



*Find Your Voice*

**MPE's Legislative Advocacy  
Guide for Educators**

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## **MPE’s Legislative Advocacy Guide for Educators**

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## Why Advocate?

**Advocate (noun)** (ad·vo·cate | 'ad-və-kət)

**1:** one who pleads the cause of another

**2:** one who defends or maintains a cause or proposal

**3:** one who supports or promotes the interests of a cause or group

**Advocate (verb)** (ad·vo·cate | 'ad-və- ,kāt)

*transitive verb:* to support or argue for (a cause, policy, etc.) : to plead in favor of

*intransitive verb:* to act as advocate for someone or something

Whether you choose to be an advocate or to advocate, advocacy enables you to be the change you wish to see in the world and in our state. As an educator, you advocate for your students each day through your instruction to and nurturing of them in your classroom. You believe and invest in them each day.

Educators have the right to advocate for their students and their profession outside of the classroom, as well. As a citizen of Mississippi, you have the right to have your opinion heard. This guide will share resources and best practices for Mississippi educators in advocating on critical educational issues, monitoring events at our state capitol, and contacting Mississippi lawmakers to encourage them to make the best decisions for public education students and educators throughout our state.

### MPE Principles

*“The teaching and practice of citizenship rights and responsibilities in our democracy should be a high priority for every educator. As individuals, educators should be actively involved in the political process.*

*However, as an organization MPE does not participate in the campaign of any candidate or political party.” (Principle 8 of MPE’s Principles of Belief)*

While the Mississippi Professional Educators (MPE) does not endorse candidates or donate to political campaigns, we encourage our members to be actively involved in the political process. We provide resources to our members to educate them on policy issues, legislation under consideration at the capitol, or elections. These resources include our weekly emails, our *MPE Journal*, and candidates’ responses to our campaign questionnaires. We strongly encourage our members to vote in elections.

You may ask yourself, “Why should I advocate?” The answer is simple: **You are the voice for your students and your profession.** If you do not advocate on critical educational issues, who will? While MPE monitors legislation and advocates on behalf of our members on critical issues, there is power in numbers. Several hundred or thousands of our MPE members contacting their respective state

representatives and senators sends a much stronger message than if our association is the only contact a legislator has.

While legislators may think they understand a bill's impact, **educators are the experts on policy issues** that will impact classrooms, schools, and districts throughout our state. Some pieces of legislation may impact various districts differently. It is important that educators from different districts contact their respective state leaders regarding a bill's impact on their respective local districts so that all aspects of a bill may be considered.

Quite frankly, it is critical that educators advocate in order to **counter bad policy**. Within just the past five years, legislation has been introduced to expand vouchers, to decrease funding for public education via a rewrite of our education funding formula, and to punish educators for contacting their state leaders. If educators do not speak up in opposition to such anti-public education policies, it will make it easier for state leaders to push similar policies through. Our state leaders and legislators are elected by the citizens of our state and they should be held accountable for their votes on critical educational issues.

