

## Introduction

For years, Mississippi has grappled with school funding issues, particularly around the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP). Efforts to fully fund MAEP have been ongoing amid the recognition that school funding research has evolved since MAEP's adoption 26 years ago. Teach Plus Mississippi sees the current legislative session as a chance to enhance school funding policies. We have analyzed national research on school funding and applied best in-field practices to proposed legislation, guided by one central question: What is best for Mississippi's children?

## Benefits of the Weighted Student Funding

Teach Plus Mississippi advocates for a **weighted student funding formula** that:

- + Begins with a per-pupil base amount.
- + Includes “weights” to allocate additional funding to students who face unique barriers to learning and need additional staff, instructional materials, or other resources to be successful.
- + Shifts the emphasis from funding schools to funding students.
- + Creates a simpler, more predictable, and more transparent formula that is easier for school leaders to work with.

HB [1453](#), The Investing in the Needs of Students to Prioritize, Impact and Reform Education (INSPIRE) Act of 2024, would establish a weighted formula for students in Mississippi public schools. We believe this legislation presents the right approach to fund our education system in Mississippi. In the memo, we examine HB 1453 through the lens of the following core principles:

- + **Adequacy:** Does the legislation ensure that public schools receive adequate funding to meet the educational needs of all students and is the funding monitored and adjusted regularly to reflect changes in the student population?
- + **Equity:** Does the legislation fairly and equitably allocate funding to students based on their individual needs, such as, but not limited to, low-income students, English language learners, and students in need of special education services?
- + **Transparency:** Does the legislation provide transparent and readily available funding data to the general public to hold lawmakers and districts accountable for meeting the needs of students?

## Strengths of the INSPIRE Act

**Increase in the Base Student Cost.** The **\$6,650 base student cost (BSC)** included in the INSPIRE Act represents a significant increase in the BSC that has been allocated to school districts over the past five

years. While this base is smaller than it would be under a fully-funded MAEP, once the weights are applied, many students in Mississippi will have significantly more funding than they would under the current formula. The legislation also includes a provision that requires annual increases for inflation and requires the Superintendent’s School Funding Working Group to recommend adjustments to the base and weights every four years.

**Weighted Funding for our Neediest Students.** By far the biggest strength of the INSPIRE Act is the substantial funding increases students would receive through this formula. Among the weights included in the legislation, the INSPIRE Act would provide:

- + **A 30% weight (+\$1,995) for low-income students.** A student from a low-income household would receive \$8,645 in funding. This alone would be a substantial increase from the 5% weight for “at-risk” students under MAEP. The formula also includes an additional 10% weight for students in “concentrated poverty districts.” In districts with low-income student populations over 35%, each student above that threshold will receive an additional \$665 in funding, bringing their total to \$9,310.
- + **A 20% weight (+\$1,330) for English language learners.** For the first time, state funds will be allocated for students whose first language isn’t English. Such a student would receive \$7,980 in funding. According to [MDE](#), there are 12,100 identified EL students currently in Mississippi.
- + **Significant, multi-tiered increases for special education students.** For students receiving special education services, this formula would provide a 60% weight (+\$3,990) for students with a Tier I diagnosis, a 125% weight (+\$8,312.50) for Tier II, and a 170% weight (+\$11,305) for Tier III. For example, a student who needs Tier II services would receive at least \$14,963 in funding. This funding would go toward intensive intervention and resources in order to bridge the gap for these students.
- + **A 10% weight (+ \$665) for students in career technical education.** Students enrolled in one or more CTE programs will receive at least \$7,315 in funding. The funding could provide a boost to each school’s career-readiness efforts.
- + **A 5% weight (+ \$332.50) for students in gifted education.** The INSPIRE Act includes this weight for 5% of a district’s average daily membership. This is slightly different from other weights that are based on student counts and is intended to address under-counting of gifted students in under-resourced school districts. Gifted students will receive at least \$6,982.50 in funding.

The weights can be stacked based on student needs. For example, a low-income student in a CTE program would receive at least \$9,310 in funding.

*“I am excited to see that the legislature is taking school funding seriously and is looking at neighboring states that have had success with a more student-driven model. As a special education teacher, I know that my students need additional support in order to be successful and I am pleased to see this acknowledged.”* —Jessica Dalton, Teach Plus Policy Fellow, K-3 special education teacher at Magnolia Park Elementary School in Ocean Springs

*“More funding for districts like Holmes County Consolidated is not just about money; it’s about investing in the promise and potential of every child, ensuring that they have the resources, support, and opportunities they need to succeed, regardless of their background or zip code,”* —Kristin Scott, Teach Plus Senior Policy Fellow, interventionist at Holmes Central High School in Lexington

## Recommendations for Strengthening the INSPIRE Act

Teach Plus Mississippi recommends the following improvements to the INSPIRE Act:

- 1. Add teacher voice to the School Funding Working Group.** Classroom teachers are experts when it comes to how policy decisions impact students, and their input on funding decisions is vital to the effectiveness of the working group. Currently, the working group to be convened by the State Superintendent doesn’t specifically include teachers.
  - Add four teachers (one per congressional district) to the working group. This would include one teacher at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, along with at least one special education teacher.
  - Ensure that at least two teachers in the working group come from districts with below 50 percentile in student enrollment.
  - Ensure that at least two teachers in the working group come from districts with low-income student populations above 35%.
- 2. Require the School Funding Report to include an examination of the Local Tax Effort.** Our current funding formula requires a local contribution of 28 mills of property tax revenue or 27% of the total student cost (not including add-ons), whichever is the lowest. The 27% cap on the local contribution allows districts with high property wealth to get more than their fair share of state funding. The “27 Percent Rule” still exists in the INSPIRE ACT. Although it will apply to the total amount of funding districts would receive, its impact on equitable funding should be closely monitored by the Working Group.
  - Grant the working group clear authority to review each district’s minimum tax effort.
  - Ensure the working group has the power to recommend changes to the minimum tax effort and/or the cap on the local contribution.
- 3. Require the working group to submit a report every two years.** The INSPIRE Act currently calls for the School Funding Working Group to submit its report of findings and recommendations every four years. Requiring the report on a more frequent basis will enable the working group to monitor the formula more closely and adjust it when necessary. The system is also more likely to absorb smaller, more frequent adjustments.
  - Require the working group to submit its first report by December 1, 2026, and the second report by December 1, 2028, before the 2029 legislative session.
  - Require the legislature to review the working group’s reports twice during their term.
- 4. Ensure school funding data to be accessible to the general public.** There is a need for greater transparency when it comes to the amount of funding each district receives and how funds are being spent. Giving the public easily accessible information about funding will enable teachers, parents, and students to be more informed and involved in determining how their schools are meeting the needs of all learners.

- Require the Mississippi Department of Education to include school financial data on the Mississippi Succeeds Report Cards for each district and charter school. The data should include, but not be limited to:
  - Funding received for each weighted category in the financial data
  - Percentage of funding spent on classroom instruction
  - Source of funding (local, state, federal)
  - Spending per pupil
  - Relationship of average spending per student to academic performance, and how it compares to similar districts.

## Conclusion

Mississippi has the opportunity to adequately and equitably fund our schools through the INSPIRE Act. These changes would make the INSPIRE Act a truly transformative piece of legislation that would improve the quality of education for ALL Mississippi students. As the legislature continues to determine the optimal per student cost in our state, Teach Plus Mississippi looks forward to bringing teacher voice to the table and providing recommendations to ensure equitable funding for all our students.

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### About Teach Plus

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing this mission, Teach Plus is guided by the Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.