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EDUCATION FUNDING: A CASE FOR MISSISSIPPI EXCEPTIONALISM

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Should Mississippi make an exception to education when it comes to budget-cutting?

Even asking the question invites controversy. Yet now is the time that the question must be asked because the stakes are so high when it comes to the future of the state. And now is the time that something exceptional must be considered by Mississippi's besieged policy makers.

We are still in the early days of this grinding recession. We have become accustomed to tuning into the news every few days to hear about the most recent rounds of mandatory budget cuts. There is one target of these cuts in which the pain has become palpable at each insertion of the budget-cutting scalpel. It is the broad category of education. Federal stimulus funds hold out hope to delay the impact of some of the more onerous cuts, but even now budget cuts have dug through the flesh and threaten vital organs.

Many Mississippians have seemingly accepted that the position of last place among the 50 states in a vast array of categories is acceptable as long as we are in sight of number 49. When it comes to education it can be maintained that as we enact cut after cut to education at all levels, from kindergarten through higher education and including community colleges, Mississippi is running the risk of losing sight of next to last and becoming completely isolated. It is almost as if we have broken loose from the "mother ship" and are floating alone in space. Now certainly the reader will say that this statement cannot be made merely based on some budgetary belt tightening. If that were all that education in Mississippi were facing, perhaps we could indeed hunker down and hang on until times were better.

Conservative columnists George Will's and David Brooks' recently reminded us that there is a perilous lag in the creation of the nation's economy-boosting brain power. I can add to that my experience of the past week in listening to candidates for an academic administrative

position discuss the most immediate and pressing problems facing education in the country. One emphatically said that “the Internet and computational devices are leading the coming educational revolution.” Another termed as “scary,” the “advance in technology in other countries that is leaving the United States behind.” A third stated that “We must co-opt the technological innovations that this generation is already learning to live with.” Other candidates offered similar remarks. If these scholars were so clearly concerned about the near emergency conditions that presented themselves as they gazed across the nation’s educational landscape then what may we make of Mississippi’s conditions?

It is perhaps time to make an exception of public education at all levels in Mississippi. There is certainly no need to recite all over again the shortcomings of education in Mississippi that were evident when the sun was shining. Those gaps look all the more ominous with economic storm clouds gathering over head. With recent budget cuts to education we are not simply “eating our seed corn,” as the old saying goes, we are in danger of burning down the corn crib. Former Governor William Winter’s statement that the “road to prosperity invariably leads past the school house door” is true now more than ever. It is perhaps time to exempt education in Mississippi from any additional budget cuts. Indeed a ray of hope appeared recently when the Mississippi Senate and the House of Representatives endorsed efforts to restore some of the funds that had been previously cut.

Numerous surveys over time have shown that the taxpaying public, while playing it close to the vest with their hard-earned dollars, has nevertheless agreed that increasing taxes to shore up education, particularly those that support their local schools. No doubt the legislature’s recent action was in response to the concerns expressed from school districts back home. Mississippi must consider it a vastly bigger emergency to fund and restructure public education at all levels than it does to hold the line on revenues during the current recession. It may be contended that funding and supporting education in spite of economic conditions is politically expedient.

Years ago, a gubernatorial candidate ran for office basing his campaign almost solely on a platform of cutting the exorbitant auto ad valorem tax. In short, this candidate promised a \$10.00 car tag if elected. Reliance upon such a single issue almost worked to get him elected. We may be approaching the point where the single issue of not only adequately funding, but expanding funding, for education in Mississippi will lead to success in a gubernatorial campaign. Meanwhile the emergency is upon us and the time to make an exception of education in Mississippi is now.



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