

# Update

## Miles To Go: Mississippi

Improving Education and the Economy  
from the Start

Jackson\*

**SEF**  
SINCE 1867

Southern Education Foundation  
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# foreword

This report contains a hopeful message: Mississippi doesn't always have to be near the bottom of the list of states in terms of quality of life and earnings of its people. Mississippi can change its future and its people will become more prosperous. The tried and true strategy to achieve this change is by ensuring that all Mississippians have access to a high-quality public education at all levels.

When Mississippi's economy was largely based upon farming and manufacturing, some of its people were able to make a decent or good living, even without a high school degree. But those days are gone forever. Now and in the future no community or state can expect its people and businesses to thrive any longer without a first-rate system of public education.

Now and in the future, new jobs are and will be fuelled by technology, information, and concerns with energy and sustainability. Employees need technological proficiency, developed analytic skills, innovation and creativity, and the ability to work in an increasingly diverse workplace, domestically and internationally, in order to compete with well-educated people in other parts of the nation and the world.

Education improvements in Mississippi, this report shows, should begin at the "beginning" with a commitment to providing access to quality publicly supported pre-kindergarten for all. By providing little children with positive educational experiences while they are young, helping them to "learn how to learn" and develop needed social skills, the state could make an enormous contribution toward greater success in later years of schooling and life.

The state also needs to ensure that better quality public education encourages more young people to stay in school and increases achievement levels. Dropout prevention and reclamation efforts of scale are vital to the state's economic future. When Mississippians are employable, the temptations of crime lessen, as does dependence on public resources for basic services.

In tough economic times, tough decisions must be made. Education must be the state's top priority. What is needed is leadership and vision. The future of Mississippi and its people hang in the balance.

Lynn Huntley

*President*

The Southern Education Foundation

# Introduction

## Introduction

In late 2006, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) released *Miles To Go Mississippi: Rebuilding Education*,<sup>1</sup> a special report that examined both the central role of education in Mississippi's economy and the long-term challenges and opportunities for improving the state's education. This brief report updates developments and issues during the last two years.

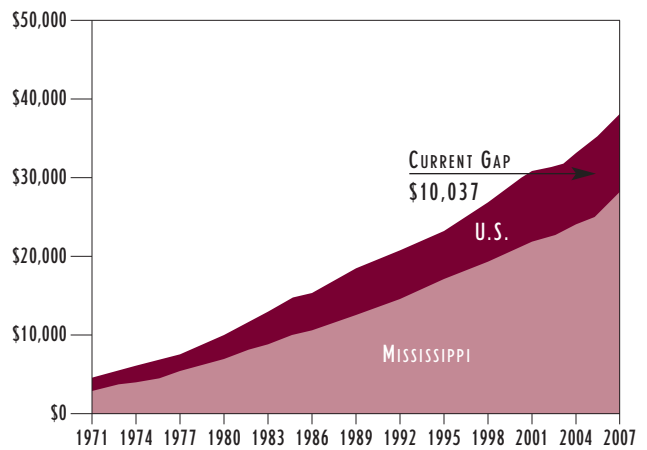
## Even in a Recession: Education Remains Mississippi's Most Important Economic Issue

Education has never been more important to Mississippi. Despite the difficulties of the current financial crisis and a deepening national recession, education remains the state's single most important long-term asset for improving Mississippians' quality of life, increasing personal income, and growing the state's economy. Not so long ago, Mississippi did not have to depend on high levels of education to grow its economy and quality of life, but that Mississippi is gone forever. In the decades ahead, once the national economy rebounds, Mississippi will expand its economic development and enjoy a higher quality of life only if it increases annually the number of well-educated students who become tomorrow's well-trained workers and well-informed citizens.

