

Mississippi Teachers Go Above & Beyond

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There was a time when the last thing a state wanted was to have their academic achievement compared to Mississippi's. But Mississippi teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, students, and families have worked hard in recent years to claw their way up from the bottom. It's been an inspiring effort.

This past year, the state achieved the top spot nationally in gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes known as "the Nation's Report Card." For the first time, Mississippi's fourth graders scored higher than the nation's average in math and tied the nation in reading. Mississippi's graduation rate is at an all-time high. With such gains, it's clear: Mississippi educators have been effective in bringing about success.

Then came COVID-19. School closures are now a major threat to achievement—and even the health and safety of our kids. There are concerns many students don't have food, and even more don't have the academic and emotional supports they need at home. But our state's public educators have come out swinging, ready to fight for kids and families and communities with all they have.

We have seen so many stories that inspire and challenge us. There are teachers who are worried about their own families who have still showed up powerfully. Within a matter of hours, many took their coursework and shifted it online or into packet form. Learning must go on. Kids and families depend on it.

Next time you hear someone maintain public educators lack creativity and innovation, remember this:

- *In New Albany and other school districts, buses were quickly equipped with Wi-Fi and parked in communities where internet access is needed most.*
- *School districts statewide have provided families with information on drive-up WiFi locations, where school or business internet can be used at no cost.*
- *In Starkville, educators from teachers to district staff to the superintendent jumped on school buses to deliver—as safely as possible—food and instructional materials.*
- *Districts have changed feeding plans repeatedly, as changes in health and safety have required.*

It's important to remember the heart piece, too. Mississippi educators have shown boundless love, hopping in their cars and parading through neighborhoods, waving to students, their cars painted with slogans like "we love you" and "keep reading." At Carver Middle School in Meridian, teachers—and their not-so-little students—have cried their way through neighborhood parades. These teachers miss their kids. The kids—big and small—miss their teachers, too. My own kids' former principal from Germantown Middle School hopped in his truck and paraded through neighborhoods, blaring music that would normally be pumped into the school's courtyard. The kids couldn't have courtyard, so he brought it to them. That's love, middle school style. A few days later, I overheard my son's Germantown High algebra teacher on Zoom. "Look at you guys! Oh my gosh! Oh! I see you! How ARE you guys?" The joy and love in her voice made me blink back tears of gratitude.

When this madness is over, I hope we don't forget how much our teachers gave. May we never, ever, disparage them collectively again. They are innovative, creative, and caring. Let's treat them accordingly—by paying them well, investing in their development, giving them the resources they need, and treating them with respect.