

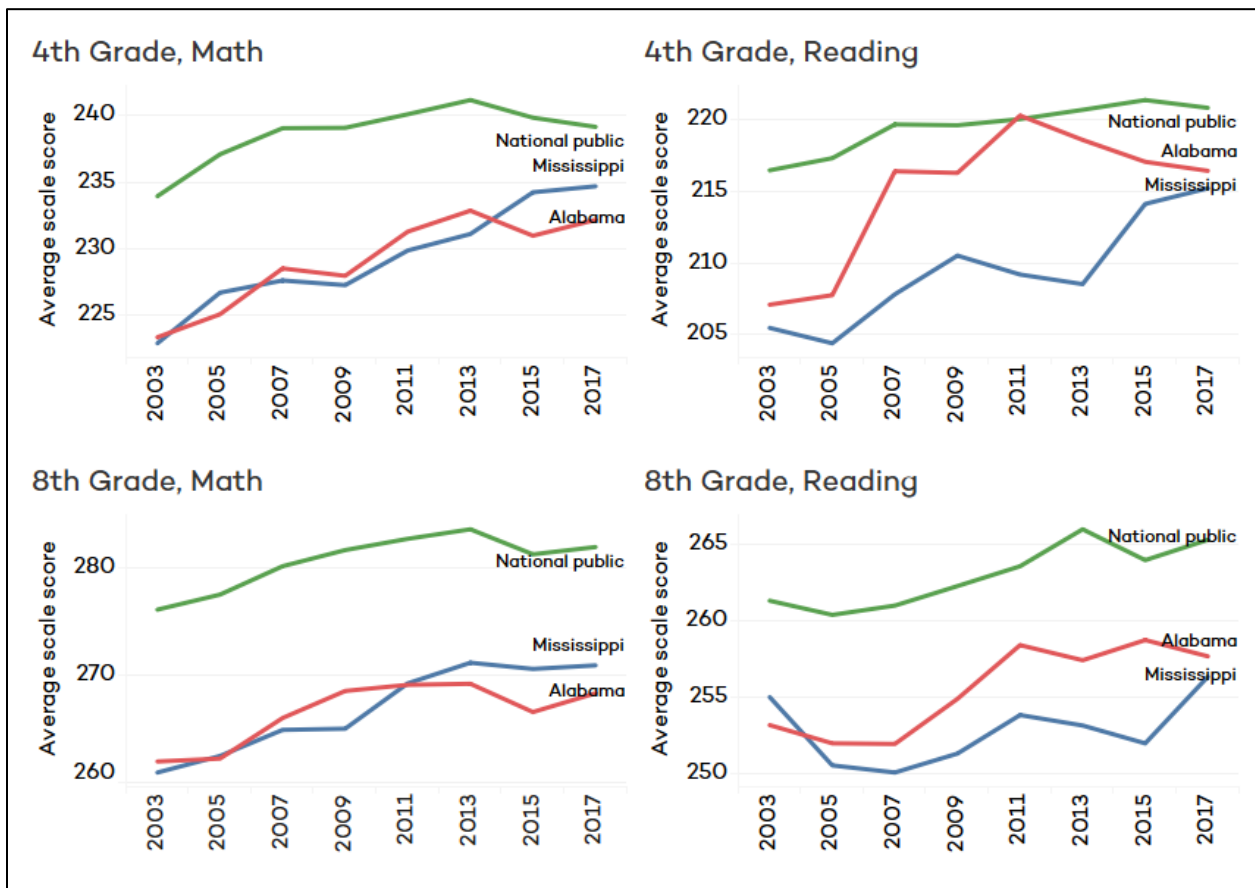
A State, Schools, and Communities Leading Students Toward Higher Levels of College and Career Readiness

Starting with a Plan, Mississippi Leads Students to Higher Achievement

On the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Mississippi continued its sustained climb up the achievement ladder. In math, Mississippi outperformed Alabama on the NAEP. In reading, though, Alabama still slightly leads among all students. However, Mississippi has a higher proportion of disadvantaged students, and when the results are broken out by economic and demographic subgroup, Mississippi students top Alabama students in every category.

