

## Mississippi Professional Educators: 2019 Gubernatorial Candidate Questionnaire

While MPE does not endorse political candidates, we encourage our members to be actively involved in the political process and to exercise their right to vote. MPE sent the following ten questions to the four leading candidates for Governor of Mississippi. Candidates' responses are below. Robert Foster did not respond. Although Tate Reeves submitted his responses more than 2 hours after our deadline, we have included them below for our members' reference in making informed decisions. Primary elections will be held August 6, 2019, and voters will return to the polls on November 5 for Mississippi's General Election.

	Jim Hood	Tate Reeves	Bill Waller, Jr.
1. <i>What qualifies you as the best candidate to serve as Governor of Mississippi?</i>	As AG, I've worked hard to protect Mississippi and its families. Now, I'm running for governor to improve the lives of working families. For too long, working people have been kicked to the curb. Because of a \$210M/year tax giveaway designed by Tate Reeves for out of state corporations, we can't fund our schools, pay teachers adequate wages, and address the problems we face. As governor, I'll say no to the special interests and fight for quality public education and the interests of working people.	For the past 16 years, I have dedicated my life to public service. I have worked to improve our education system, cut taxes, protect Mississippi values and strengthen our economy through sensible, business-friendly policies. During that time, we have seen consistent economic growth, reached new milestones in education, lowered taxes for every Mississippian, and become the safest state in the country for the unborn. As Governor, I will continue to build on that success.	My life experiences as Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court and as a Brigadier General in the Mississippi National Guard have prepared me to lead this state forward as governor and tackle the big challenges we face – including education, health care, and infrastructure.
2. <i>What do you see as the biggest challenge facing educators today? How will you address this issue?</i>	Nearly all the issues facing educators today stem from leadership that doesn't respect teachers for the valuable public servants they are. We can address this issue in a few ways. I would start by paying our teachers wages that reflect their commitment to our children. I'd also like to see teaching included as a profession at state career fairs and incorporated into the state's workforce development strategy. We need a governor that respects and values teachers and will fight for the people educating our children.	Recruiting and retaining highly skilled teachers is critical for our students' success. Studies cite a top reason that teachers leave the profession is lack of administrative support. As Governor, I want to return authority back to the classroom so they can manage it as they see fit. From limiting the amount of needless testing to managing student discipline, I will support legislative and regulatory changes that empower teachers to focus on students, not structure.	We need to get our teacher salaries to the Southeastern average. We cannot afford to lose quality teachers to neighboring states or other professions due to low wages. I am committed to raising teacher pay every year until we reach that goal. We should also work on creating an educational environment where teachers rediscover their love of teaching. With policies and procedures that sustain a supportive educational environment.
3. <i>What is your top priority for strengthening and advancing public education in Mississippi?</i>	My top priority for strengthening public education is phasing in a statewide pre-kindergarten program for Mississippi four-year-olds. Children attending state-funded Early Learning Collaboratives in Mississippi are consistently scoring high on kindergarten readiness assessments, and are more prepared to learn on the first day of kindergarten than their peers who haven't attended pre-k. We need to fully fund the ELC program, and expand beyond that to ensure every four-year old has access to some form of pre-k.	One thing I've learned is that if we expect more of our students, they'll live up to those higher expectations. Our education improvement levels are outpacing the nation, and our graduation rate stands at 84 percent – an all-time high. I will continue focusing on achieving our goals by investing in programs that impact student achievement, such as teacher supply funds and literacy coaches; expanding pre-kindergarten collaboratives; and providing parents with more choice in their child's education.	Increasing teacher salaries to the Southeastern average is step number one. We also need to look at reforming the way we do testing so that our teachers and students are not constantly worrying about preparing and taking too many tests. We need to focus on quality education and accurately measuring the results, not endless testing. We also need to focus more on preparing those students who do not wish to attend college for the workforce.

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<i>4. Do you believe local communities should be responsible for a greater portion of education funding in our state?</i>	No. I think the state should step up and fully fund public education through the MAEP funding formula before we ask local communities to spend more. In the past seven years, our legislative leadership has underfunded our public schools by \$1.67 billion, and next school year they will have underfunded schools by nearly \$2 billion. Our educators and children deserve more from the <i>state</i> before we ask local communities to pay more.	As Lt. Governor, I supported modernizing the state’s decades-old education funding formula to a new method that would determine funding needs based on factors like rurality, student characteristics (like gifted and special needs), and English Language Learners. However, I did not support changing laws to require additional investment from local communities because I believe the state has a responsibility to ensure current dollars are being used to provide high-quality education to our students.	I believe it is primarily the state’s responsibility to provide funding for the education of its citizens. We must work collaboratively with our local communities, not force them to make up for our shortcomings at the state level. By creating and incentivizing a facilities program to help local districts maintaining and modernizing some of our school buildings.
<i>5. What is your solution for Mississippi’s teacher shortage?</i>	The first step in solving the teacher shortage is showing educators we value the work they do by increasing teacher salaries. As governor, I’d like to see Mississippi’s average teacher pay raised to the Southeastern average. Additionally, we can help reverse the teacher shortage by expanding scholarship opportunities for education students, offering tuition forgiveness or reduced tuition for teachers, and creating pathways for the 8,500 paraprofessionals and education supports staff working in our schools.	Our schools of education have seen a decline in their programs, jeopardizing Mississippi’s pipeline for quality teachers. We must look at innovative solutions to alleviate this problem, including programs which connect military service men and women to classroom teaching opportunities; consider giving local school districts the option to hire more non-traditional staff, such as citizen experts; and tapping into the existing teacher pool by incentivizing college professors to serve as “adjunct faculty” at nearby schools.	It starts with providing competitive wages that pay teachers like professionals. We lose far too many quality teachers to surrounding states for the simple reason that they can make more money in those states. Attracting and retaining quality teachers is my top priority for education. Long term solution is to create an accessible pipeline for teachers entering Schools of Education and have a pathway to achieve certification in their chosen field. We should look at entrance requirements at the IHL level.
<i>6. What is your solution to the concerns regarding state testing that will still allow Mississippi to meet federal guidelines and still assess state standards?</i>	I recognize the role and importance testing plays in gauging student achievement. As governor, I will seriously evaluate federal guidelines, how much students are tested, what they’re being tested on, and identify unneeded or duplicate testing in our schools.	Students suffer when teachers are forced to focus on bureaucratic testing, not classroom learning. Yet, a recent nonprofit survey found that many tests teachers are asked to administer are required by the local school district, not federal or state policies. I firmly believe we must put an end to unnecessary testing by limiting the number of testing days allowed per school year, in addition to fighting efforts to impose more statewide assessments.	We need to work with all stakeholders to reform the system so that we can have the necessary testing and accountability without the current situation that is clearly not working for our students, teachers and communities. Clearly, we can develop a better system that is not burdensome but still meets guidelines for testing. And we should prepare our students today, for the world they are going to participate in, in their future.