Even before the current recession, Mississippi's personal income had grown very little in comparison with the nation's income. In 1980, Mississippi's per capita income was 69 percent of the national average. In 2007, it was approximately 74 percent of

### Mississippi: 50th in the Nation in Personal Income

Per Capita Income in U.S. and Mississippi, 1970-2007



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce

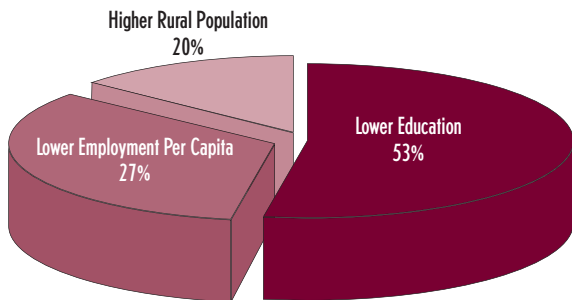
the nation's average – a net gain of only 5 points during almost 30 years. As a result, Mississippi ranked 50th in the nation in 2007 in per capita income. In terms of current dollars, each man, woman, and child in Mississippi in 2007 had an average of \$10,037 less in income than the average American. Each Mississippian also had \$6,298 less in personal income in 2007 than the average resident of the other Southeastern states.

Mississippi's economy will probably worsen during the current recession, but its basic, enduring problems are rooted deeply in the state's failure to adequately, consistently increase educational attainment. SEF's econometric study shows that at least 53 percent of the difference between Mississippi's per capita income and the nation's continues to be due solely to the state's lower levels of education. In other words, at least \$5,319 of Mississippi's current gap in per capita income with the nation is entirely due to the state's lower levels of education.

<sup>1</sup>A free electronic copy of the 2006 Mississippi report is found in the publications section of the SEF website: [www.southerneducation.org](http://www.southerneducation.org).

## Mississippi's Economic Gap

The Education Gap Explains Most of the Gap in Per Capita Income



Source: SEF Commissioned Study

Trends in personal income during the last 50 years illustrate how education has become the primary means for a state to improve its quality of life. In 1956, a high school graduate received 66 cents for every dollar earned by the average college graduate, and a high school dropout made about 50 cents for every dollar received by the college graduate.

This pattern held until the 1970s when the new global economy began to emerge. As of 2002, a high school graduate earns only 48 cents on the dollar that the average college graduate earns and the income of a high school dropout has declined to only 29 cents for every dollar of income by a college graduate.

The decline in the relative earnings among adults with too little education has had a major impact on Mississippi because the state still continues to have the nation's highest percentage of adults who have no high school diploma. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2007 more than one out of every five Mississippians 25 years or older – 21.5 percent of all adults –

<sup>2</sup>These estimates of median earnings probably understate differences in total income by educational level since adults with higher educational attainment usually have a disproportionately larger income from investments and savings.

## Per Capita Income as an Economic Indicator

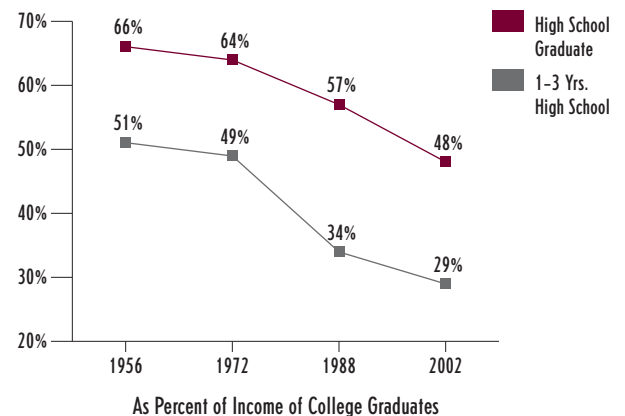
Per capita income is perhaps the best, single indicator of the status of both a state's economy and its residents' economic well-being. As a statistic, it captures some key elements of a state's economic growth and individual income. For this reason, economists, government economic reporting agencies, and others use it as a common, prime economic indicator for the status of both states and their people.

have not completed high school. In the same year, these adults had median earnings that were \$21,457 below the earnings of Mississippians with a BA degree. Also, the annual earnings of those who graduated from high school were almost \$16,000 less than what Mississippians with four years of college earned in 2007.<sup>2</sup>

This problem multiplies its effects by limiting both the income of adults and the life-chances of their children. In 2007, 88 percent

