

MURC Special Report

Mississippi Urban Research Center
College of Public Service
Jackson State University
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Forum on Mississippi's Accountability Grading System



I. Introduction

On October 25, 2017 Jackson State University's Mississippi Urban Research Center hosted a forum to discuss the Accountability measures used to evaluate schools academic performance in Mississippi. The purpose of this forum was to start a dialogue among education officials and community leaders and members about recent findings suggesting that accountability grades measure poverty. This report presents a summary of the major issues and recommendations discussed at the forum. Also, it provides policy-makers, school officials, and other stakeholders with information that can inform and influence policy decisions regarding accountability practices and standards.

Background. Test-based accountability for schools is now the centerpiece of education policies in the U.S. It is the concept of holding school districts, educators, and students responsible for performance as determined by test scores. Accountability in education informs the public of how well students perform academically.¹ This transparency was to ensure that tax dollars are not wasted and students are receiving an adequate education.

The issue of accountability facing school districts in poverty stricken areas is multifaceted and requires an in-depth exploration in order to thoroughly understand the issue. The relationship between poverty and education shows in the students' levels of cognitive readiness. Research documents that the physical and social-emotional factors of living in poverty have a detrimental effect on students' cognitive performance.² Students from low-income families consistently, regardless of ethnicity or race, score well below average.³ Children who lived persistently in poor families scored 6 to 9 points lower on assessment tests than children who were never poor.³

With 637,128 persons living in poverty, Mississippi ranked 51st for the percentage of people who had income below the poverty line (\$24,250 for a family of four) in 2015.⁴ The distribution of the percentage living below poverty was 24.4% for urban and 18.8% for rural. When female-headed households are factored in, 51.2% of urban residents live below poverty.⁴ Clearly, poverty engulfs many of Mississippi's public school districts. Since poverty is a variable which school districts cannot change, an accountability measure that is not insulated from the effects of poverty could be viewed as not being a fair measure of how well a district or local school is doing.

¹ Ladd, H. F. (2016, May 04). Rethinking the Way We Hold Schools Accountable. Retrieved from < <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/01/23/20ladd.h27.html>>

² How Does Poverty Affect Education? | LSU Online. (2017, April 10). Retrieved from <https://lsuonline.lsu.edu/articles/education/how-does-poverty-affect-education.aspx>

³ Lacour, M., & Tissington, L. D. (2011) The effects of poverty on academic achievement. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 6(7), 522-527.

⁴ Mississippi Report - 2016. (n.d.). Retrieved from <<https://talkpoverty.org/state-year-report/mississippi-2016-report/>>

II. Moderator

Dr. Daniel Watkins, Dean of Jackson State University's College of Education and Human Development, served as moderator for the forum. Dr. Watkins, an alumnus of JSU, has over 20 years of experience in the education field serving in numerous capacities. He exhibits both professional excellence and a commitment to improving teacher education in Mississippi. With a long history of successfully securing grants, his imprint on education in Mississippi is permanent.

III. Forum Panelists

Senator Norwood (Mississippi Legislature); Kenneth Thrasher (President of Hazlehurst City School District); Ms. Rosaline McCoy (President of Jackson PTSA Council); Dr. Earl Watkins (Leadership Consultant, Leading2Leap LLC; President, Mississippi ABSE).

IV. Panelists' Comments

Dr. Earl Watkins (Leadership Consultant, Leading2Leap LLC; President, Mississippi ABSE)

"When you talk about the current accountability system, you have to look beyond the A, B, C, D, and the F, because a simple letter is a message for something much more complex than what many of us don't even realize. So when we consider that we have to then look at what goes into that process, and when you talk about reforming public education, it's more than just finding a better teacher or better principal. It's more than just extra dollars that goes into the process. It's a very complex process."

"When you talk about the large number of children who go to our schools in poverty in the State of Mississippi you have to then ask yourself, what are the issues that travel to school with them? If we are not addressing the education of children of poverty from an equitable approach, then we are going to miss quite a bit that has to be addressed."

Senator Norwood (Mississippi State Senate)

The purpose of public education is to teach students to become fully functioning independent citizens. Students are to transform classroom learning into life skills. Public education should facilitate the progress of transforming our youth to functionally independent citizens.

Rosaline McCoy (President of Jackson Council PTA)

"We have a lot of different needs in our communities. We talked about the free lunch program, but we also have non-health issues and all of the social services that our children need. When those needs are not met, then of course it is expected that our students are not going to be able to produce or perform on the highest level in our classrooms."