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7. <i>Do you support the diversion of federal and state funds from public schools to nonpublic schools, home schools or virtual schools via vouchers, tuition tax credits, scholarships, individualized education funds (IEFs), or some other means? Please explain your position.</i>	No. Mississippi public schools are already severely underfunded, and we place near the bottom in national rankings of per pupil spending. We shouldn't take taxpayer dollars from our public schools and hand them over to private organizations who aren't held to the same accountability standards. Additionally, research shows voucher programs tend to have a negative effect on student outcomes. In Louisiana, voucher students were 24-50% more likely than public school students to fail basic assessments.	What I support is simple: giving parents more choice in their child's education. No two children learn in the same way, and I support an education system that reflects the diversity of our student population. From highly-qualified charter schools to individualized education scholarship accounts for special needs students, I believe giving parents more options will continue to help improve educational outcomes.	I believe we need to let the current laws regarding these issues work before expanding or doing anything new. We need to prioritize teacher pay, reforming curriculum to better prepare non-college track students for the workforce, and testing reform.
8. <i>What qualifications and/or characteristics will you look for in your nominees to the State Board of Education?</i>	First and foremost, my nominees to the State Board of Education will be lifetime supporters of public schools. It's important we have members who are committed to public schools, and, preferably, have worked in or around them for most of their careers. Additionally, we need to have educators—people who have been in the trenches—sitting on the board.	As Governor, I will take seriously the opportunity to appoint someone to a nine-year term on the State Board of Education. An ideal candidate is someone knowledgeable about Mississippi's public education system, who has a passion for moving our state forward, and who will approach his or her responsibilities with a thoughtful, measured approach. Prior to making this appointment, I will consult with key stakeholders, including the MPE, to receive feedback on possible appointees.	I will look for a highly qualified, diverse group that reflects Mississippi and is committed to my vision for high quality education for all Mississippians.
9. <i>What is your vision for Mississippi's community colleges and universities for the next decade?</i>	My main vision centers around implementing a statewide, tuition-free community college system. Several counties in Northeast Mississippi already have this program. By doing this, we can provide relief to families who may not be able to afford four years of university tuition and offer a path for further education to students that might not see a four-year degree as their best option. I'd also like to expand scholarship and tuition forgiveness programs, especially for future educators.	Workforce development will be one of the most critical issues facing our next governor, and our higher education system will play a key role in helping to meet the demands of our economic future. I envision a closer alliance among K-12, community colleges, and universities to lead us toward a system in which students can transition seamlessly from the classroom to the workforce with the skills they need to get and keep a job.	Our community colleges and high schools need to be more tightly integrated to help improve job training. We need collaborative partnerships between these schools and businesses who need workers. Not every student wants to go to college and there are many skilled trades that do not require a 4-year degree. We need those students to be prepared with industry certifications trained for good paying jobs.

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<p><i>10. According to a report prepared for the Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning in 2016, only slightly more than half of the people who graduate from Mississippi's eight public universities are still working in the state five years after they graduate. What can we do as a state to prevent this brain drain?</i></p>	<p>Between 2010-17, we lost about 32,400 millennials—nearly the population of Tupelo. We must reverse this disturbing trend if we want Mississippi to move forward. I think we can do this by strengthening our education system so graduates have good schools to send their children. Additionally, we need to focus economic development on expanding Mississippi businesses and creating good jobs so graduates can earn a living to raise families here, not move out of state to earn a decent wage.</p>	<p>We need to continue to cut regulations and pass sensible policies that will encourage businesses to move to Mississippi, creating jobs and incentivizing graduates to pursue meaningful careers here in Mississippi. We also need to communicate the workforce needs in our state to students who are in the process of choosing their career paths and encourage them to study in fields that will pay dividends immediately after graduation without having to leave the state.</p>	<p>My agenda is a comprehensive vision for enacting a major roads program, increasing teacher pay, and health care reform including Medicaid reform. If we tackle those three areas, I believe our economy will grow quickly and our population will also grow for Mississippi to make great strides forward.</p>