the most significant is low wages. Ultimately, those who suffer most from underpaying teachers are the students under their instruction who are likely not receiving the quality and attention that they deserve.

Figure 2.2 shows the average salaries for kindergarten through twelfth grade public school teachers by state in the Gulf South and the nation. According to 2016-2017 data from the National Education Association, the Mississippi average public-school teacher salary was $16,025 less than the national average. Among the Gulf South states, Texas had the highest teacher salary at $52,575, followed by Louisiana at $50,000. Mississippi had the lowest teacher salary at $42,925, followed by Alabama at $48,868 and Florida at $49,407. All of the Gulf South states had teacher salaries below the national average.
Figure 2.3 shows the average annual teacher salaries in the top quintile (green) and bottom quintile (red) for kindergarten through twelfth grade public school districts in Mississippi. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the state median annual teacher salary for the 2017-2018 academic year was $44,344. The top quintile ranges from $50,142 to $45,928. The bottom quintile ranges from $43,012 to $39,731.

### 2017-2018 Average Annual Salaries of K-12 Public School Teachers by School District in Mississippi (Top and Bottom Quintiles)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claiborne County</td>
<td>$50,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pascagoula-Gautier</td>
<td>$48,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biloxi Public</td>
<td>$48,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass Christian Public</td>
<td>$48,337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>$48,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreys County</td>
<td>$47,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulfport</td>
<td>$47,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica County</td>
<td>$47,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin County</td>
<td>$47,586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson County</td>
<td>$47,563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Public</td>
<td>$47,547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean Springs</td>
<td>$47,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison County</td>
<td>$47,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazlehurst City</td>
<td>$46,944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison County</td>
<td>$46,806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amite County</td>
<td>$46,724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowndes County</td>
<td>$46,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauderdale County</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson County</td>
<td>$46,347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson Public</td>
<td>$46,206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton Public</td>
<td>$46,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Albany Public</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay St. Louis-Waveland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natchez-Adams</td>
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<td>Vicksburg-Warren</td>
<td>$45,964</td>
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<td>Western Line</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moss Point</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hancock County</td>
<td>$45,928</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jefferson County</td>
<td>$45,928</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Median</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corinth</td>
<td>$43,012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pontotoc County</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Point Consolidated</td>
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<td>Richton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
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<td>Perry County</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monroe County</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Bolivar Consolidated</td>
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<tr>
<td>McComb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lumberton Public</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scott County</td>
<td>$42,328</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marshall County</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Tallahatchie</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nettleton</td>
<td>$41,796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Municipal</td>
<td>$41,672</td>
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<tr>
<td>East Tallahatchie Consolidated</td>
<td>$41,562</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coffeeville</td>
<td>$41,388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tate County</td>
<td>$41,371</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union Public</td>
<td>$41,275</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chickasaw County</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leland</td>
<td>$40,590</td>
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<tr>
<td>Okolona Separate</td>
<td>$40,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Panola</td>
<td>$40,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman County</td>
<td>$39,731</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **Green** represents the top quintile or 20 percent. **Blue** represents the state median (as calculated from district figures), and **Red** represents the bottom quintile or 20 percent.
Just as low teacher salaries can hinder educational quality and contribute to teacher shortages, teacher supports and class sizes can have similar effects. Pupil-teacher ratio is best understood as a proxy for how many teachers are present in a given district as well as classroom size. School districts with higher ratios tend to have more students per classroom, resulting in less one-on-one attention a student can receive from a teacher.

While there is no consensus on optimal pupil-teacher ratio, a higher ratio can have a negative impact on student academic progress and classroom management.\(^{43}\)

Figure 2.4 shows the average pupil-teacher ratios by state for public schools, grades kindergarten through twelve. According to 2016-2017 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the national average pupil-teacher ratio was 16.1 students to one teacher.\(^{44}\) Among the Gulf South states, Alabama had the highest average pupil-teacher ratio at 17.51 students to one teacher and Louisiana had the lowest at 14.80 to one. Mississippi had the third lowest average pupil-teacher ratio at 15.13 students to one teacher, less than the national average, which is a positive sign.
The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi

Academic Performance

Proficiency in English and mathematics are essential for academic and occupational success, and the skills developed during the educational process are cumulative. If students fall behind their appropriate level long enough, it can be difficult, or even impossible, to catch up.