## High School Is No Longer Enough

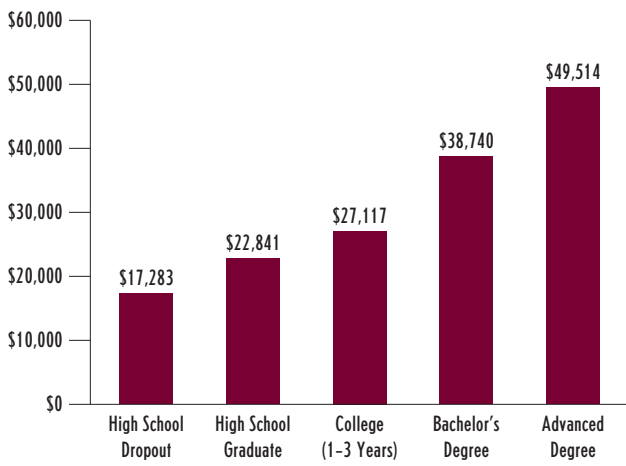
Change in Economic Value of High School Education, 1956-2002



Source: U.S. Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1956-2005

## Mississippi Earnings by Educational Level

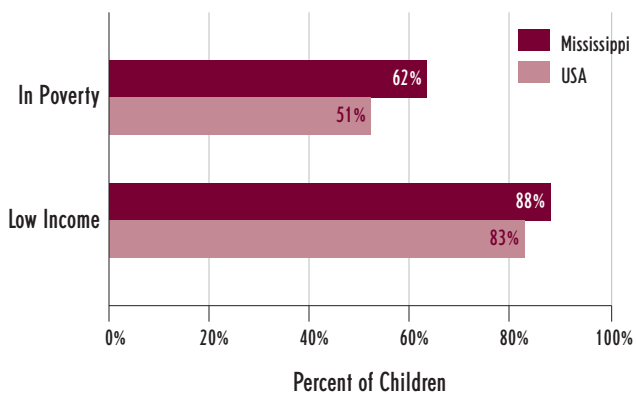
Estimates for Adults 25 Years or Older, 2007



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

## Condition of Children With Parents Without a High School Diploma

2007



Source: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University

of the children whose parents had no high school diploma in Mississippi were low-income<sup>3</sup> and 62 percent of those children were in families below the poverty line. These are Mississippi's children who face the largest challenges in succeeding in school. Therefore, when Mississippi fails to educate a large number of students in one generation, the state creates the conditions that will make it more difficult to educate the next generation of students as well.

## Mississippi K-12 Students: Current Characteristics

Today almost 500,000 children in Mississippi are in the public schools and approximately 48,000 are in private schools. Approximately half of all K-12 students in both public and private schools are White and the other half are predominately African American. In 2007-08, African American students (51 percent) were the largest racial or ethnic group in the state's public schools, while White students were 46 percent. According to the latest survey by the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 87 percent of Mississippi's private school students are White.

Two-thirds of Mississippi's public school students are from low-income families.<sup>4</sup> Fifty-eight percent are poor – eligible for free lunch at school, and an additional nine percent receive a reduced-priced lunch.

<sup>3</sup>Here "low-income" is defined as at or below 200 percent of poverty and roughly reflects the standard used in public schools to determine eligibility for reduced-priced lunches. In 2007, a "low-income" family of three would have an income of \$34,340 or less. "Poor" is defined as a household living in poverty. The poverty threshold for a family of three in 2007 was \$17,170.

<sup>4</sup>There are no available data on the family income of Mississippi children in private schools. Also, since private schools in Mississippi have elected not to participate in national educational assessments, there is no systematic information available about student performance and resources in Mississippi's private schools.

## Big Problems Start in the Early Grades

Too many of Mississippi's young children are not school-ready when they arrive for their first day of class. As of the start of 2009, Mississippi remains the only Southern state without state-supported pre-kindergarten (Pre-K), and the absence of such a program of early childhood education becomes quickly evident across Mississippi schools.