School leaders there credit Mississippi’s rise to high state educational standards, continuity of educational leadership, and to a well-designed state strategic plan that not only describes goals but includes detailed strategies for achieving them.

Figure 5. A time series of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, comparing Alabama, Mississippi, and the public school national average in scale scores on reading and math assessments.



Continuity of Leadership

The current State Superintendent, Carey M. Wright, took office in 2013. She was recruited from the District of Columbia, where she was Chief Academic Officer. That makes her one of the longest-serving state superintendents in the nation. In Alabama, five individuals (both permanent and interim) have occupied the post over the same period. A 2017 survey by *Education Week* found that the average tenure of state superintendents was 2.5 years.

Coupled with that, Mississippi elected an education-oriented Governor, Phil Bryant, and Lt. Governor, Tate Reeves, in 2011. Over the same period, there has also been consistent leadership in the Legislature and on the state’s appointed school board. The state and educational leaders have developed a productive working relationship.

“It is very difficult to have sustainability of results without the stability of leadership,” said Kim Benton, Mississippi’s Chief Academic Officer.

A Plan for Progress

With Wright’s arrival, Mississippi developed and implemented [a strategic plan for K-12 education](#) that has guided the reform efforts during Wright’s term. The plan, adopted by the state board, includes goals and measures of success. Most importantly, it lays out strategies to be implemented by the state board and department that will lead to the achievement of the plan’s goal. The plan is revisited annually. Progress on the plan’s metrics is reported each year publicly by the superintendent.

Figure 6. Excerpt from Mississippi Strategic Plan

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Ensuring a bright future for every child

MISSISSIPPI BOARD OF EDUCATION
2016-2020 **Strategic Plan**

GOAL 1 All Students Are Proficient and Show Growth in All Assessed Areas

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- Increase the percentage of students proficient on 3rd grade reading assessments
- Increase the percentage of students proficient on all assessments

STRATEGIES

- Implement the required reading assessment for all elementary teachers and add to licensing for SPED and early childhood teachers
- Use the MDE Early Warning System to identify and intervene students needing assistance
- Provide professional development based on data in all content areas
- Expand content coaches in literacy and math
- Increase parental engagement through P-16 councils in lower performing schools

Under Superintendent Tommy Bice, Alabama developed a strategic plan, Plan 2020. While the plan includes general strategies for improvement, they weren’t coherently and concretely connected to specific goals, and subsequent to the plan’s creation, there wasn’t a systematic reporting on implementation of the strategies. Since Bice

left the top school post in the spring of 2016, the plan hasn't been revisited. Bice's replacement initiated work on a new plan but resigned his post before the plan could be formalized and adopted by the Board. Alabama needs an actionable plan to meet the goal of 100 percent of graduates being college and career ready by 2025.

Chief Academic Officer Benton said Mississippi's plan is so central to their work that department officials can repeat its six goals in their sleep. Having that public blueprint for progress has helped create consensus and clarity.

"If we are all moving toward the same goal, our collective energy is going to get us there," she said.

Higher Standards and Professional Development to Support Teachers

Like Alabama, Mississippi adopted new higher academic standards and set up a system of professional development to help Mississippi teachers teach to the new standards.

"We've made instruction the focal point," Benton said. "Professional development has been critical."

Mississippi also implemented a literacy initiative similar to the Alabama Reading Initiative but targeted the initiative primarily at high-need schools.

Mississippi has only funded 80 reading coaches to support teachers in literacy instruction. That compares to Alabama's initiative that provided funding for every Alabama elementary school to hire a coach. In Mississippi, the coaches are employed by the state department and remain dedicated to literacy education, while Alabama eventually allowed school systems to broaden the responsibilities of its reading coaches. Benton said Mississippi invites evaluators such as the Florida Center for Reading Research and the American Institutes for Research to evaluate the results of its interventions. Having that external validation is important, Benton said.