In a 2014 report, the Annie F. Casey Foundation explained,

“The end of third grade marks the point when children transition from learning to read to using reading to learn other subjects. Children who read proficiently by the end of third grade are more likely to graduate from high school and to be economically successful in adulthood.”

The same is also true of mathematics. States differ on when they assess these skills, but it is evident that the achievement gap emerges early.

Kindergarten Readiness Assessments

In Mississippi, children are evaluated on reading readiness in the fall after they begin kindergarten. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment is designed to gauge the literacy skills of kindergarten students and provide parents and teachers with an understanding of where a child stands academically upon entering primary school. A score of 530 or higher on the assessment indicates that a child will likely be proficient in reading by the end of third grade. The state average Kindergarten Readiness Assessment score for 2018 is 501, one point lower than in 2016 and two points lower than in 2017.

While median income for families with children has a clear moderate to strong positive correlation with School District Accountability Grades, there is a weak to moderate positive correlation with Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Scores. This suggests that the impact of poverty on education is cumulative and becomes more evident as a student ages.

In 2018, only 36.13 percent of students in kindergarten statewide met the 530-point benchmark.
Figure 2.5 shows the average Kindergarten Readiness Assessment scores in the top quintile (green) and bottom quintile (red) by school district in Mississippi. According to 2018 data from the Mississippi Department of Education, the state median score by school district is 498.48. The top quintile of assessment scores range from 559 to 518, and the bottom quintile scores range from 479 to 441. Out of 141 school districts, only 16 had average assessment scores of 530 or higher in 2018.

Note: Green represents the top quintile or 20 percent. Blue represents the state median (as calculated from district figures), and Red represents the bottom quintile or 20 percent. A score of 530 or above is the benchmark for the assessment.
In Mississippi, 3rd and 5th grade test scores are considered especially pertinent measures of academic progress. Students in 3rd through 8th grades are evaluated annually in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics (5th and 8th grades are also evaluated in science, Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and US history) using the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP). Students are classified into five performance levels based on their MAAP scores in each subject and grade level.

Students who score at level 3 are considered passing and able to “demonstrate general mastery of the knowledge and skills required for success in the grade or course in the content area.” Level 4 is considered proficient and level 5 is considered advanced. According to the 2018 MAAP statewide results, 77.14 percent of 5th grade students scored level 3 or higher in ELA and 72.25 percent scored level 3 or higher in math. 36.18 percent of 5th grade students scored levels 4 or 5 in ELA and 33.79 percent in math.

### Figure 2.6

**Percentage of 5th Grade Students by School District with ELA and Math MAAP Scores of Level 3 or Above (Top and Bottom Quintiles)**

Figure 2.6 shows the top and bottom quintiles of school districts in Mississippi with 5th grade students who had ELA and math scores of level 3 or above on 2018 MAAP tests. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the state median percentage of school districts with 5th grade students scoring level 3 or above is 77.07 percent for ELA and 72.09 percent for math.

Note: Figures represent the percentage of 5th grade students with scores qualifying as level 3 or higher in the school district. The state median was calculated using the district percentages. Level 3 is considered the benchmark for the tests.
Eleventh Grade ACT Scores

Mississippi public school students are also required to take the ACT in 11th grade for the purpose of evaluating college and career readiness. College and career readiness is assessed using ACT benchmark scores for math, along with either English or reading, as a framework. According to the ACT organization, “The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are scores that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing courses.” The ACT benchmark score for English is 18 and the benchmark score for both math and reading is 22.

Figure 2.7

Percentage of Mississippi 11th Grade Public School Students with 2018 ACT Scores Meeting the Benchmarks by Race/Ethnicity

Figure 2.7 shows the percentage of Mississippi 11th grade public school students in 2018 whose ACT scores in math, along with either English or reading, met the benchmarks for college readiness by race/ethnicity. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the percentage of all students who met the benchmarks is 38.10 percent. The percentage of white students who met the benchmarks is the highest at 54.70 percent, followed by Hispanic/Latino students at 33.70 percent. The percentage of black students who met the benchmarks is the lowest at 21.50 percent, 16.6 percentage points lower than the percentage for all students and 33.20 percentage points lower than white students.
Figure 2.8 shows the 11th grade average composite ACT scores in the top quintile (green) and bottom quintile (red) by school district in Mississippi. According to 2018 data from the Mississippi Department of Education, the state median composite ACT score is 17.1, 3.7 points lower than the national average. Oxford School District is the only district with an average composite score at or above the national average. Average composite scores in the top quintile range from 22.0 to 18.6, and scores in the bottom quintile range from 15.1 to 14.1.
High School Graduation and University/College Enrollment