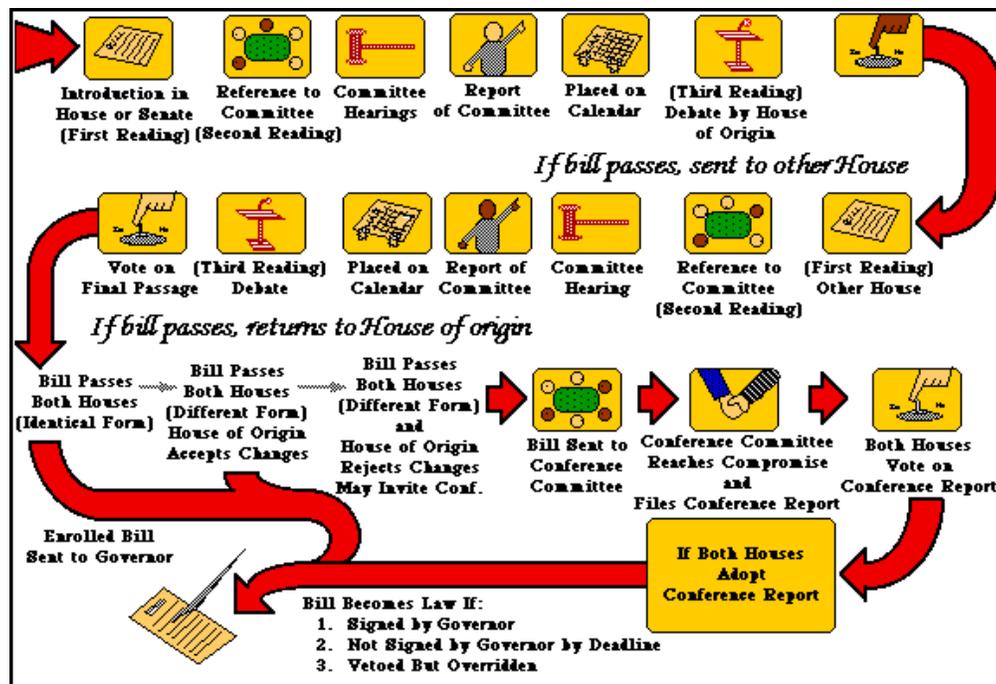
Finally, **it is your right** to advocate and to participate in political activities as long as you do so outside of your school duties and hours. Mississippi's Attorney General has issued multiple opinions, including a 2015 opinion regarding educators' public support for Initiative 42, that "school employees may voluntarily participate in political activities as long as their participation in such activities is limited to the hours when they are not involved in their work-related duties."

## How do I Advocate with Legislators?

### Educate Yourself

Membership in a professional association such as MPE affords educators not only professional growth networking opportunities, but also resources and information on important policy issues and legislation. MPE provides regular updates via email and social media to our members throughout the legislative session so that they may stay informed and contact their legislators on significant legislation and votes.

It is important that educators understand the legislative process in order to monitor legislation, as well as to recognize critical points in the process when they should contact their legislators and the leadership. The flowchart below provides an overview of the life of a bill:



Legislative deadlines govern the flow of the legislation throughout each session, with specific deadlines set for significant points in the process depicted above. You may find the deadlines for the 2020 Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature at [billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/htms/timetable.xml](http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/htms/timetable.xml). There are several points in the process where it is critical for educators to contact their legislators regarding a proposed piece of legislation, most notably committee votes and floor votes. These points are depicted above via the graphic of the finger pushing a grey switch. It is important to remember that while a bill may die at a legislative deadline or with a vote, there is a saying at the Mississippi State Capitol that “nothing is dead until it is dead, dead, dead,” as an issue is not truly dead until the session concludes because another piece of legislation could be amended to incorporate the issue. Thus, it is important to monitor legislation throughout the legislative session and not just at critical voting times.

The [Mississippi Legislature's website](#) enables citizens to review proposed bills and to track action on bills. We will use SB 2770, the teacher pay raise bill from the 2019 Legislative Session, as an example below. After going to the [Mississippi Legislature's website](#), scroll down to the “Measure Number Search” at the bottom of the page. Select “Senate Bills” from the drop-down menu in the first box, enter “2770” in the second box, and click the “Retrieve Measure” box:

**Measure Number Search**

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Senate Bills

2770

Retrieve Measure

You will be taken to a history of the bill. Different versions (i.e., as introduced, as passed the chamber of origin, as sent to the Governor) of the bill are available in PDFs under the “Bill Text for All Versions” section at the top of the page.

**Bill Text for All Versions**

[Approved by the Governor](#)  
[As Passed the Senate](#)  
[As Introduced](#)

**Description:** Teachers' salaries; provide for \$1,500.00 increase.

**Fiscal Note:** No fiscal note conducted

**Background Information:**  
*Disposition:* Law  
*Deadline:* General Bill Constitutional Amendment  
*Revenue:* No  
*Vote type required:* Majority  
*Effective date:* July 1, 2019  
*Chapter Number:* 461

**History of Actions:**

1	01/21	(S)	Referred To Education
2	02/05	(S)	Title Suff Do Pass
3	02/13	(S)	Amended
4	02/13	(S)	Passed As Amended <i>(Vote)</i>
5	02/18	(S)	Transmitted To House
6	02/19	(H)	Referred To Education:Appropriations
7	03/04	(H)	DR - TSDPAA: ED To AP
8	03/05	(H)	DR - TSDPAA: AP To ED
9	03/05	(H)	Title Suff Do Pass As Amended
10	03/11	(H)	Amended
11	03/11	(H)	Passed As Amended <i>(Vote)</i>
12	03/11	(H)	Motion to Reconsider Entered (Harness, S
13	03/12	(H)	Motion to Reconsider Tabled
14	03/13	(H)	Returned For Concurrence
15	03/19	(S)	Decline to Concur/Invite Conf