An Assessment Aligned with State Standards

To test students' mastery of the new standards, Mississippi invited in national experts from the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessments (the Center for Assessment) to help develop standardized tests specific to Mississippi and aligned with state standards. That effort also depended heavily on an expert state technical advisory committee to help with the assessment's design and implementation. Alabama chose to contract with ACT for its state assessment test, the Aspire. Responding to dissatisfaction with that assessment in 2017, Alabama replaced the Aspire with another commercially available assessment system by Scantron. In 2018, Alabama contracted with the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment to complete bid specifications for Alabama's Reading and Math Assessment. In July, the State School Board hired Data Recognition Corporation to lead the development and administration of a new set of tests aligned with Alabama standards.

The assessment results serve as the primary basis for the state's educational accountability system, which, in Mississippi, is written into state law. Report card results for schools have been published annually, and the department strives to make

the data publicly accessible, which prods districts to strive for better results. “What gets measured, gets done,” Benton said.

In 2018, Alabama issued its first set of report cards to comply with a state law passed in 2012 by the Alabama Legislature. This creates a tool for improvement that Mississippi has seen as a benefit.

Results

Mississippi is posting gains in the percentage of students proficient on state assessments, and the results parallel a rise on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Mississippi has been cited by national publications and educational advocacy groups for its improvements on the NAEP in 2017. The state has seen a significant increase in eighth-grade reading where the scale score rose 4.4 points, from 252 in 2015 to 256 in 2017, the greatest improvement nationally. Mississippi posted gains in both reading and math at both fourth- and eighth-grade levels.

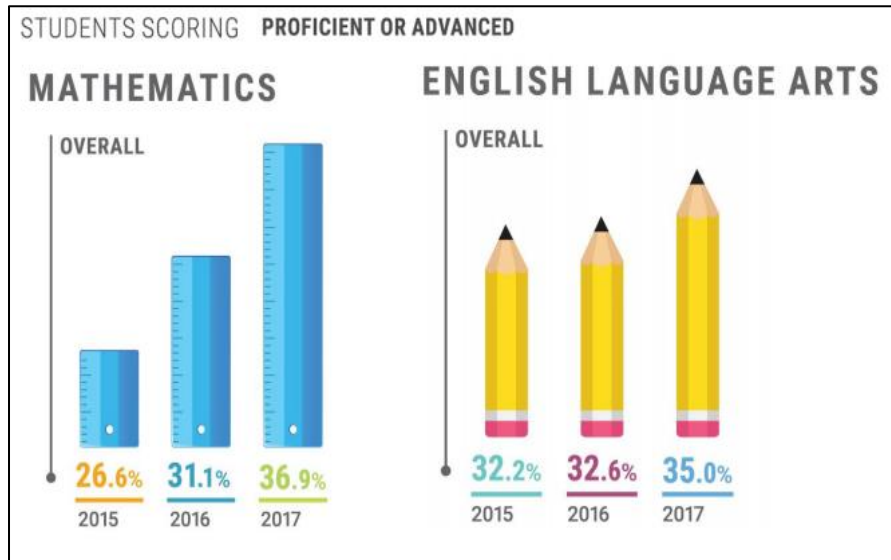


Figure 7. From annual update on progress on Mississippi State Board of Education’s Strategic Plan for Education. Results for Mississippi’s state developed assessment.

Mississippi Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Mississippi’s educational aspirations are spelled out in a strategic plan, adopted by the State Board of Education. The State Superintendent reports to the Board and the public annually on the strategies enacted and the progress made toward goals.

Design: Mississippi designed its own state assessment based on its adopted state standards with assistance from national experts. With the assistance of organizations like the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Southern Regional Education Board, and Johns Hopkins University, the department promoted and helped local districts implement nationally proven school reform initiatives in targeted areas such as literacy, math education, early childhood education, and career readiness.

Development: Mississippi has created a “menu of options” approach to professional development, allowing districts to request the training in areas of identified need. Scarce state resources are targeted at assisting teachers in high need school districts. Literacy coaches support teachers at the most challenged schools.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Data: Mississippi systematically tracks performance data for schools and publishes report cards for schools and districts. It also tracks statewide data and publicizes progress toward goals identified in the state's strategic plan.