Ultimately, the express purpose of primary and secondary education is to provide students with the crucial skills needed to succeed as adults. Students who complete the required high school courses are awarded a diploma, while other students who elect to leave school prematurely or do not meet the academic requirements must seek out alternative options if they choose to complete their high school education. A high school diploma or equivalent is necessary for many jobs and if a student seeks post-secondary education, such as community college, a university, or vocational training.

Figure 2.9 shows the average public high school graduation rates for the Gulf South states and the nation. According to 2016-2017 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the national average graduation rate was 85 percent. Among the Gulf South states, Mississippi had the third lowest average graduation rate at 83 percent, 2 percentage points below the national average. Louisiana had the lowest rate at 78 percent and Texas had the highest graduation rate at 90 percent, 5 percentage points above the national average.
Figure 2.10 shows the school districts in Mississippi with 2018 high school graduation rates in the top (green) and bottom (red) quintiles. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, the median high school graduation rate for the state is 83.1 percent. Graduation rates in the top quintile range from 93.5 percent to 87.3 percent, and rates in the bottom quintile range from 77 percent to 66.7 percent.
According to 2018 data from the Mississippi Department of Education, 67.1 percent of high school graduates in the state were enrolled in college in the fall after graduation. The rates for specific groups were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Enrollment Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these rates offer a sign of hope for the future, the data also show gaps in post-secondary advancement.

In fall 2016, the entering freshman class for public universities was 33.32 percent black and 57.52 percent white.

For the 2015 class of black college-enrolled, public high school graduates, 59.88 percent took post-secondary remedial math and 47.65 percent took remedial English within 16 months of graduation.

For the 2015 class of white college-enrolled, public high school graduates, 34.75 percent took post-secondary remedial math and 15.57 percent took remedial English within 16 months of graduation.

For 2015, first time, full-time public university freshmen who were retained in the fall after one year of enrollment (fall 2016), the black rate was 71.37 percent and the white rate was 79.30 percent.

The data suggest that black and white students are enrolling in post-secondary institutions at similar rates but the public education system in Mississippi is not adequately preparing black students for post-secondary studies.
Primary and Secondary Education: Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

In this section, the authors examined the relationship between a student’s academic achievement and their economic status. While a child’s home environment often serves as a basis for future development and academic achievement, primary and secondary education can play a significant role in mitigating negative experiences, such as child poverty. Financial resources are essential for ensuring that schools are adequately staffed, necessary materials are available, and facilities are properly maintained. In Mississippi, there is a clear divide between high income and low income school districts that manifests in the academic performance and eventual educational attainment of the students within those districts. While school districts in high-income areas can make up many budget shortfalls with local revenue, those in low-income areas are forced to stretch their budgets to cover the basics.

The data show a moderate to strong positive relationship between a district’s accountability score as determined by the Mississippi Department of Education and median household income for families with children.

The data also show a moderate to strong negative relationship between childhood poverty and the district accountability score, and the same between single parent households and district accountability scores. There is also a moderate to strong negative relationship between a district’s non-white under-18 population and the district accountability score.

Furthermore, the data show that students from wealthier school districts generally score higher than students from low-income districts on English and mathematics assessments in 5th grade, as well as the ACT. The wealthiest school districts are consistently ranked in the top quintiles for test scores, whereas the poorest districts are consistently ranked in the bottom quintiles. This suggests that the status of a student’s home environment affects his or her education from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood.
The following action steps should be undertaken in order to address the issues pertinent to this period of matriculation:

### Funding and Teacher Salaries

Lawmakers must fully fund the MAEP over the long term with special attention to districts with high percentages of at-risk students and students with disabilities. This would narrow the gap in per-pupil expenditures between richer and poorer districts, while also addressing the most vulnerable student populations. Additionally, state and local lawmakers should allocate additional funds to increase teacher pay to at least regional levels and to keep up with inflation.