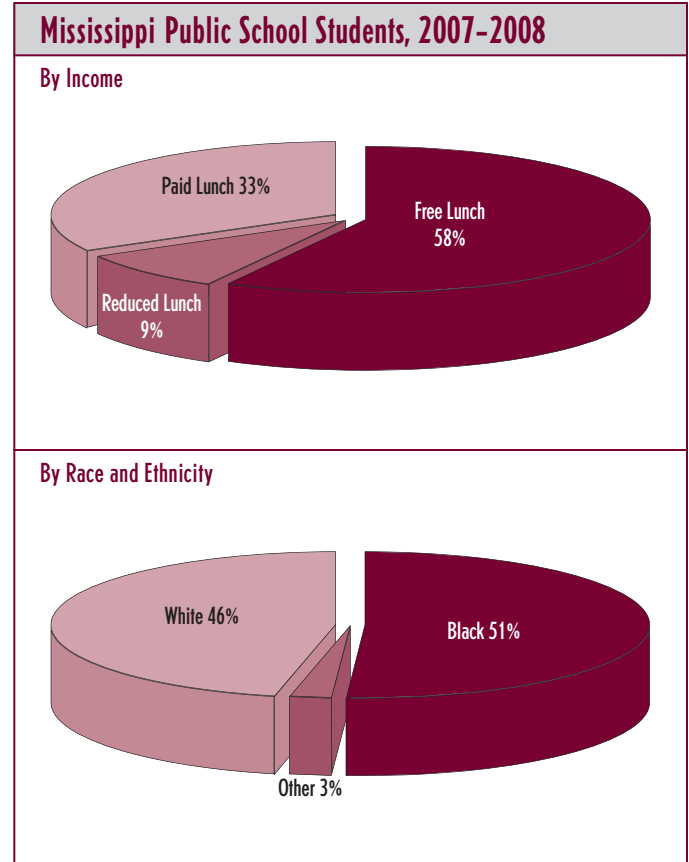
Children in kindergarten and the first grade in Mississippi are far more likely to repeat a grade than most other K-12 students. One out of every 14 kindergarteners and one out of every 12 first-grade students were held back in 2007-08 – exceeding twice the rate of retention for all other elementary school grades in Mississippi. In fact, only in the 9th and 10th grades did a higher percentage of students in Mississippi repeat the same grade during two consecutive school years.<sup>5</sup>

A national children's survey undertaken by the federal government published in 2005 puts this statewide pattern into a national perspective. It found that 20 percent of Mississippi students between the ages of 6 and 11 (1st and 5th grades) had repeated at least one grade.<sup>6</sup> In addition, an elementary school student in Mississippi was twice more likely to repeat a grade than the average student in the United States. In fact, this retention rate was the highest in the nation for elementary school students.<sup>7</sup>

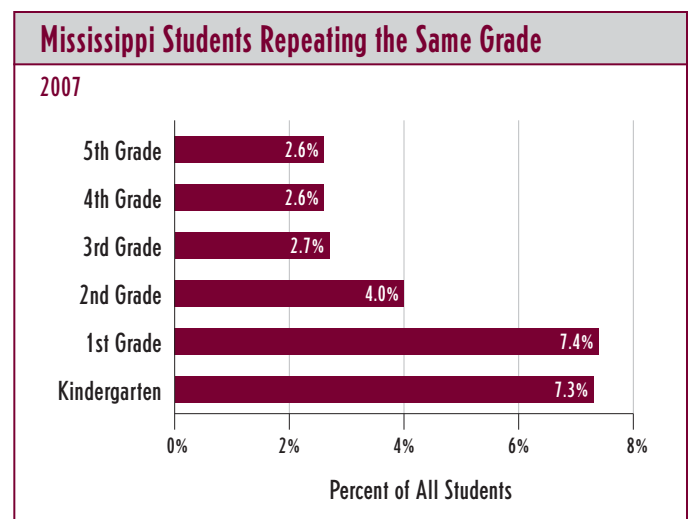
<sup>5</sup>It is nonetheless noteworthy that the percentage of students repeating a grade has been slowly declining in Mississippi during the last 8 years.

