



Mississippi Association  
of Educators

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*Executive Director*

Representative Charles Busby  
Mississippi House of Representatives  
400 High Street  
Jackson, MS 39201

Re: HB 1349

Dear Representative Busby,

It was my hope that House Bill 1349 would provide real solutions to help correct the significant and systemic issues that plague education in the state of Mississippi. To say that I, along with our members, am disappointed would be an understatement.

I have been an educator for over 37 years and have served as president of the Mississippi Association of Educators for almost 6 years. During my career I have seen firsthand the impacts of the legislature's actions as related to education policy here in our state.

I was an early career educator in Clinton when educators raised our voices and took to the streets to fight for a raise in pay. I was an educator in DeSoto County when MAEP became law, and have witnessed it go underfunded nearly every year since. I was president of MAE when teachers received a pay increase during the last election cycle and was proud to be one of the public education advocates who fought against HB 957, a bill that would have rewritten the education funding formula and reduced funding for school districts across the state.

Prospective educators must earn a bachelor's degree, maintain a certain GPA in college, pass both Praxis I and Praxis II exams, and pass a background check just to become eligible to receive a license to teach in Mississippi. Furthermore, each teacher must earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to retain a license—often having to identify and pay for CEUs themselves.

The state legislature does not fund, and has not funded, the Education Enhancement Fund's (EEF) teacher supply fund to the level mandated by the statute for years. What's more, those limited funds aren't even made available until many months after teachers have been forced to go into their own pockets to purchase the items necessary for their classrooms to function.

Teachers are forced to teach with outdated textbooks—assuming there are even enough books for each student. Teachers are expected to produce students who are prepared for the future, when access to the technology required to do so in the present is limited and, often, inaccessible.

Educators are also faced with the very real possibility of not having a job the next year. Did you know that every single school year, school districts must offer teachers a new contract, and teachers must renew their contracts? Contracts can be non-renewed without just cause, which is often the case in districts across the state.

I take the time to describe the conditions in which educators work because, quite frankly, many lawmakers simply do not know. I have to believe that lawmakers are unaware, and not intentionally making decisions that complicate the lives of the teachers making sacrifices across this state each and every day.

The proposed \$2,000 pay raise split over two years is insulting to our public school teachers—many of whom already struggle to make ends meet by working second jobs, and use their already low salaries to provide for their classrooms as they simultaneously provide for their own families.

The \$1000 pay raise split over two years is also an appalling gesture to our state's incredibly hardworking assistant teachers, who make \$13,500. If you're unaware, that number puts them just barely above the federal individual poverty line.

Mississippi is in the midst of a certified teacher shortage crisis. There is no other word to describe the situation in which we find ourselves. This is a crisis.

How are we to attract new educators and retain our veteran educators when the state has created an environment in which teachers rightfully feel underappreciated, inappropriately compensated, and unheard? Keeping Mississippi's best and brightest educators in our classrooms has become an uphill battle. Teachers are trained in our universities and choose to make their lives here in Mississippi, but when they drive to their classroom it is often in a neighboring state where they tell us their careers are more fulfilling and more lucrative than if they'd chosen to teach down the street from their own homes. Many Mississippi-trained educators are leaving the state altogether.

The numbers don't lie: In 2007, the Mississippi Department of Education issued 7,620 teaching licenses. By 2017, that number shrunk to a mere 603 licenses issued.

Our shamefully low teacher salaries, inadequate and under-resourced classrooms, minimal and underfunded teacher supply funds, and the consistent starvation of public education in Mississippi all play a significant role in our inability to retain and recruit current and future educators while limiting opportunities for our students.

To begin addressing the predicament in which we now find ourselves, we implore you to take the following actions:

- Fully fund the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP)
- Provide an immediate raise of \$5,000 to all certified teachers
- Provide an immediate raise of \$2,500 to all assistant teachers
- Fully fund the Education Enhancement Fund's (EEF) Teacher Supply Fund
- Provide multi-year contracts and the possibility of teacher tenure for veteran teachers

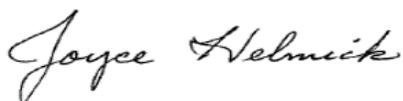
The state of Mississippi has asked teachers and education support professionals to “figure it out” year after year. State leaders tell us in speeches and statements to the press that teachers and school district employees are loved and valued, while their actions show us that we are on our own—until, of course, it's time for re-election. Even then, we are given just enough scraps to pacify us until the next time an election year rolls around.

Well, not this time.

We have amazing educators at work in this state. From Clarksdale to Pascagoula and everywhere in between, there are teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, janitorial staff, and administrators in every school district in Mississippi pouring their hearts into shaping the future of this state. They deserve our admiration and our respect, and they deserve a significant investment from our state leaders.

We stand ready to have a real conversation about how we can work to remedy this situation. I eagerly await your reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joyce Helmick".

Joyce Helmick  
President, Mississippi Association of Educators

CC: Governor Phil Bryant  
Speaker of the House Philip Gunn  
Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves  
Chairman Richard Bennett  
Chairman Gray Tollison