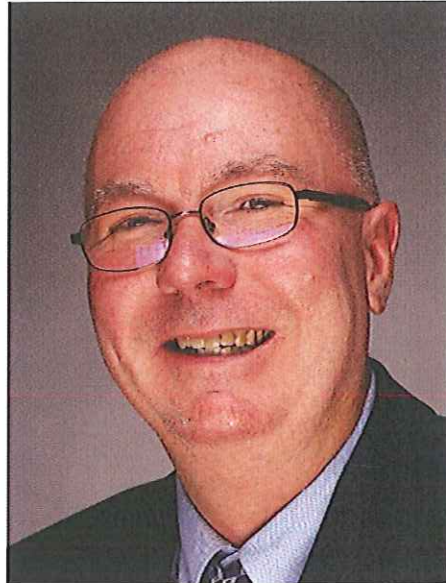


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## BOBBY HARRISON: Legislators had options to fully fund MAEP, chose not to

Bobby Harrison Feb 22, 2018



BOBBY HARRISON

Senate Education Chair Gray Tollison, R-Oxford, maintains that the new school funding formula being advocated by him and other members of the legislative leadership preserves the core tenets of the Mississippi Adequate Education program.

Even Rebecca Sibilia, the chief executive officer of New Jersey-based EdBuild, who was paid \$125,000 by the legislative leadership to develop a new funding formula, acknowledged during a recent meeting that the MAEP was landmark legislation when it was passed in 1997.

What Sibilia was referring to is the direct, and at the time innovative, way of ensuring a higher degree of equity in school funding. Under MAEP, an objective set of criteria was developed to determine the amount needed to provide an adequate or C-level education for a child. Each school district is required to pay a certain percentage of that amount with the state providing the rest.

Under that formula, poorer school districts receive more state funding because they have less local money to contribute to that child's education. That principle is incorporated in the new funding proposal.

There is a good chance that the Adequate Education Program is on its last leg. Legislative leaders give a number of different reasons for wanting to rewrite that innovative proposal.

But in recent weeks, Speaker Philip Gunn, R-Cinton; House Education Chair Richard Bennett, R-Long Beach, and others have been straightforward about the fact they want to scrap the Adequate Education Program because they do not believe the state can afford it.

Let's be clear here – the Legislature is getting ready to pass a new funding formula because they want a law that would not require them to spend as much on public education.

It is that simple. Perhaps, that is a good thing. Perhaps it is not.

MAEP was fully funded from 1997-2003, but since then has been underfunded every year but one. It has been underfunded cumulatively \$2.1 billion since 2008.

But it needs to be pointed out that, if not for the more than \$300 million in tax cuts that have gone into effect during the past six years and the more than \$400 million in tax cuts that will be enacted in the next eight years, the state could afford the full funding of the Adequate Education Program.

Maybe, enacting those tax cuts – many of which went to out-of-state corporations and some for malls that were already being built – were the best option for the state. Maybe the state will be better off because of those tax cuts.

But it is fair to say the Legislature made the choice to provide tax cuts rather than fully fund the Adequate Education Program.

MAEP was underfunded \$213 million for the current year. If not for those tax cuts, the state could have afforded to fully fund the Adequate Education Program and expand Medicaid to provide health care for the working poor as is allowed under federal law. Studies by academic groups have concluded expanding Medicaid would result in the state receiving billions of dollars in federal funds and eventually creating 20,000 new health care-related jobs.

Maybe, the tax cuts will be better for the state in the long run. Time will tell.

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