### Staffing and Retention

State lawmakers should also pass appropriate legislation to incentivize teacher recruitment and retention by providing incentives aimed at attracting educators to poor or underperforming districts, such as expanding benefits packages and increasing tuition forgiveness amounts. There are numerous programs available for both traditional route and alternate route teachers in the state:

1. **The Federal Teacher Loan Forgiveness program** offers, for highly qualified teachers in low-income schools or education agencies, forgiveness up to $17,500 for secondary math, secondary science, and both elementary and secondary special education teachers after 5 years of consecutive employment. Under the same program, highly qualified elementary and secondary teachers in other subject areas can get up to $5,000 forgiven. Federal lawmakers should increase the forgiveness incentives to complete debt forgiveness after 10 years.

2. **The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program** forgives both the balance and interest of a consolidated student loan after 10 years of consecutive payments. Education officials should take deliberate action to let teachers know that this federal program applies to them.

3. **The Mississippi Teacher Loan Repayment Program** provides up to $12,000 maximum loan forgiveness for alternate route teachers. Due to budget constraints, this program is not accepting applications for the 2019-2020 academic year. It is paramount that state lawmakers take appropriate action to fully fund this program for the 2020-2021 year. Furthermore, state lawmakers should increase the maximum loan forgiveness to $30,000 after 5 years teaching in a high needs areas, such as low-income rural communities.

4. **The Graduate Teacher Forgivable Loan Program** provides $125 per credit hour for class A teachers in Mississippi to pursue education courses leading to an AA educator license. Due to budget constraints, this program is not accepting applications for the 2019-2020 academic year. State lawmakers should take appropriate action to fully fund this program for the 2020-2021 academic year.

These policies can ensure that districts and schools are properly staffed, and would help to keep class sizes manageable while also providing support to teachers and staff.
High School Graduation Rates and College Enrollment

There is no single policy prescription that can increase high school graduation rates, but improving these numbers is the cumulative result of multiple policies. To increase graduation rates and college enrollment rates across the board, state lawmakers must take appropriate measures to increase the teacher pool as well as providing districts with the supplementary funds to acquire the necessary educational resources they need.

Smaller class sizes can allow districts to quickly identify learning deficiencies, such as being below grade appropriate reading and math levels, so that they can provide struggling students with necessary academic intervention. In addition to teaching staff, state lawmakers should adopt appropriate incentivizing measures to attract counselors and social workers to serve in high-need and rural school districts. Education officials should also examine policies that have a discernable impact on school attendance and dropout rates, specifically school discipline codes.
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

After graduating from high school, typically between ages 17 and 19, students must decide whether or not to pursue further education credentials. Although previous generations were able to obtain jobs that earned them a living wage with only a high school education, such opportunities are increasingly rare. A rise in globalization and increases in the use of automation have led to the replacement of low-skilled labor, creating a greater demand for a more educated and specialized workforce. Therefore, future economic prosperity in Mississippi and in the country as a whole is dependent on expanding the population with vocational training and college degrees.

Ensuring equal access to all students, regardless of race/ethnicity or income, who wish to attend a college or university is a crucial part of increasing the educational attainment of Mississippi citizens.
Public University/College Tuition

Higher education tuition is a significant barrier to students who wish to pursue a degree. Many students have a variety of options available to help meet the financial obligations of college attendance; however, those options are less available than they were before the 2008 Great Recession. More students are taking out student loans in order to afford the cost of tuition and other costs.

As the Center on Budget Priorities wrote in a 2018 report:

In the most difficult years after the recession, colleges responded to significant funding cuts by increasing tuition, reducing faculty, limiting course offerings, and in some cases closing campuses. Funding has rebounded slightly since then, but costs remain high and services in some places have not returned.65

Figure 3.1 shows the average tuition increases from 2008 to 2018 for four-year public colleges/universities in Gulf South states and the nation.66 According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the average tuition increase for Mississippi was the third-highest in the Gulf South at $2,364, but below the national average increase of $2,651. Louisiana had the highest increase at $4,773, and Texas had the lowest average tuition increase at $2,210. This has combined with a decline of 34.4 percent in per-student funding for Mississippi’s public colleges and universities below their 2008 levels.
The burden of increased tuition has not hit all racial/ethnic groups in Mississippi equally. For example, in 2017 the average tuition at a public four-year university accounted for 17.2 percent of a family’s median household income. For white families, the average tuition accounted for just 13.6 percent of median household income, while that number is 25.6 percent for black families and 17.5 percent for Hispanic/Latino families.

