

**Community responses to the
Policy and Legislative Recommendations**

By the Task Force

To Study Underperforming Schools and School Districts

Submitted by the following organizations:

**Southern Echo, Jackson, MS;
Nollie Citizens for Quality Education, Holmes County, MS;
Citizens for a Better Greenville, Washington County, MS;
Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County; Tunica, MS;
Sunflower County Parents and Students Organization, Indianola, MS;
Activists With A Purpose, Grenada County, MS and
Youth Innovation Movement Solutions, Lee County.**

**Please Note that the MDE
recommendations are in
black and the
Community responses
are in blue and set forth
beneath each MDE
recommendation.**

**The Task Force on Underperforming Schools and School
Districts recommends that:**

Accountability

- The Legislature mandate that each local school district provide an annual report card to inform the public of its most significant data and shall mandate the method in which the report is to be published in the local newspaper. The State Board of Education shall prescribe the contents of the report. Additional in-depth information can be posted on the district's website.
- Who will be responsible for the annual report? Supt. or Board? This should be defined so that it doesn't fall between the stools.
- Is there any way that copies of the report card can be provided to each family because many do not get the newspaper and do not have access to the internet?
- In the report card there needs some accountability regarding parent, student and community engagement AND in order to do that there must some clear, meaningful and identifiable benchmarks which are addressed in the report card.
- MDE should be responsible for doing an independent assessment of each school district which is then reported in a statewide report card so that school districts can be compared. Based on past experience with self-reporting from local school districts, our concern is whether a process which is exclusively dependent on self-reporting will be sufficiently accurate.
- When the legislature delegates to the State Board of Education the responsibility to define which data is included in the report card, community groups would like an opportunity to weigh in on what data ought to be included.

- The State Board of Education define underperforming schools and districts and include the following factors in such definition: student assessment data, including both absolute achievement and meeting growth expectation, graduation rate, dropout rate, completion rate (including GED and skills courses), and any other information pertinent to school performance.
 - Additional data that ought to be included are violations of any and all accreditation standards, since these violations impact the quality of education delivered, the performance of students in class and on standardized tests, their promotion from grade to grade, the number of suspensions and expulsions each year, the number of referrals to the Alternative School and to Youth Court each year, the ability of students to graduate on time, their ability to graduate college-ready, their ability to graduate at all, and the factors that contribute to dropping out. The data relating to each of these items should be reported to the public each year.
 - Data should include the number of teachers on emergency certificates who are teaching the core subjects of math, sciences, reading, and language arts.
 - Data should include the number of teachers that each school district needs to meet its educational needs, the actual number of teachers that it has employed, and the resulting shortage, if any, and for each school district identify the number of teachers that are AmeriCorps, Teach for America, or any other similar program.
 - The definition of underperforming school needs to account for parent, student and community engagement based on clear, meaningful and identifiable benchmarks.
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- The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) develop an early intervention process to increase the levels of intervention/assistance as student performance falls below average but prior to receiving the designation of an underperforming school or school district.
 - MDE needs to have the authority to develop standards, benchmarks and indicators that authorize MDE to intervene at these early stages and these are important so that school districts, parents, teachers and community can understand in advance what will authorize the intervention. Each year this information needs to be published by the district in the newspaper and be provided directly to parents, students and community through publications and community workshops.
 - At such time that MDE determines that the data relating to standards, benchmarks and indicators demonstrate that a school district is at risk, then MDE should provide in a timely manner that information to the school district, parents, students and community so that they can be aware that steps need to be taken and can become involved in the process to assist.

- The Legislature give MDE ability to address school districts that have violated accreditation standards at probation level or school districts that have been defined by the State Board of Education as an at-risk school district due to lack of improvement in student achievement by giving MDE the statutory authority to:
 1. Require that school districts meeting either of these criteria implement certain instructional strategies, implement professional development for teachers and leaders, and require building a School Improvement Plan, and
 2. Monitor implementation of the School Improvement Plan.Failure to comply with this directive would lead to immediate takeover by the Mississippi Department of Education.
- We agree with this increase in authority to intervene to press school districts to do well, but we think that parameters need to be established regarding timelines for compliance and so forth, to ensure that the school district is clear as to what it has to do and that due process can be secured.
- The Legislature include the removal of school board members in underperforming school districts in the same manner as superintendents of underperforming schools, as passed in Senate Bill 2149 during 2008 session. Legislation would recognize that boards act as a single entity, not five individuals. However, an appeals process would allow individuals to appeal the decision, similar to the process outlined for superintendents in SB2149.
- The right of an elected board member is individual. Mississippi Supreme Court decisions are clear on this when it comes to accountability. See, for example, the Hinds County Board of Supervisors decision about twenty years ago that held that only the Supervisors who voted affirmatively for the offending or illegal decision ought to be held liable or responsible for misconduct. The burden of proof as to removal should not be placed on a duly elected board member, but on the removing authority to show cause that any individual to be removed has engaged in the offending conduct or misconduct or failure to act. If there is going to be a right to remove a school board member, there should be clear and reasonable standards and benchmarks to alert a school board member as to what constitutes conduct that will justify removal.

- The Legislature mandate that the superintendent in a district with one or more underperforming schools must annually complete the 6-hour course entitled “Improving Student Outcomes and Academic Success” with his/her school board members and the superintendent in a district with a serious financial condition must attend the 6-hour course entitled “Effective Financial Management in Local School Districts” with his/her school board members. School board members in these specific districts are already required to complete this training provided by the Mississippi School Boards Association, but the Task Force believes it is important for the superintendent to also participate in this training with board members.
- The Task Force does not recommend a change to the current requirements for an individual to qualify for the office of school board member, based on the following:
 1. No other locally elected official is required to have more educational requirements.
 2. A survey conducted by the Mississippi School Boards Association in 2007 determined that Mississippi’s standards are inline with the rest of the nation.