<sup>6</sup>Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative (2005), National Survey of Children's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. See [www.nschdata.org](http://www.nschdata.org).

<sup>7</sup>Among all school-aged children (ages 6-17), the survey also showed that Mississippi had the nation's second highest rate for African American students who repeated one or more grades – slightly behind Louisiana – and the nation's highest rate of retention for White students. The survey did not distinguish between private school and public school students.



Source: Mississippi Department of Education



Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Among Mississippi's children living in poverty, the national survey found almost 40 percent had repeated at least one grade between the ages of 6 and 11. (This too was also the highest rate among the states.) In comparison with the state's students from families with higher incomes, Mississippi's poor children were almost 8 times more likely to repeat one or more grades from ages 6 to 11.

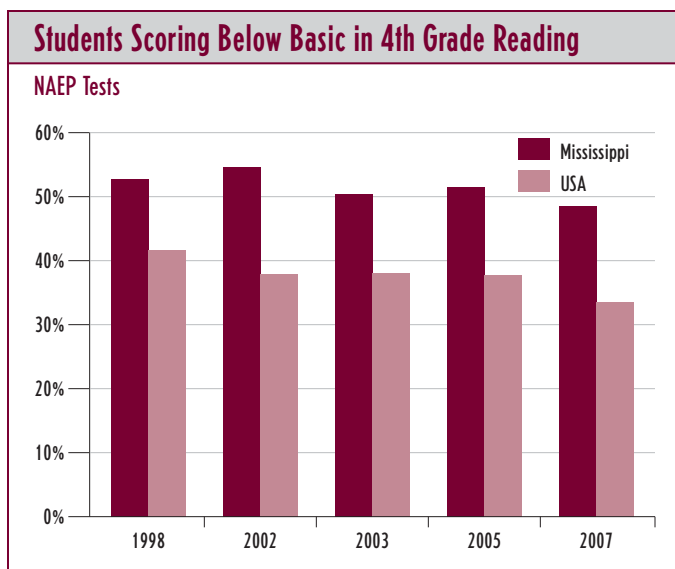
## Too Many Students Already Behind by the 4th Grade

Vast gaps in educational achievement in Mississippi are evident according to a student's family income by the 4th grade. These gaps indicate that low-income students are falling far behind other students even before they leave elementary school.

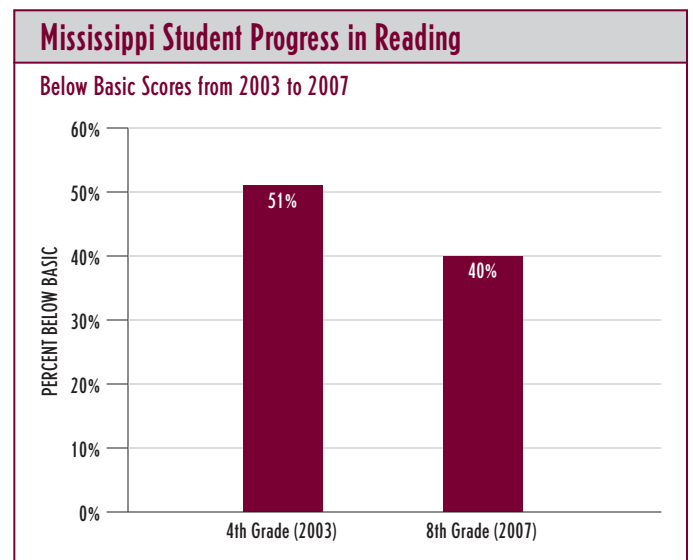
The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's only report card measuring K-12 students' knowledge and achievement across 50 states, showed in 2007 that low-

income students in Mississippi are approximately two years or more behind the state's wealthier students in both reading and mathematics. For instance, in reading tests Mississippi's 4th grade students eligible for free and reduced lunches scored almost 25 points below students with higher family incomes. (Generally, a spread of 10 points in NAEP test scores is considered equivalent to a difference of one school year's learning and knowledge.)