**Educational Attainment**

Economic security increasingly is a function of post high school educational attainment. As a 2018 report by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University explains:

> Education matters. More and more, good jobs are going to workers with bachelor’s degrees, who now hold 55 percent of all good jobs. For workers without BAs, associate’s degrees have become increasingly important for finding a good job. More associate’s degree holders are getting good jobs, while the number of these jobs held by workers with a high school diploma or less is in decline.

For Mississippi and the nation as a whole, future economic prosperity, as well as social and racial equality, are dependent upon creating a more educated workforce.

Figure 3.2 shows the educational attainment of adults over the age of 25 in Mississippi and the United States. According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, the percentage of adults over 25 without a high school diploma or GED is 17.04 percent in Mississippi, about 4 percentage points higher than the national average. At the other end of the educational attainment spectrum, the percentage of Mississippi adults over 25 with a bachelor’s degree or higher is 21.02 percent, over 9 percentage points lower than the national average. In between, 30.44 percent of adults over 25 in Mississippi have a high school diploma or GED, 2.91 percentage points higher than the national average; and 31.50 percent of Mississippi adults over 25 completed some college or an associate’s degree, 2.37 percentage points higher than nationally.
Figure 3.3 shows the educational attainment by race/ethnicity for adults over the age of 25 in Mississippi. According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, 12.92 percent of white adults in Mississippi have less than a high school diploma, while 24.70 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. 32.45 percent of white adults in the state have some college or an associate’s degree, and 29.93 percent have only a high school diploma or GED. For black adults over 25 in Mississippi, only 14.57 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, while 23 percent have less than a high school diploma or GED. 31.97 percent of black adults have only a high school diploma or GED, while 30.47 percent have some college or an associate’s degree. Hispanic adults in Mississippi have the highest rate of adults over 25 with less than a high school diploma or GED at 36.43 percent, while also having the lowest rate of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher at 12.95 percent.

27.46 percent of Hispanic/Latino adults have a high school diploma or GED, and 23.16 percent have some college or an associate’s degree. Finally, 25.87 percent of adults of other racial/ethnic groups have less than a high school diploma, while 23.07 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. 23.92 percent of adults of other racial/ethnic groups have a high school diploma or GED, and 27.14 percent have some college or an associate’s degree.

A moderate to strong positive correlation exists between childhood poverty and adults over the age of 25 having less than a high school education. The data suggest that higher rates of lower educational attainment are a contributing factor to childhood poverty rates in a cyclical relationship which has a clearly disparate impact on communities of color due to higher rates of less than a high school education.
Figure 3.4 shows the school districts in Mississippi in the top (green) and bottom (red) quintiles for percentage of adults over the age of 25 with less than a high school diploma or GED.\(^7\) According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, the state median district percentage of adults over 25 with less than a high school education is 20.54 percent. The top quintile ranges from 5.89 percent to 14.53 percent. The bottom quintile ranges from 24.44 percent to 36.84 percent.

Note: Figures represent the averages within a school district. **Green** represents the top quintile or 20 percent. **Blue** represents the state median (as calculated from district averages), and **Red** represents the bottom quintile or 20 percent.
Figure 3.5 shows the school districts in Mississippi in the top (green) and bottom (red) quintiles for percentage of adults over the age of 25 with an educational attainment of some college or higher. According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, the state median percentage of adults over 25 with some college or higher is 46.13 percent. The top quintile ranges from 80.34 percent to 54.93 percent. The bottom quintile ranges from 39.76 percent to 30.21 percent.

Note: Figures represent the averages within a school district. Green represents the top quintile or 20 percent. Blue represents the state median (as calculated from district averages), and Red represents the bottom quintile or 20 percent.
Post-Secondary Education: Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

Institutions of higher education and vocational education are the end of a student’s formal matriculation, which typically is around age 25. The exceptions are further graduate studies, advanced certifications, and medical school. Educational attainment is the ultimate measure of the health of Mississippi’s educational infrastructures. As noted earlier, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, in the future, higher education credentials will be required for jobs with better salaries, which in turn affects health outcomes and standard of living for workers and their families. The data show that the majority of adults in Mississippi have a high school diploma and above, which follows the national trend. While this is a positive sign regarding the overall functioning of education in Mississippi, when examined racially disparities become evident.

