

Strengthening Mississippi's Career Coaching System:

Recommendations from Teach Plus Policy Fellows



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INTRODUCTION

While Mississippi has made gains in high school graduation rates, earning a high school diploma in the state does not equate to students being college and career ready (CCR), as measured by meeting the benchmarks on the ACT or the ACT WorkKeys tests. According to the Mississippi Department of Education's 2022-23 accountability scores, each of Mississippi's 37 school districts with CCR rates below 30 percent have graduation rates above 75 percent. In fact, the four school districts with CCR rates below 10 percent have graduation rates above 80 percent.¹ This means that Mississippi is handing out diplomas to thousands of students who lack the knowledge, skills, and support for postsecondary success.

Since 2022, the Mississippi State Legislature has invested millions of federal and state dollars into a career coaching program operated by Accelerate Mississippi. Through this initiative, organizations such as local chambers of commerce and community foundations receive funding to hire career coaches. These organizations then partner with local school districts to deploy career coaches, who assist students in pursuing career pathways. As of spring 2023, career coaches were working in 184 high schools across the state.

Through this [program](#), career coaches work with high school seniors to help them define their goals for the future and create a plan to achieve them. More specifically, "they help seniors realize their dreams of being first-generation college students, working with local employers to provide jobs in fields of interest, and establishing paths to certification programs in coding, barbering, welding, truck driving, and other skilled professions."

Mississippi has received national recognition for its recent gains in literacy. A key element in producing those gains was the training and mobilization of literacy coaches—not dissimilar to career coaches—who worked in partnership with teachers and administrators to improve literacy instruction statewide with a particular emphasis on schools with the lowest levels of reading proficiency.

We are a group of Policy Fellows who teach diverse student populations across the state. We believe that there is an opportunity for career coaches to spur gains in college and career readiness in the same way that literacy coaches spurred gains in literacy. To learn more about the program and to understand its strengths and identify opportunities for improvement, we conducted a survey of career coaches in Mississippi. In this brief, we present our findings and recommendations for policymakers in the hope of driving improvement of the state's career coaching system.

Findings

1. Accelerate Mississippi's career coaching program's structure successfully protects career coaches' time to work closely with students.
2. Career coaches view the development of "soft skills" as an essential component of students being "college and career ready."
3. Career coaches with non-education backgrounds bring unique expertise to schools, but may require additional training to effectively support students.
4. For remote, rural districts, access to career pathways and opportunities for students remains a significant challenge.

Recommendations

1. Train all career coaches in a core set of skills and provide additional training to meet their individual needs.
2. Ensure that Mississippi students have the soft skills necessary to succeed in the postsecondary opportunity of their choice.
3. Provide assistance to remote districts that might have limited access to the full ecosystem of resources available to larger, urban districts.

METHODOLOGY

In spring 2024, we conducted a survey of 82 career coaches throughout Mississippi. These respondents come from every corner of the state, and reflect a wide range of professional experiences. In the survey, we sought to determine:

- + How career coaches view the effectiveness of the program in their partnering schools
- + What training and professional development opportunities career coaches currently receive
- + What additional training and resources would help prepare students for college/ career success



1. The program's structure successfully protects career coaches' time to work closely with students.

Through the initial conversations with Accelerate Mississippi, we learned the program was specifically structured to have the coaches be employees of their hosting agencies instead of the school districts they would partner with. The rationale was that the structure would protect the coaches' time to work with students and reduce the likelihood of them getting pulled into other duties and responsibilities.

The majority of our respondents indicated that this structure has successfully protected their time and duties, with 95 percent of coaches agreeing that their expectations are clearly defined, and over 85 percent agreeing that they had a sufficient amount of time to regularly meet with students. Nearly 60 percent of survey respondents reported spending at least 50 percent of their time directly engaging with students, with over 30 percent spending more than 80 percent of their time with students. One career coach said, *"I work very closely with our CCR teachers, counselors, and CTE student coordinators. I am able to pull students for one-on-one coaching, I visit classes often to speak with the students on careers, bring in guest speakers, and conduct mock interviews with students."*²

2. Career coaches view the development of soft skills as an essential component of students being "college and career ready."

When asked to define "college and career readiness," coaches most often mentioned the importance of exposing students to a wide range of career pathways, while assisting them in selecting, applying to, and financing their preferred pathway. However, equally important to survey respondents was the students' development of soft skills, which include interviewing, public speaking, and resume writing. One career coach said, *"I have successfully worked with students by assisting them with refining resumes, filling out job applications, completing college applications, and navigating the FAFSA application process. Furthermore, I have conducted workshops to enhance students' interviewing skills, time management strategies, and priority setting."*

Another career coach said: *"College and career readiness means possessing the skills, knowledge, and attributes necessary to succeed in postsecondary education or the workforce. A student who is ready for higher education or the workforce demonstrates proficiency in critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and collaboration. They exhibit a strong work ethic, adaptability, resilience, and a willingness to continue learning. Additionally, they may have practical experiences through internships, projects, or extracurricular activities that demonstrate their readiness for the demands of college or the professional world."*³

3. Career coaches with non-education backgrounds bring unique expertise to schools, but may require additional training to effectively support students.

The career coaches who completed our survey joined this program with a vast array of prior professional experiences. Over 60 percent came from non-education backgrounds, holding prior job experience in state agencies, higher education, and human resources. Based on this wide variance, career coaches have widely different needs when it comes to their training and professional development.