With a large majority of poor and low-income students in its public schools, Mississippi test scores continue to lag far behind the nation in the 4th grade. In fact, the gap in 4th grade reading between Mississippi and the nation has enlarged over time. Mississippi students have made gains in NAEP scores since 1998, particularly in mathematics, but students across the nation also have improved their performance over the same period. As a result, Mississippi students in 2007 continued to have the nation's lowest average scores in 4th grade reading and rank 49th in scores for 4th grade mathematics.



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Center for Education Statistics



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Center for Education Statistics



## Early Problems Persist into Later Grades

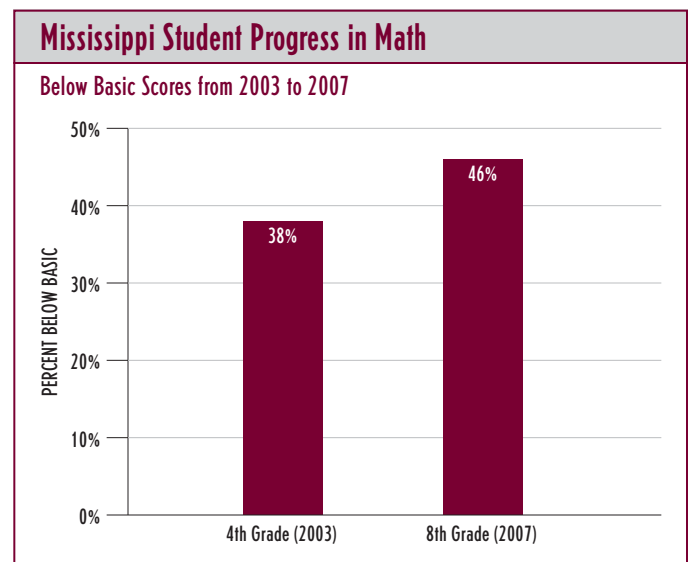
Many Mississippi students are not able to recover later in school after they fall behind during the elementary grades. NAEP scores evidence that 51 percent of Mississippi's 4th grade students were "below basic" in reading in 2003. Four years later, when this cohort of 4th grade students reached the 8th grade, 40 percent remained "below basic" in their reading skills. In mathematics, 38 percent of the state's 4th grade students were below basic in 2003. By the time this class of students reached the 8th grade in 2007, the percentage of Mississippi students scoring below basic in mathematics had grown to 46 percent.

Among Mississippi's low-income students in the 8th grade, 49 percent scored below basic in the 2007 NAEP reading test and 57 percent scored at the same low level in mathematics. In each case, Mississippi's low-income students were more than twice as likely to perform below basic than were their students from families with higher incomes in the state. As a consequence, Mississippi's overall average scores in reading and mathematics for all students in the 8th grade ranked last among the 50 states.

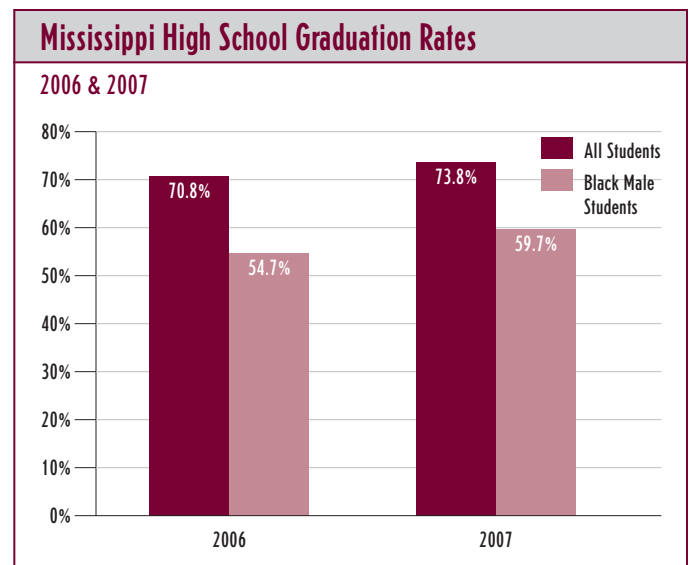
Mississippi's large-scale academic problems persist into high school and help to explain the state's worrisome rates of high school graduation. According to the latest numbers compiled by the Mississippi Department of Education,<sup>8</sup> Mississippi had a high school graduation rate of 70.8 percent in 2006 and 73.8 percent in 2007. This improvement came in the aftermath of an intensive, year-long effort to reform public reporting, accountability, and public awareness of the problems of high school dropouts led by the state superintendent.