Of those with less than high school education, white people have a far lower rates than any other racial group. At the other end of the educational attainment spectrum, white people and people of other races have similar rates of bachelor’s and higher degrees while black people and Hispanics have significantly lower rates. Both of those groups also have a higher rate of less than a high school diploma than bachelor’s degree and above. Blacks and Hispanics make up over 45 percent of the under 18 population in the state; failing to improve educational attainment for them is and will continue to be a roadblock for future economic prosperity and social mobility in the state. Mississippi cannot thrive if almost half of its population seriously lags in educational attainment. In the next section, the authors will examine the long-term impacts of educational attainment on economic security.
The following action steps should be undertaken in order to address the issues pertinent to this period of matriculation:

**College/University Tuition**

In the years following the recession, Mississippi universities raised their tuition by an average of $2,364, which was the third-highest increase of the five Gulf South States. The cost of attendance is a major barrier for many students to enter and stay in college without accruing large amounts of debt. Federal and state lawmakers must increase funding for public universities and community colleges to at least pre-recession levels, adjusted for inflation, in order to drive down costs, which would reduce the dependency on student loans and increase the efficacy of scholarship and grant programs in covering more of the cost of attendance. By making college more affordable, more students will be able to attend and graduate with less debt; this increases the adult educational attainment while putting money into local economies. State lawmakers also must increase funding for college incentive programs.

Currently, the Office of the Mississippi State Treasurer offers two 529-education savings plans: the Mississippi Prepaid Affordable College Tuition Plan and the Mississippi Affordable College Savings Program. Residents can participate in both. In addition to this, Mississippi high school graduates can apply for need-based grants such as the Higher Education Legislative Plan for students with demonstrable financial need according to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and the Mississippi Tuition Assistance Grant. The state also offers the Mississippi Eminent Scholars Grant, which is merit-based. As tuitions rise and the cost of attendance increasingly becomes an access barrier for many families across the nation, state programs like the 529 plans, need-based grants, and the Mississippi Eminent Scholars Grant are facilitating access to higher education for many of Mississippi’s students. State lawmakers should increase the award amounts for students in need and merit-based grants so they cover more of the tuition burden. In addition to these measures, state lawmakers should take appropriate action to ensure that all community colleges are tuition neutral, thus allowing access for students of all income levels.
THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The cumulative nature of education ends in adult educational attainment. Education is an investment and one return on that investment is the standard of living a person enjoys. Educational achievement for all people regardless of race is a central issue hindering long-term prosperity in Mississippi. Studies show that individuals with lower educational attainment have higher rates of poverty than those with higher educational attainment. This increases the demand for government spending on social services and incarceration. Lower education rates limit economic opportunity and subsequently hinder the quality of life and the likelihood of social mobility. The effect is most clear in looking at three areas—earnings, unemployment, and poverty—and the disparities by educational attainment.
**Earnings**

Figure 4.1 shows the median annual individual earnings for adults over 25 by educational attainment in Mississippi and the United States according to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates. The median earnings for adults in Mississippi, regardless of educational attainment, is $30,992, $5,818 lower than the national average. Adults in Mississippi with less than a high school diploma or GED earn $19,990 annually, about $1,000 less than the national average. Adults with a high school diploma or GED earn $26,240 in Mississippi, $2,432 less than the national average. The median earnings for adults with some college or an associate’s degree are $30,081, compared to $34,412 nationally. Adults with a bachelor’s degree earn $41,282 annually, almost $10,000 less than the national average. The most significant earnings gap is for adults with a graduate or professional degree—in Mississippi, adults with a graduate or professional degree earn just $51,881, almost $16,000 less than the national average and just $787 more than the national average for adults with a bachelor’s degree.
Unemployment

Figure 4.2 shows the unemployment rates for adults ages 25 to 64 in Mississippi and the United States. According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, the average unemployment rate in Mississippi, regardless of educational attainment is 7.61 percent, 1.54 percentage points higher than the national average. The unemployment rates in Mississippi are higher than the United States among all levels of education with the exception of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. The unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma or GED in Mississippi is 16.31 percent, 5.09 percentage points higher than the national average.