Consolidation

- The Legislature study the value of school district consolidation, to include cost savings, impact on underperforming schools, and possible incentives that could be made available to districts. The study should also review any needed collaboration of services among districts, such as sharing of teachers in critical shortage subjects.
- The study should include those national, regional and rural school district studies that demonstrate that smaller, and smaller rural school districts perform as well or better than large, or urban school districts. This data may be counter-intuitive, but it is critical to an accurate understanding of what the actual experience has been.

Funding/Finance

- The Legislature provide additional contractual dollars to MDE for Turnaround/School Improvement Teams that assist districts in an early intervention process.
- These teams need to be representative of the communities they are serving and therefore they should be diverse as to race, class and gender and should be comprised of people who are sensitive to the culture of the communities served. It would be helpful for MDE to consult with the local communities in the process of selecting Team members.

- The Legislature consider a law to allow MDE to charge districts for the intervention process, when school districts have resources for such efforts.
- The strongest sentiment is that school districts should not be charged for intervention. However, if a school district that has sufficient resources has paid for intervention and at the end of the monitoring and evaluation process the school district has not improved, or is doing worse, then the state ought to be required to reimburse the district for all of the costs of the intervention.
- The Legislature consider a law requiring the state auditor to complete audits on districts every 4 years or name the firm to complete the audit. However, no firm shall audit a district for more than 3 years.
- The Legislature establish \$100 million revolving building account that districts can borrow against and repay over a five to seven year period. MDE should establish controls necessary to ensure proper use of the funds.
- The revolving building fund should be \$150 million in light of the extent of need in low wealth communities.

Principals (Use Caron's language)

- The Legislature direct State Board of Education to study and define incentives and consequences for principals to improve student performance.

School Board Members

- The Legislature include the removal of school board members in underperforming school districts in the same manner as superintendents of underperforming schools, as passed in Senate Bill 2149 during 2008 session.
- The right of an elected board member is individual. Mississippi Supreme Court decisions are clear on this when it comes to accountability. See, for example, the Hinds County Board of Supervisors decision about twenty years ago that held that only the Supervisors who voted affirmatively for the offending or illegal decision ought to be held liable or responsible for misconduct. The burden of proof as to removal should not be placed on a duly elected board member, but on the removing authority to show cause that any individual to be removed has engaged in the offending conduct or misconduct or failure to act. If there is going to be a right to remove a school board member, there should be clear and reasonable standards and benchmarks to alert a school board member as to what constitutes conduct that will justify removal.
- The House and Senate Elections Committees examine the benefits and disadvantages of having all school board members elected during the general election.

Superintendents

- The Legislature mandate the termination of the contract of a superintendent upon takeover of his/her district by the state.
- The State Board of Education develop the training and process for issuing and requiring a superintendent's license. The training could be offered either prior to or following appointment or election to the position, mandating a specific period of time for successful completion of the training.
- The Legislature give superintendents complete hiring authority with budget limits set by the local school board.
- This provision would take us from the frying pan into the fire. We are strongly opposed to reducing the accountability of the Superintendent to the Board. The joint responsibility is necessary because many Superintendents are already dismissive of the Board as having anything to say about the conduct of the district.
- This provision would add to the patronage power of elected superintendents, and make it even more difficult to have open elections on the merits of qualifications.

Teachers

- The Legislature consider final recommendations regarding teacher licensure requirements from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Preparation established in 2006.
- The Legislature provide funds to build a National/International Teacher Recruitment effort in Mississippi.
- The Legislature provide resources to thoroughly evaluate the current Critical Teacher Shortage Act.

Takeover Regulations

- The Legislature establish the Mississippi Recovery School District, which will have a superintendent to oversee all local districts under conservatorship and will result in long-term governance. A district under conservatorship should result in abolishing such district and should be exempt from Education Employment Procedures Law.
- We approve of the effort to generate a Mississippi Recovery School District concept (subject to review of such a provision when it has been formulated), but we strongly oppose any automatic abolition of a school district under conservatorship and any automatic exemption from Education Employment Procedures Law, without knowing what standards or benchmarks are to be used as thresholds to justify such actions.

Community Involvement

- The Legislature require the establishment of a community-based P-16 (Pre-Kindergarten through higher education) council in every school district to advise the school board and to include representation from a broad spectrum of the community, including economic developers, elected officials, civic leaders, business leaders, faith-based leaders, social services, non-profits, school attendance officers, law enforcement officials, health department officials, day care providers, librarians, parents and anyone else with the knowledge and resources that can be leveraged to build stronger P-16 communities. The council should be appointed in a number of ways and should not be appointed solely by the local school board. It would be a community-led group that is inclusive and transparent, learns to make data-driven decisions, has shared accountability for results, is required to publicly report progress to the community as a whole and to the task force.
- This concept should include the following:
 - a. There should be public funding to support the work of the council;
 - b. Students should be an integral part of the process, not an afterthought;
 - c. The body should be completely independent of the control of the school district, which means that the selection should be free of control of the superintendent, the board or other school employees;
 - d. The school district, including the administration, should be required as a matter of law to provide in a timely manner to the council any and all requests for data that is public record.

Continuation of Task Force

- The Legislature consider continuing the work of the Task Force in order to monitor underperforming school districts and to continue making recommendations for improvements.
- We support the continuation of the work of the Task Force, but we think that it ought to be more representative of underperforming school districts and the communities that they serve, including parents, students, school board members and educators from within these districts and communities. Since students in grades K-12 probably would not be in a position to serve because of the need to be in class, college students who recently attended an underperforming school ought to be included because they are in a strong position to contribute to the analysis and proposed remedies.