<sup>8</sup>Beginning in 2007, Mississippi began to collect and publish reliable data on high school graduation rates. It is possible, nevertheless, that the new federal regulations requiring a national standard for computing graduation rates will reveal that the current numbers and rates understate the problem.

At the same time, 14 Mississippi school districts continued to have graduation rates below 60 percent in 2007. In addition, while data for students by family income are unavailable, the state reports show that some student groups are graduating far below the state average. For example, less than 60 percent of the state's Black male students graduated on time in 2007 in Mississippi.



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Center for Education Statistics



Source: Mississippi Department of Education

# conclusion

## Conclusion: Falling Behind Too Far, Too Fast from the Start

Mississippi has made progress in recent years in some areas of public education, and a great deal of good-faith work is underway to help improve teaching and learning in the early and middle grades, to align the rigor of state tests with national standards, to re-design high schools as effective 21st century educational institutions, to improve failing school districts, and to increase high school graduation rates.<sup>9</sup> If implemented with honest leadership and adequate school funding, these initiatives

**“... far too many of its youngest students, especially low-income students, are not school-ready, fall behind quickly, and never catch up.”**

can help move the state steadily upward in educational achievement and attainment. But, these reforms ultimately will have a limited impact on enabling and sustaining the state’s overall educational improvements if Mississippi does not address the unavoidable, fundamental problem: far too many of its youngest students, especially low-income students, are not school-ready, fall behind quickly, and never catch up.

In a statewide educational system where nearly two-thirds of its public school students are from low-income families and more than a majority come from families below the poverty line, Mississippi can not afford to continue to allow so many of its students to come to school unprepared and never succeed.

Increasing educational achievement and graduating more students from high school and college are clearly the most important, long-term ways by which Mississippi can have a better quality of life and increase its economy and income. But, Mississippi will not leave the vicinity of 50th in the nation in education and personal income unless most of its young children have access to a preschool program that prepares them to enter school ready and able to learn from the start. Until that day, education will not fulfill a primary role for most Mississippians, and, in comparison with the rest of the nation, the Mississippi economy will remain in an enduring state of recession.

Mississippi and its children deserve better.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Mississippi Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds’ statement on academic rigor: [http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/Extrel/news/2008/08Weekly/W\\_July\\_25\\_08.html](http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/Extrel/news/2008/08Weekly/W_July_25_08.html).

## **The Southern Education Foundation**

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF), [www.southerneducation.org](http://www.southerneducation.org), is a public foundation comprised of diverse women and men who work together to improve the quality of life for all of the South's people through better and more accessible education. SEF advances creative solutions to ensure fairness and excellence in education for low-income students from preschool through higher education.

SEF develops and implements programs, serves as an intermediary for donors who want a high-quality partner with whom to work on education issues in the South, and participates as a public charity in the world of philanthropy. SEF depends upon contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals to extend its work.

### **SEF'S VISION**

We seek a South and a nation with a skilled workforce that sustains an expanding economy, where civic life embodies diversity and democratic values and practice, and where an excellent education system provides all students with fair chances to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. We will be known for our commitment to combating poverty and inequality through education.

### **SEF'S TIMELESS MISSION**

SEF develops and promotes policies, practices, and creative solutions that ensure educational excellence, fairness, and high levels of achievement among low-income students, including African Americans. SEF began in 1867 as the Peabody Education Fund.

### **CREDITS**

*Miles To Go: Mississippi Update* was prepared and written by Steve Suitts, SEF Vice President, with research assistance from SEF Program Officer Lauren Veasey and SEF Research Fellow Vanessa Elkan.

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