For those with only a high school diploma or GED, the unemployment rate in Mississippi is 9.27 percent, 1.31 percentage points higher than the national average. The unemployment rate for adults with some college or an associate’s degree in Mississippi is 7.04 percent, 0.87 percentage points higher than the United States and almost 1 percentage point higher than the overall national unemployment rate. Finally, the unemployment rate for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher is 3.17 percent in Mississippi, just 0.18 percentage points lower than the national average.
Poverty

Figure 4.3 shows the poverty rates for adults over 25 by educational attainment in Mississippi and the United States. According to the ACS 2016 5-year estimates, the poverty rate for adults in Mississippi, regardless of educational attainment is 17.44 percent, 5.65 percentage points above the national average. The poverty rates for adults in Mississippi are higher than the United States among all levels of education. The poverty rate for adults in Mississippi without a high school diploma or GED is 34.01 percent, 6.94 percentage points higher than the United States. The poverty rate for adults with a high school diploma or GED in Mississippi is 20.14 percent, 5.87 percentage points higher than the national average. The poverty rate in Mississippi for adults with some college or an associate’s degree is 14.38 percent, 3.95 percentage points higher than the national average, and 0.11 percentage points higher than the national rate for adults with only a high school diploma or GED. Finally, the poverty rate for adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher is 5.41 percent in Mississippi, compared to 4.53 percent nationally.

The data clearly show that in Mississippi and in the nation, those with higher education rates generally have a better standard of living than those with less education. **Individuals with higher educational attainment have higher median incomes, lower unemployment rates, and lower poverty rates than those with less education.** Ultimately, this completes the educational cycle while also establishing the conditions for early education for the next generation.
Conclusion

The data presented in this study of education equity in Mississippi indicate that the greatest detriment to educational performance and, subsequently, future adult educational attainment is poverty. Poverty in the home environment delays and diminishes educational development even prior to formal schooling. The impact of poverty carries over into elementary and secondary education and is reflected in elementary school testing and the ACT college admissions test. Poverty then diminishes the opportunity to access college, university, and technical training both academically and financially. Ultimately, the level of educational attainment usually determines family economic security and the environment in which the next generation of children are formed and educated.

Because poverty is concentrated in higher levels in communities of color in Mississippi, the data in this study have shown its racial effects in the acute disparities by race/ethnicity in affording higher education, the levels of educational attainment, and, ultimately, individual and family economic security. Because of the close relationship of poverty to poor test results and other educational measures, the disparate racial impact runs throughout the levels of education—from preschool to elementary to secondary to higher education—and locks people into a cycle of educational underachievement. Inequality in education, especially based on race and socioeconomic status, undermines the short-term and long-term economic and social stability of communities of color and, as a consequence, communities as a whole. As the US Catholic Bishops explained forty years ago:

Racism and economic oppression are distinct but interrelated forces which dehumanize our society. Movement toward authentic justice demands a simultaneous attack on both evils.82

Policies, practices, and institutions that restrict access to quality education for any children—whether low-income or children of color—are oppressive practices that adversely affect the standard of living of millions of poor and marginalized people. This makes them socially unjust and therefore immoral.
This study further indicates that increasing educational attainment requires the necessary investments to educate children and to offset the disparate educational impact of poverty, race, and ethnicity and, in so doing, improves the overall standard of living for all of us. Any disparities in education in the United States and specifically in Mississippi—whether economic or racial—should be of great concern to policy makers, educational administrators, business and labor leaders, citizens, families, and students. They are indicative of deeper systemic concerns, but chief among them must be alleviating poverty. Mississippi cannot prosper, economically and socially, so long as education is unstable due to budget constraints and clear economic and racial disparities. Bad policy initiatives created or enabled by the federal, state, and municipal governments created our current educational disparities. Good policy and practices can close those same gaps.

Catholic social teaching considers educational equity to be a pertinent social justice issue because it is necessary for integral human development, and any violation of this requires deliberate remedy. In Gravissimum Educationis, the Second Vatican Council declared,

“All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education.”

