

To Save Public Education, Look to Mississippi

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Trust in public schools has cratered. A Gallup poll last year revealed that satisfaction with public education had reached a 24-year low, and people have good reason to be miffed. A federal assessment of reading and math skills for fourth- and eighth graders released last fall showed the lowest test scores in decades. On reading exams, a third of high school seniors scored “below basic,” the bottom threshold, and nearly half lacked the ability to perform rudimentary math computations.

Progressive cultural fads concerning race and gender have dominated the education discussion, especially since the Covid lockdowns, which turned out to be unnecessary and harmful. These ideological crusades can distract from the reality that too many youngsters aren’t learning basic academic skills. The problem is pronounced for children from low-income families who rely on public schools for the educational and behavioral foundation that more affluent families can provide at home. When educators dumb down standardized tests, inflate grades and ease graduation requirements, they make matters worse for the most vulnerable kids, for whom a decent education may be the only means of social and economic advancement.

Many failed practices continue because they are advantageous to the teachers unions, which control public education, and to the politicians who benefit from union largess. For the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and their thousands of state and local affiliates, the priority isn’t student learning but job security. The same school that is graduating 12th-graders with the reading and math skills of eighth graders is still providing solid middle-class jobs for adults, so it stays open and politicians look the other way.

The good news is that successful public education models exist, and they’re starting to receive more attention. Mississippi’s education transformation over the past decade recently received a glowing assessment in the New York Times, of all places. The conventional wisdom, long advocated by the Times’s editors and other liberals, is that poverty largely explains learning gaps and that more school spending will result in better educational outcomes. Yet Mississippi, which spends less per student than almost every other state, is outperforming other states with far larger education budgets.

Adjusted for state demographics, Mississippi ranks first nationally in fourth-grade reading and math, and at or near the top in eighth grade, according to an Urban Institute analysis.

Among black students, it ranks third nationally in reading, and its low-income students outperform all other states.

How did the Magnolia State pull it off? “It did not do so by relying on some of the most common proposals held up as solutions in education, like reducing class sizes, or dramatically boosting student funding,” according to the Times. “Rather, the state pushed through a vast list of other changes from the top down, including changing the way reading is taught, in an approach known as the science of reading, but also embracing contentious school accountability policies other states have backed away from.”

While other states “have gone in the opposite direction, backing off accountability and lowering proficiency standards, sometimes in the name of equity,” Mississippi raised its academic standards, held back third-graders who lacked proficiency in reading, and sent literacy and math coaches to help teachers in low-performing schools. Notably, the Times reports that Mississippi “was able to muscle through some changes, in part, because it has weak teachers’ unions, which have traditionally resisted accountability linked to standardized testing.”

Last week, the Mississippi House took up a bill that would loosen limits on the creation of new charter schools and make it easier for families to transfer from one public school to another. In addition, the legislation would create education savings accounts that allow parents to direct education dollars toward private schools or home schooling if traditional public schools aren’t meeting their children’s needs. The teachers unions oppose school choice, but like other changes the state has made, it has a proven track record of success, especially for low-income minorities.

Mississippi isn’t the only state to figure out that high expectations, quality instruction, and retention policies for struggling students are a recipe for academic success. Florida implemented comprehensive literacy reform in the early 2000s under Gov. Jeb Bush. Indiana, Louisiana and Alabama are using similar strategies to improve education outcomes.

Unfortunately, too many states are hampered by teachers unions, which pursue their own interests at children’s expense, and by an education establishment that thinks its social crusades are more important than basic skills. Meanwhile, politicians understand that promising to spend more money on education is an easy way to duck responsibility for poor outcomes. Perhaps a few more Mississippi miracles will help expose the left’s deceptions.