Notice that you may access recorded votes in the “History of Actions.” For example, click on the 3/11/19 “(Vote)” to see how your representative voted in the House’s vote on passage of the bill as it was amended by that chamber:

Mississippi House of Representatives  
2019 Regular Session

S. B. No. 2770 passed by the following vote:

Yeas--Aguirre, Anderson, Anthony, Arnold, Bailey, Bain, Baker, Banks, Baria, Williams-Barnes, Barnett, Barton, Beckett, Bell (65th), Bell (21st), Bennett, Blackmon, Bounds, Boyd, Brown, Burnett, Busby, Byrd, Calhoun, Carpenter, Chism, Clark, Clarke, Cockerham, Corley, Crawford, Currie, DeLano, Denny, Denton, Dixon, Dortch, Eubanks, Eure, Evans (91st), Evans (45th), Faulkner, Ford, Gibbs (72nd), Gibbs (36th), Guice, Hale, Haney, Harness, Hines, Holland, Holloway, Hood, Hopkins, Horan, Horne, Huddleston, Hudson, Hughes, Jackson, Johnson (87th), Johnson (94th), Karriem, Kinkade, Ladner, Lamar, Mangold, Massengill, McGee, McLeod, Mettelal, Mickens, Miles, Mims, Morgan, Oliver, Paden, Patterson, Pigott, Powell, Read, Reynolds, Roberson, Rogers (14th), Rogers (61st), Rosebud, Rushing, Sanford, Scoggin, Scott, Shanks, Shirley, Smith, Snowden, Staples, Stevenson, Straughter, Sullivan, Sykes, Taylor, Tullis, Turner, Walker, Wallace, Watson, Weathersby, White, Wilkes, Willis, Young, Zuber, Mr. Speaker. Total--112.

Nays--Bonggar, Criswell. Total--2.

Absent or those not voting--Foster, Henley, McNeal, Myers. Total--4.

Vacancies--4.

If a voice vote was taken, rather than a roll call vote, the voice vote is not recorded and is not available via the legislative website. For your reference, an “(S)” in the “History of Action” indicates Senate action, while an “(H)” indicates action taken by the House of Representatives.

### **Build Relationships with Your Legislators**

Effective lobbying and advocacy are all about building relationships with elected officials, including legislators. Building a relationship with your respective senator and representative enables them to recognize your experience and expertise, develops a degree of trust between the two of you, and should result in your legislators turning to you for your opinion and feedback on various pieces of legislation, as well as other policy issues.

Regular, professional contact – whether face-to-face interactions or conversations via the telephone, email, or social media – with your elected officials is critical to developing relationships. It is extremely beneficial to build these relationships by having elected officials visit your school and your classroom, as these opportunities give them an invaluable opportunity to get a “boots on the ground” view of the benefits and challenges faced by you and your co-workers each day. It also gives them a great point of reference for considering the impact of legislation. For example, invite your local legislators (senator and representative) to:

- Attend a “town hall meeting” with your school’s faculty to discuss education legislation and/or educational policy issues
- Serve as Principal of the Day or Teacher’s Assistant for the Day
- Serve as a test proctor during state testing. This is a very eye-opening experience for them if they accept the invitation.
- Attend/participate in special events at your school. Recognize their attendance by submitting a press release to your local newspaper, with a picture if possible.