As stated earlier, the Catechism of the Catholic Church declares that education is necessary for a human being to lead a truly human life and is as much a necessity as food, work, water, clothing, and shelter. If we, as a society, provide people with what they need to develop as human beings, then we shall prosper as a community.
Correlated data was gathered from five-year averages of the United States Census, the National Center for Education Statistics, the Mississippi Department of Education, and Feeding America. Data was organized by public school district in order to standardize indicators, with the exception of child food insecurity data, which was not available by district. For each indicator, the data ranges were divided into quintiles then negatively/positively coded to account for positive and negative implications of the data values. All data ranges were entered into a correlation matrix and relationships were assigned a blue scale for positive correlations and orange scale for negative correlations. For both color scales, lighter shades indicate weaker relationships and darker shades indicate stronger relationships. Correlations were measured using the standard interpretation of correlation coefficients:

The following figure shows the correlation matrix and all correlated indicators:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hill Income (Fam w/children)</th>
<th>Child Poverty Rate</th>
<th>Single-Parent HH</th>
<th>Early Ed Enrollment (Ages 3-4)</th>
<th>Non-White Under 18</th>
<th>Pupil/Pop Ratio</th>
<th>Teacher Pay</th>
<th>PT Ratio</th>
<th>District Scores</th>
<th>K Reading Readiness (Target 50%)</th>
<th>5th Grade ELA % Level 3 or Above</th>
<th>5th Grade Math % Level 3 or Above</th>
<th>11th Grade ACT Scores</th>
<th>High School Graduation Rates</th>
<th>Some College/Higher</th>
<th>Less Than HS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hill Income (Fam w/children)</td>
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<td>Single-Parent HH</td>
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<td>Early Ed Enrollment (Ages 3-4)</td>
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<td>Pupil/Pupil Ratio</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
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<td>PT Ratio</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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<td>K Reading Readiness (Target 50%)</td>
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<td>High School Graduation Rates</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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<td>Less Than HS</td>
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</table>

Notes: 1. Did not meet threshold of statistical significance (p<0.05)

### Strength of relationship
- **None to Very weak**: 0-0.1
- **Weak to moderate**: 0.2-0.3
- **Moderate**: 0.4-0.5
- **Moderate to strong**: 0.6-0.8
- **Very Strong to Perfect**: 0.9-1
11 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
22 Data retrieved from http://livingwage.mit.edu/states/28
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 Mississippi Department of Education, Mississippi Early Learning Collaboratives, 10/18/2017.
31 Ibid.
32 Mississippi Department of Education, 2017-2018 enrollment data.
33 Data retrieved from https://lifetracks.ms.gov/PK12/ViewReport.aspx?reportName=PPI2StudentProfile
34 Lifetracks defines "economically disadvantaged" as the number of enrolled public school students (PK-12) that are eligible or have received Title I services and assistance. Students can receive Title I services and assistance directly or indirectly as part of a classroom or school that has received services and assistance.
35 Statewide Accountability Performance Results. Retrieved from: https://msrd.ode.ms.edu/StatewideAccountabilityPerformanceResults.aspx
36 Data retrieved from https://lifetracks.ms.gov/PublicUniversity/ViewReport.aspx?reportName=HLSStudentProfile
38 Data retrieved from https://lifetracks.ms.gov/PublicUniversity/ViewReport.aspx?reportName=HLSStudentProgress
42 Ibid.
43 Mitchell et al., op. cit., 13.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 JSRI analysis done using data from the Mississippi Department of Education, Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Results, November 2018.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
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62 Ibid.
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74 Mississippi State Treasurer Office. Retrieved from https://www.treasurerlynnfitch.ms.gov/collegesavingsmississippi/Pages/About.aspx
75 Information retrieved from https://www.msfinancialaid.org/
76 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
86 Design and layout by Kelsey McLaughlin / Photographs courtesy of unsplash.com icons courtesy of themefunct.com. Family by Dikana Lathyeva, House by IVikon, crayons by Made by Made, Food by Atif Arshad, Piggy Bank by VectorBakery, grade by Bieu Tuong, classroom by Fahmihorizon, salary by Andi Nur Abdillah, Teacher by Max Hancock, graduation by DIVYA A, College Tuition by Redifusion.
The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi

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