Kenneth Thrasher (President of Hazlehurst City School District, Board of Trustees)

“We are facing problems in our lower socioeconomic areas with a system that does not take into account all of the realities and diversity that are going on in our schools.”

We live in a very technological age which requires us to educate our parents. Books are not the thing now. You need to have internet accessibility. Anything you want to learn, you can go online and find a tutorial. You can tell parents, I understand you may not be able to assist your child, but there are free tutorials online you can access which can provide additional assistance.

“One of the things I wish we would really address when we are looking at the grading of our schools is that all things are not equal. Some of our schools are battling serious socioeconomic problems that cannot be compared to affluent school districts. We can’t control the home, we can only do the best we can while we have them on our campuses.

V. Issues Identified During the Question & Answer Session

The question and answer period of the forum allowed each panelist an opportunity to respond to questions presented by the moderator. Panelists identified critical issues based on their perspective, which they believe contributes to ‘failing’ school districts based on accountability standards. The issues are listed below:

A. Curriculum/Classroom

- “The growth and development of children is not a cut and dry process. We can’t treat a child as if everyone has made it to the mark at the same time, and we know in human growth and development that is not possible.” (Dr. Earl Watkins)
- Students are introduced to advanced subject matter much earlier. (Rev. Kenneth Thrasher)
- Students are suffering from a lack of skills on how to take tests on a computer. (Dr. Earl Watkins)
- Poverty and other surrounding issues are threats to education and contribute to low performing/under-performing schools. (Dr. Earl Watkins)

B. Accountability Scores/System

- “Accountability model is unfair. Our school district is a D school district, but under new baseline score, our district received an F, but no F schools are in our district. The neighboring white district had two F schools (with new and old system), but were classified as a C district. I have a problem with that.” (Kenneth Thrasher)
- Schools need to take cultural differences among students into consideration regarding determining accountability scores. (Rev. Kenneth Thrasher)
- “The system was not designed to teach black or minority children, so it’s doing what it’s designed to do.” (Ms. Carolyn Jolivet, Audience member)
- The accountability model keeps changing. “MDE keeps changing the rules making it harder to meet accountability standards. The rules set us up for failure, almost as if there is some institutional racism.” (Ms. Rosaline McCoy)

- There is inequitable access to certain components/factors that go into the model; putting “bad” factors (e.g., dismal ACT scores) into the model tends to distort the results for some school districts. (Dr. Earl Watkins)
- Lack of quality “Pre-Kindergarten” education impacts accountability scores. (Dr. Earl Watkins)

C. Operations

- Infrastructure not present in some schools which tends to take money away from instruction. “They’re spending money just to stay afloat, and it takes away from the opportunity of trying to provide a quality education.” (Senator Norwood)

D. Mississippi Department of Education (MDE)

- The success and failure of the State Department of Education should depend highly on the success or failure of the school districts. We need to develop evaluation standards for the Department of Education. “Who is rating the rater?” (Senator Norwood)
- MDE personnel/teams lack people with a background in education. (Senator Norwood)
- Legislation requirements becoming a barrier to teachers entering into education field-requirements are too restrictive. (Senator Norwood)

E. Support Services

- Wrap around services (mental health, etc.) are needed for those students who live in poverty every day because many schools are not in a position to provide adequate care services. (Ms. Rosaline McCoy)
- Low-income students often do not have the tools to promote success. (Rev. Kenneth Thrasher)
- Community engagement and involvement is absent in some of our school districts. “Anywhere there is a high performing district we have an engaged community.” (Dr. Earl Watkins)
- Parental engagement is needed. Training parents to value education more and to become more involved. (Ms. Rosaline McCoy)
- Churches should be more involved with schools in their community. (Panel & audience members)

VI. Discussion of Issues Identified

There appears to be consensus among panel members that accountability is not a one size fits all measure. The proficiency of students is believed to be different across school districts. During the forum, panelists affirmed school districts face different challenges that are out of the school districts’ administration purview. Others noted that many of the school districts lack adequate facilities to provide a quality education, and maintaining old school buildings takes money away from instruction.

The effectiveness and transparency of MDE was also discussed. Panelists and audience members expressed a need for an evaluative measure to monitor the department's effectiveness. Audience members noted that while the accountability model has been revised several times, it fails to adequately address the realities present in low-income school districts. MDE includes certain components in the accountability model that may distort the results of performance for some districts. Moreover, legislative standards for certifying teachers are becoming too restrictive, which in turn discourages individuals from entering the field.