Most coaches mentioned that they need training on different pathways, as well as training on widely used platforms, such as Major Clarity. While coaches with an education background expressed a need for training in their local business environment, those from other sectors need training on school and district policies as well on communicating with students. One coach said: *“I was not a former educator; I was in the commercial banking business for 42 years. Almost everything I have learned as a career coach has been self-taught. Time on the job has allowed me to understand things much easier. I will say, however, that the connections I made as a banker and civic leader have paid off when it comes to finding programs for classes in addition to businesses to participate in our annual Career Fair.”*⁴

4. For remote, rural districts, access to career pathways and opportunities for students remains a significant challenge.

Several respondents voiced concerns about the unique challenges districts in rural areas face when seeking to expose students to various career pathways. For many remote communities, local career opportunities are limited. These districts often face additional challenges when it comes to inviting speakers, scheduling college or career tours, or establishing internship opportunities. According to one career coach: *“I am fortunate to work at a school that has a number of resources for its students. However, I have observed a significant issue concerning transportation. A number of students have barriers in attending college campus tours or participating in college and career fairs due to lack of transportation. These tours and fairs are of great importance as they often serve as students' initial exposure to college campuses and various career opportunities.”*⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Accelerate Mississippi should train all career coaches in a core set of skills and provide additional training to meet their individual needs.

All career coaches across the state should receive the same quality training. This core set of skills should include (1) exposing students to a variety of career pathways, (2) helping students select, apply for, and enroll in the pathway of their choice; and (3) helping students develop soft skills, such as resume writing and written/verbal communication skills. The training program should also include an adaptive set of skills that speak to the needs of each career coach. Accelerate Mississippi should take into account that coaches with K-12 backgrounds might need to build their knowledge of their local industry landscape, while those without a K-12 background might need to develop skills in communicating and engaging with students. Training programs should also include skills and activities that reflect the localized needs and opportunities in a given community.

The one-on-one interactions career coaches have with students give them an opportunity to become trusted adults in the lives of young people. Because of this, we strongly recommend that the core skills training also include [mental health first aid](#) training. This will enable career coaches to pick up on mental health challenges or crises that may necessitate referrals to counselors or other mental health professionals.⁶

2. Accelerate Mississippi should ensure that Mississippi students have the soft skills necessary to succeed in the postsecondary opportunity of their choice.

Our respondents clearly recognized the importance of soft skills in preparing students for career pathways. Skills such as public speaking, critical thinking, and work ethic were viewed as essential for all students, regardless of their chosen career pathway. There are many soft skills that Accelerate Mississippi can utilize. America Succeeds, for example, has developed a [Durable Skills Advantage Framework](#) which includes multiple skills across 10 competencies, such as leadership, communication, and critical thinking. Other states, such as [Arkansas](#) and [Tennessee](#), have surveyed employers to establish a state-specific set of prioritized durable skills. Accelerate Mississippi should take a similar approach to identifying the most sought-after durable skills in our state and ensure that career coaches are prepared to work directly with students and in partnership with schools to ensure that these skills are developed.⁷

3. Accelerate Mississippi should provide assistance to remote districts that might have limited access to the educational and career resources within their ecosystems.

For many remote and sparsely populated school districts in Mississippi, important career pathway experiences such as college tours, job shadowing, and internship opportunities can be very challenging to attain. There might also be financial and transportation challenges that create additional hurdles for career coaches and students. The leaders of Accelerate Mississippi's eight ecosystems, who work closely with many education, industry, and business sectors should commit to providing additional support for remote districts in our state to help their students chart their career pathways. This support might include coordinating school visits with industry professionals, working across multiple schools and districts to plan pathway opportunities, and/or collaborating with adjacent ecosystems to expand access to opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The growth of our state is dependent on our ability to prepare all Mississippi children for success after graduating from high school. This requires leaders in education, industry, and government to embrace policies and practices that will enable students, as early as possible, to explore a wide variety of career options, choose their own career pathway, and successfully pursue and earn the credentials their career aspirations require. By working directly with students and in partnerships with schools and communities, career coaches are a vital part of the support system each child needs.

As Accelerate Mississippi's program grows, it must provide a standard training experience for each and every career coach tailored to meet the coaches where they are. The building of internal capacity and external partnerships is essential in order to expand the reach and depth of the program, while helping schools and communities overcome barriers that might limit their students' access to college and career opportunities. A robust career coaches program has the potential to empower every Mississippi student to pursue their career aspirations and to succeed—in the same way that literacy coaches empowered Mississippi's students to become proficient and successful readers.

Looking ahead, this research is an important first step towards Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows' broader efforts to improve college and career readiness (CCR) in Mississippi, with a specific focus on districts with the lowest CCR rates. Our teacher leaders will work on examining how state policymakers define and measure CCR. They will also advocate for greater access to data that will help districts determine how students are performing after high school and what support may be necessary to bolster postsecondary success. We look forward to working with Accelerate Mississippi to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for their path ahead.

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Mississippi Department of Education, Office of District and School Performance. Accountability Measures 2022-23. Retrieved from: <https://www.mdek12.org/OPR/Reporting/Accountability/2023>
- 2 Question 10: In the space provided below, please share examples of how you have successfully worked with students in your school.
- 3 Question 10: In the space provided below, please share examples of how you have successfully worked with students in your school.
- 4 Question 17: Would you like to share any details about your response above? Are there any additional skills and/or topics for which you would like to receive training or professional development opportunities?
- 5 Question 15: What additional support do students need in the schools you work in that will better prepare them for college and career success?
- 6 National Council for Mental Wellbeing. (2024). Mental Health First Aid Training. Retrieved from: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/about/>
- 7 America Succeeds. (2023). Durable Skills Advantage. Retrieved from: <https://www.durableskillsadvantage.org/>