### **Contact Your Legislators**

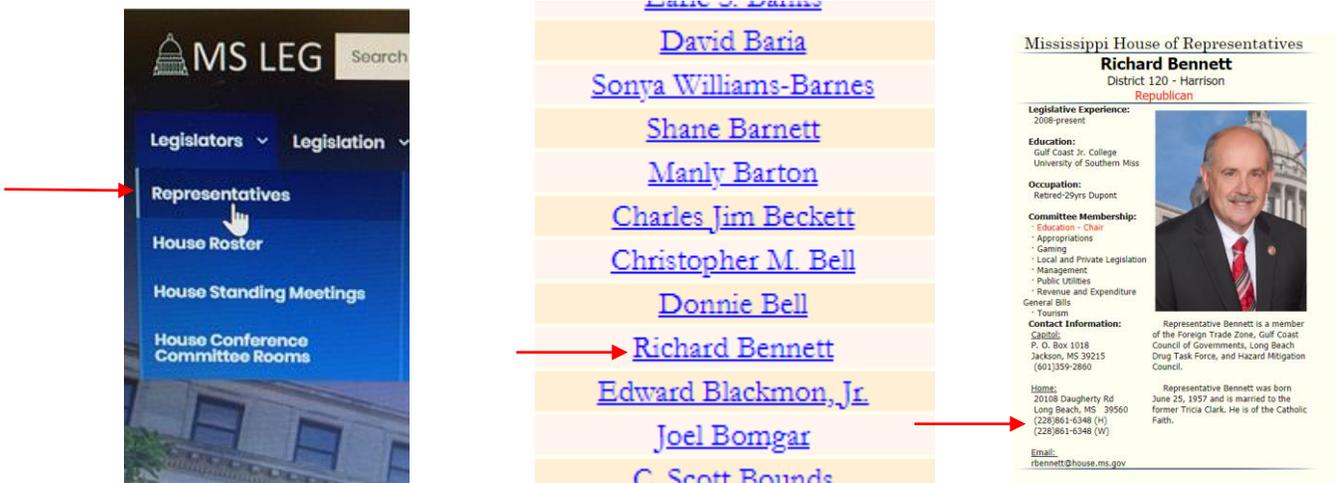
You are free as an educator to contact your representative, senator, and statewide elected officials with your opinion on a particular piece of information. Do not use school resources – school hours, computer, email, phone, copier, etc. – for such communications. You may contact your legislators via:

- **Phone calls:** Phone calls are an extremely effective form of communication with your legislator. If you reach their voicemail, leave a succinct message of your support for or concerns with a particular bill. Be sure to identify yourself as one of their constituents and leave your number so that they may return your call. You may leave a message for a legislator at the capitol during the legislation session by calling **601-359-3770**. It sends a very strong message to legislators if word gets out at the capitol that the switchboard is being flooded with calls on a particular bill.
- **Email:** Legislators are inundated with emails during the legislative session. Recognize that while they may see an email from you, they may not read your email in its entirety. It is still an effective form of communication, as an inbox full of emails regarding a particular bill can catch the legislator’s attention. It is a good idea to put the bill number (i.e., Senate Bill 2770) in the message line of your email. Personalize your message, rather than cutting and pasting a bulk email message into your email, as personal messages are better received by legislators.
- **Social media posts/comments:** Although you would be using your own time and resources to post on an elected official’s account, any such posts that you make should be in accordance with your district’s policies regarding employees’ use of social media. Remain professional at all

times with your comments, as inappropriate language does not advance your cause and diminishes your standing with the official.

- **Face-to-face meetings:** If you see your senator or representative while they are at home during the legislative session, stop them and share your thoughts on a particular issue or piece of legislation. You may be at a ballgame, church, the grocery store, etc. You may also schedule an appointment for a formal meeting with them in your local community or at the state capitol during the legislative session.

Contact information (phone numbers and email addresses) is available for legislators via the “Legislators” link at the top of the [legislative homepage](#). You may access individual representatives’ information via the “Representatives” link, which will take you to each representative’s biographical page reflecting his or her background/experience, committee assignments, and contact information. The “House Roster” link provides contact information for all House members. The same information is available for senators via the “Senators” and “Senate Roster” links. As an example, to contact Rep. Richard Bennett, Chairman of the House Education Committee, click on the “Representatives” link and then click on his name to be taken to his page:



The Lt. Governor and the Speaker of the House are often referred to as the “legislative leadership.” Contact information for the Lt. Governor and the Speaker of the House is available via the “Senators” and “Representatives” links, as well as via the leadership’s respective sections in the middle of the [legislative homepage](#).

You will find legislative contact information in the “Quick Links” section of our MPE homepage ([www.mpe.org](http://www.mpe.org)). Another good source is [The Parents' Campaign](#), as its website provides a list of legislators by school district.

