

Education Funding Formula: Separate but [un]Equal

There is a relatively new historical fiction teen novel entitled *The Lies We Tell Ourselves* by Robin Talley. It tells the story of the rough desegregation of public schools in 1959 Virginia. One of the African Americans chosen to move to the white school, Sarah, held a conversation with a white classmate in which she explained one of the reasons why the schools should be integrated: the separate but equal doctrine was not truly what it claimed to be, and the contrast of environment and supplies between the white schools and the black schools were glaringly different.

“Your Biology class at Jefferson has a microscope at every single lab table,” she says, “At my old school we had *one*. For the whole class. We all took turns... Johns doesn’t have enough textbooks for everyone to have their own, either... We share those, too. No one’s allowed to take them home.” Jefferson, the white high school, supplied their students through state funding -- funding that Johns, the black high school, did not have.

Today, at Murrah High School, one of the seven high schools in the Jackson Public Schools district, few classes have a full class set of textbooks, and even fewer have enough to send one home with every student. Several classes, including accelerated classes and PE classes, depend on an electronic textbook or, occasionally, a class set of textbook photocopies. The AP Biology class has two different editions of the same textbook that are delegated to the students, both several years old. Microscopes are a rare sight, although occasionally enough are found for a class, if they’re lucky. For the most part, toilet paper can be found, but paper towels and soap are harder to track down in the high school bathrooms. Air conditioning and heat are never guaranteed, and sometimes they’re too guaranteed. Some of the bathroom stalls are empty because the plumbing is old enough that a broken toilet is difficult and expensive to replace.

The difference between this and some of the other schools in the state is astonishing.

This is not to say, however, that primarily white schools or districts in Mississippi get the amount of funding that they are entitled. It is evident, however, that the disparity in funds and resources between minority school districts and white school districts is huge.

The [Mississippi Adequate Education Program \(MAEP\)](#), a two-decade old formula for public school funding in Mississippi, contains a crucial detail that largely affects the inequitable funding of various districts: the 27% rule. After a district’s estimated needed funds are calculated, that district is legally required to provide 27% of those funds through their tax base, with the expectation that the state is responsible for the other 73%. If a district has a high property tax base and has the financial capability to provide more than 27% and does provide more, the state is still responsible for the other 73%. This gives those districts more funding than required by the formula and a higher percentage of funding than districts in which there is a low property tax base. Furthermore, the Mississippi Department of Education often fails to adequately pay that calculated 73%. This expectation of 73% is not supported by property taxes paid to the

state, and must be supplied through general or earmarked state funds, limiting the funding of education to what the state can afford.

HB 957, a new education funding proposal named Mississippi Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPS) was recently proposed in the Mississippi Legislature. Previously, student poverty measure -- and subsequent numbers given by the formula -- was found through the free and reduced lunch program. Because of districts like JPS where the entire district receives free lunch, the new bill finds the student poverty measure using Census data. The Census data includes all students who reside in the district, even if they are homeschooled or attend private school. The [community poverty measure is disproportionately calculated](#) because high income families with students in private school are included in the formula for the funding of the public school district. A non-profit that helps states find ways to properly and equitably fund public education and that was hired by the state legislators, EdBuild, does not agree with this change, nor do they agree that the 27% rule should remain in the formula, which, so far, is remaining. EdBuild used the numbers given to them by the legislators proposing the bill to calculate the estimated funding each district would receive, but those numbers were calculated from the Census data that does not accurately represent most school districts' income. Using Census data to calculate district poverty levels unfairly targets areas like Jackson, where the well-off white students are sent to private schools and everyone else is in the public school. The wealthy students decrease the district's poverty level, even though they aren't attending a school in the district. Usually this ends up hurting minorities. The private school kids outnumber the homeless kids, and the homeless kids are no longer factored into the poverty level as heavily. Once again, privilege has the power.

If the 27% rule were to be removed from the bill, the state government would calculate the money each district needs and the money each district can provide through their area's property taxes. Districts in high property tax areas would be responsible for paying a larger percentage of their funding. These districts are underfunded under the current funding laws, but would be more underfunded if they could no longer provide the extra bit of money that is not counted in their 27% through property taxes. They would then be underfunded to the same or a similar degree as school districts with a low property tax base are now. They, too, would lack the number of textbooks required to send one home with every student. They, too, would carry a bottle of hand sanitizer with them every time they go to the bathroom because soap is never guaranteed.

Mississippi Representative Jay Hughes shared a [google spreadsheet](#) with his constituents describing the differences between the actual funding received by school districts, the funding MAEP calculates for the school districts, the funding HB 957 calculates for the school districts, and the difference between the two calculations. Only a few schools gain in recommended funding under HB 957, and only one school gains a significant amount. Jackson Public Schools, already underfunded by around \$11,500,000 under MAEP, is calculated to need \$7,000,000 less than MAEP calculated when placed in the formula for HB 957 -- a formula that has yet to be

officially established. The Madison County School district is slated to receive \$4,000,000 less than their MAEP calculation.

Our students are smart. They're enthusiastic. They want to learn. It's hard, though, when the classrooms are either 90 degrees or 60 degrees, when technology is unreliable, when the grant for computers ran out after only two years, when the food is edible but just barely. If we cannot afford the mundane necessities because we are underfunded, depriving us of more funding will not make things better. We cannot buy more buses with less money. We cannot buy more textbooks with less money. We can not fix the roofs with less money. The legislature's reworking of the school funding formula is nothing less than an attempt to place minority students at more of a disadvantage than they're already experiencing. The starting line has never been at the same place as the privileged, but now it's being moved further back than before.

While the legislators proposing HB 957 claim that it increases school funding, it, in reality, severely decreases funding from what MAEP suggested, which already [underfunded education](#) by about \$200 million in the last fiscal year and only fully funded education twice in its twenty-year life.

The MAEP formula harmed low income areas, but the new UPS formula will be worse. Coincidentally, statistics show that low income areas are mostly populated by minorities. It's no surprise that the majority white Mississippi legislature twists education funding to unfairly provide educational opportunities based on income, race, and geographic location. Half a century after school integration, it is clear that the promise of true integration and education equality was never intended to be fulfilled.