While panelists and audience members attributed the failing grades school districts receive to the accountability standards, MDE, and poverty, they also acknowledged the significance of parental and community engagement. Part of the success of affluent school districts can be attributed to high levels of parental and community engagement. Panelists and audience members expressed serious concern and need for community and parental engagement in low-income school districts. Furthermore, the church's role should be to offer more than spiritual guidance, but to step in and offer assistance in the form of after school tutoring and other educational- related services.

VII. Recommendations

The key purpose of the forum was to discuss ways to improve the accountability grading system used to measure Mississippi's public school districts' performance. The goal of the forum was to start a collaborative discussion on how to improve the current system. The forum allowed panelists to discuss the system from several perspectives and to offer recommendations for possible solutions to current accountability practices. The following two subsections present (a) recommendations specifically made by the panelists, and (b) recommendations for future actions:

(A) Recommendations made by panelists

Senator Norwood made a recommendation to develop evaluation standards to measure the effectiveness of the Mississippi Department of Education. Often times, MDE makes decisions without being held accountable for the effects of their decision, such as changing the state tests on numerous occasions. Implementing standards for MDE would provide a level of transparency and confidence when it comes to making decisions that directly impact student outcomes and learning. Senator Norwood added that the success and failure of schools should not rest solely on school districts administration but on MDE as well. Additionally, MDE's success should depend highly on the success and/or failure of the school districts of the state.

Ms. Rosaline McCoy, who spoke on behalf of the parents, recommended that school districts' focus on providing educational and coaching assistance to parents. Parents becoming engaged in the school are a crucial part of the success of school districts. It is important that parents understand and comprehend accountability and what it means for students. Additionally, developing trust between community members and school districts is imperative. She recommends school officials organize a variety of activities that will engage the community.

Ms. McCoy also added that mental health and social services are essential for school districts that are unable to adequately address this need for students.

Dr. Earl Watkins made a recommendation to get community members more involved with what goes on in schools. Additionally, Dr. Watkins suggested that the accountability model should measure if learning is occurring and there needs to be a “call to action” for district administrators (Superintendents, District Boards, Principals). Furthermore, city, community, and business leaders should be involved in transforming struggling school districts.

Rev. Kenneth Thrasher recommended that the accountability measure takes into account the socioeconomic and cultural issues that occurs in certain school districts. Rev. Thrasher also added that churches in the communities of struggling districts do more to assist the schools by offering services such as after –school tutoring programs, summer camps, etc. Lastly, providing internet accessibility at home for students would help supplement classroom learning.

B. Recommended Future Actions

1. Investigate and develop ways to establish and improve relationships between churches, local school districts, and neighborhoods regarding providing assistance to school-aged students in the form of after school care/tutoring.
2. Seek to collaborate with social services institutions who can provide assistance to students who require additional services that the school cannot provide.
3. Develop a new accountability model that measures if learning is occurring while controlling for poverty.
4. Strengthen coordination and relationship between school districts and community members.
5. Engage parents and families in school district improvement practices.
6. Develop evaluation standards for the Mississippi Department of Education.
7. Engage in resource mapping to identify available social service resources and how they can be utilized to provide support to the school or district.
8. Promote internet accessibility at home for students to support classroom learning.

VIII. Conclusion

The central theme that emerged from the moderated discussion was the accountability measure should account for the impact of poverty and other social/cultural factors. There are many factors that contribute to poor performance including lack of resources, financial constraints, etc. The consensus among panel members was that overall, the accountability system is flawed, unfair, and biased, particularly against low income students. There is a perception that race as well as income levels are determining factors in accountability measures and grades. This form of bias/discrimination was viewed as calculated and intentional.

During the forum, the panel discussed the accountability model and how it intersects with a myriad of social, cultural, and economic issues. Students from low economic backgrounds face serious challenges. The socio-emotional issues of living in poverty may contribute to below

average performance of these school districts. It is unrealistic to expect those challenges to have no effect on learning and academic outcomes.

There is a need for an inclusive accountability system which captures the needs of low income school districts. Attendees expressed a keen interest in continuing to dialogue about accountability standards. To further explore this area, MURC has established an education committee, which consists of individuals with backgrounds in community development, education, policy, and research. The committee will devise a plan to best address accountability issues, prioritize recommendations which arose from the forum, and explore possible funding opportunities. The committee will move forward in hopes of improving educational outcomes for all students in Mississippi.