When you contact your legislator– whether face-to-face or via the telephone, email, or social media – it is critical that you make a local connection with them. Identify yourself as one of their local constituents in their respective House or Senate district. Make any additional connection you may have with them (i.e., you go to church together, your children play ball together, etc.). When you contact them regarding a particular bill under consideration, it is beneficial for you to “put a face on it”-- i.e., explain to them what the bill will mean for your local school, district, and community. Personalize the legislation for them, as this may help them recognize a particular strength or weakness of the bill that they had not recognized.

In addition to it being your right to contact your respective legislators, doing so can assist them in making difficult decisions. It is a political reality that the leadership will often “count votes” prior to an important vote in order to ensure that they have enough members voting in the desired manner. The legislative leadership will exert political pressure on members of the Mississippi House of Representatives and the Mississippi Senate to vote in the way that the leadership wants members to vote on legislation. If a significant number of constituents contact their representative or senator, it can provide a legislator with the “cover” he/she needs to vote based on the feedback they are receiving from their constituents, rather than as directed by the leadership.

### **Suggested Talking Points**

MPE’s Executive Director often receives inquiries from our members as to what they should say to their legislators. Some educators feel inadequate to have such conversations with elected officials. Remember that you are far more experienced and knowledgeable when it comes to educational practice and issue than they are. For your reference, some critical points to make during a conversation can include the following:

- *My name is (insert name). I live in (insert town) in your district and I teach at (insert school).*
- *I am contacting you to ask you to vote (yes/no) on (insert bill number).*
- *I support this bill because (insert reason) OR I am opposed to this bill because (insert reason).*
- *This bill will (benefit/hurt) my (classroom/school/district/community).*
- *I am asking you to vote (for/against) the bill.*
- *I am going to be watching to see how you vote on the bill. Please vote (yes/no) on the bill.*
- *Thank you for your time.*

MPE provides an overview of critical legislation, including issues of particular concern, in our weekly email updates. If you need additional clarification or information on a bill before you contact your representative or senator, email [Kelly@mpe.org](mailto:Kelly@mpe.org) or call our office (800-523-0269; 601-355-5517).

It is important that you follow up with your legislator after a vote to either thank him/her for voting as you requested or to express your disappointment in his/her vote. This lets the legislator know that you are monitoring their actions and that you are holding them accountable. Do this on your own time and with your personal resources. Do not use school resources for any communications.

## 2020 Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature

The 2020 Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature will convene at 12:00 noon on Tuesday, January 7, 2020. As this will be the first session of a new four-year term, the Mississippi Constitution provides that this will be a 125-day session, rather than a 90-day session as in the second-fourth years. The Lt. Governor and Speaker of the House will appoint committees, including committee chairmen, in January. Senate Education will have a new chairman. We anticipate Rep. Richard Bennett will be reappointed as Chairman of House Education.

The timetable for processing legislation includes the following significant legislative deadlines:

- February 24 - Deadline for introduction of general bills and constitutional amendments
- March 10 - Deadline for committees to report general bills originating in own house
- March 19 - Deadline for original floor action on general bills originating in own house
- April 7 - Deadline for committees to report general bills originating in other house
- April 15 - Deadline for original floor action on general bills originating in other house
- April 30 - Deadline to concur or not concur in amendments from other house to general bills
- May 2 - Deadline for conference reports on appropriation bills to be filed
- May 4 - Deadline for adoption of appropriations conference reports and for conference reports on general bills to be filed
- May 10 - Sine Die

MPE will keep our members updated throughout the session via our weekly email updates, as well as Facebook and Twitter (@MSProfEd). MPE staff will develop our bill tracking spreadsheet of the bills we will be monitoring throughout the session after the March 10 committee deadline. We will update this tracking spreadsheet each Friday and post it in the “Legislative News” section of our website ([www.mpe.org](http://www.mpe.org)).

## Vote!

One of the most effective forms of advocacy is voting for pro-public education candidates, especially those incumbents who have proven their support for public education, students, and teachers via their votes. Educators used to be one of the strongest voting blocks in Mississippi. Many educators expressed frustration after Initiative 42's defeat in 2015 that their vote did not matter anymore. This could not be further from the truth. It is more important than ever that educators exercise their right to cast their votes for the candidates of their choice who support the teaching profession and our public schools.

Make sure you are registered to vote! The Secretary of State's website allows you to [verify your voter registration](#) or [update your address](#). If you are not registered to vote, complete an [official voter registration form](#) and mail it in today!

### **Read Campaign Finance Reports**

Legislative candidates are required to file campaign finance reports with the Secretary of State's Office. Among other requirements, these reports reflect campaign contributions in excess of \$200. A review of a candidate's reports will tell you if a candidate has accepted campaign donations from political action committees (PACs) or organizations that support the privatization of public education. For example, you may search candidates' reports to determine if they have accepted donations from pro-school choice or pro-voucher organizations.

Citizens may search campaign donations via candidates' finance reports filed on the Secretary of State's [campaign finance website](#). You may search by a candidate's name to view contributions in excess of \$200 to that candidate. You may also search by a PAC's name to see whose campaign(s) the PAC has donated to.

Candidate/Committee Office Contribution Expenditure Reports filed prior to 9/30/2016

Search By

Contains  Starting With

Search Type

All  
 Candidate  
 Candidate Committee  
 Political Committee (PAC)  
 Political Initiative Committee

Entity Name:  Search Clear

### **Vote "E" for Education**

Exercise your right to vote. If you are not registered to vote, register. Don't vote for a candidate simply because of the party symbol (i.e., "D" for Democrat or "R" for Republican) behind their name. Don't vote for a candidate because your spouse, parent, or friend told you to vote for them. Do your homework and research candidates' voting records and their education platforms. Vote for the candidate who will invest in and promote public education. Vote "E" for education!

## May I ....?

We often receive inquiries in the MPE office from members as to what they may or may not do related to advocacy, political campaigns, and other forms of public expression. Please see below for activities educators may and may not engage in:

### Advocacy Activities Educators May Engage In

- Educators may communicate on their own personal time with elected officials regarding policy issues or legislation. When contacting an elected official on a particular issue or bill, specifically ask the legislator to vote “Yes” or “No.” Tell them what you want them to do. Be sure to follow up with legislators after a vote.
- Educators may volunteer to work on a political campaign on their own personal time. Volunteer activities may include attending or hosting a town hall meeting for a candidate, distributing campaign materials, contributing to a campaign, or other campaign activities.
- Educators may have political bumper stickers on their cars on school district property.
- Educators may put yard signs on their personal property supporting their preferred candidate(s).
- Educators may make social media posts regarding particular bills or initiatives. Your personal profile picture may reflect your support of or opposition to a candidate.
- Educators may participate in public hearings or town hall meetings as long as they do so on their own time. If such an event is held during the school day, the educator should take leave to attend the event unless they are participating in the event as an official representative of their school or district.
- Educators may attend and participate in rallies at the state capitol during the legislative session, but they must take leave if the rally is held during school hours.
- Educators may write letters to the editor. You may respond to reporters’ requests for comments on an issue, but only in an individual capacity and not as a representative of your school or school district.
- Administrators may provide updates to their staff regarding legislation under consideration at the capitol as it relates to and will impact their school/district practices and operation.
- Respect differences of opinion. Just because someone’s opinion differs from that of your own does not make that person’s opinion less important or wrong. Acknowledge your difference of opinions and reiterate the reason(s) for your position
- Remain professional at all times. Inappropriate language, cursing, and name calling weaken your credibility and do not advance your standing with an elected official.
- Educators should VOTE for candidates based upon their voting record on critical educational issues, rather than based on a candidate’s political affiliation.

### Advocacy Activities Educators Should Not Engage In

- Educators may not use school resources (school hours, email, phone, etc.) to contact legislators or other elected officials. Contact should be on your personal time using your personal resources.
- Educators should not use inappropriate language in conversations or social media posts.
- Educators should not wear political campaign clothing to school or school events.
- Educators may not disseminate campaign materials to your co-workers during school hours.
- Educators should not strike or walk out, as state law prohibits teachers’ strikes, concerted work stoppages, and concerted refusals to perform duties. Any certified teacher who does shall be terminated and may not be reemployed as a teacher by any public school district in Mississippi. Do not throw away your professional career by striking; rather, get engaged and elect candidates who support teachers and our public schools.