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# EXPLORING MISSISSIPPI'S PRIVATE EDUCATION SECTOR

The Mississippi Private School Survey

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## About Empower Mississippi

Empower Mississippi is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that every child in Mississippi has the opportunity to flourish through access to a high quality education.

We Believe:

- A quality education is critical in preparing a child for success in life.
- No child should be denied access to a quality education because of where they live or their parents' level of income.
- No one knows a child better than their parents.
- Parents should be empowered to choose the best educational setting for their child.
- Public education funds should follow every child to the school or services that best meet their needs.

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## Executive Summary

*Exploring Mississippi's Private Education Sector: The Mississippi Private School Survey* was conducted to provide a snapshot of the landscape of K-12 private education options in Mississippi. Through the survey, Empower Mississippi was able to determine the average cost of educating students in private school, measure familiarity with and support for school choice programs, and approximate the number of private school seats that are currently available.

Mississippi made an entrance into the private school choice universe with the enactment of the Dyslexia Therapy Scholarship in 2012 and the Special Needs Education Scholarship Account (ESA) in 2015.

Both of these programs have been subsequently expanded after their initial passage and they served a combined 598 students during the 2016-2017 school year. This number is only a fraction of the number who could benefit if these programs were expanded, but it is a nice start and is growing steadily every year.

As the Mississippi legislature considers expanding school choice, this brief analyzes

- Private school familiarity with and support for school choice programs
- What rules and regulations provide the greatest concern to private schools
- Whether schools administer a nationally norm-referenced test
- Whether schools serve students with special needs
- Number of available open seats
- Tuition and fees
- Participation in the Special Needs ESA program

From April 19, 2017 through June 30, 2017, Empower Mississippi administered a first-of-its-kind survey to answer these questions and

more.

## Mississippi Private School Landscape

There are approximately 545,000 school-aged children in Mississippi with estimates showing private schools educate about 44,000 children.<sup>1</sup>

Private schools in Mississippi take on many shapes and sizes. There are Catholic schools, church schools, non-denominational Christian schools, and non-sectarian schools. There are schools with over 1,000 kids. Some have less than ten. Some are accredited by MAIS, some by AdvancED, some by ACSI, some by all three. And some have chosen to be accredited by the state.

Most of these schools operate on tuition and fees paid by families, which means private school students are disproportionately from middle or upper income families. The cost of tuition also means many families who otherwise would prefer a private school are unable to attend.

Private schools are generally responsive to the needs of their students because parents have walk-away power. Parents can always remove their financial support for a school if it does not meet the needs of their child.

This report analyzes the cost to attend a private school in Mississippi, the number of seats that are available today, and private school support for school choice programs.

### Are Open Seats Currently Available?

The survey sought to determine if private schools in Mississippi were to experience an increase in demand because school choice programs removed the financial barrier of a private education, would there be seats available? Based on the responses from schools that participated in the survey, we can estimate that there are between **7,811 and 10,351 open seats** in private schools today.<sup>ii</sup> (See Table 1 below.)

While many private schools have been open for decades, the private school market is dynamic and constantly changing. Schools open and close as demand (and population) shifts. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect new educational options would become available if demand grew from a school choice program.

This is exactly what happened with the 3-D School in Petal after passage of the Dyslexia Scholarship. Because of demand from parents, the 3-D School opened a new campus on the Coast in 2017.

*Table 1: Number of open seats in private school today*

Estimate (Low-End)	Estimate (High-End)
7,811	10,351

### What Are Current Tuition And Fees?

Private school tuition in Mississippi is among the lowest in the country, and significantly lower than what a district school spends per student.<sup>iii</sup> Among respondent schools, the average tuition for lower school is \$5,316, the average tuition for middle school is \$5,689, and the average tuition for high school is \$6,599.

The median tuition, which is less impacted by outliers and therefore a better indicator of tuition at most schools, is \$4,658 for lower school, \$4,950 for middle school, and \$5,692 for high school. (See Table 2 right.)

The national average for private schools was \$10,940 according to data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2013.<sup>iv</sup>

*Table 2: Tuition and fees at Mississippi private schools*

	Average Tuition	Median Tuition
Lower School	\$5,316	\$4,658
Middle School	\$5,689	\$4,950
High School	\$6,599	\$5,692

### Do Private Schools Offer Financial Aid?

Approximately 29 percent of private school students receive financial assistance with 83 percent of respondent schools saying at least some students receive financial aid. (See Table 3 below.)

Similar to the tuition and fees charged by private schools, we believe the median is a better indicator of the true number because of outliers.

In fact, our survey also found there are a number of private schools in the state where virtually every student receives significant financial aid. These schools are donor-funded, often have a mission of serving low-income children, and charge families minimal or no tuition.

*Table 3: Percentage of students that receive financial aid*

Average	Median
29%	10%

### Do Private Schools Administer Annual Tests?

Most private schools in Mississippi administer annual tests. In fact, nearly 90 percent of private schools in Mississippi (88 percent) require their students to take a nationally norm-referenced test. (See Table 4 below.) Though we did not directly ask schools to select the tests they administer, there was an option to list the test in the comments. The most commonly administered tests (in order) are ACT Aspire, Stanford 10, and Iowa Assessments.

*Table 4: Does your school administer nationally norm-referenced tests?*

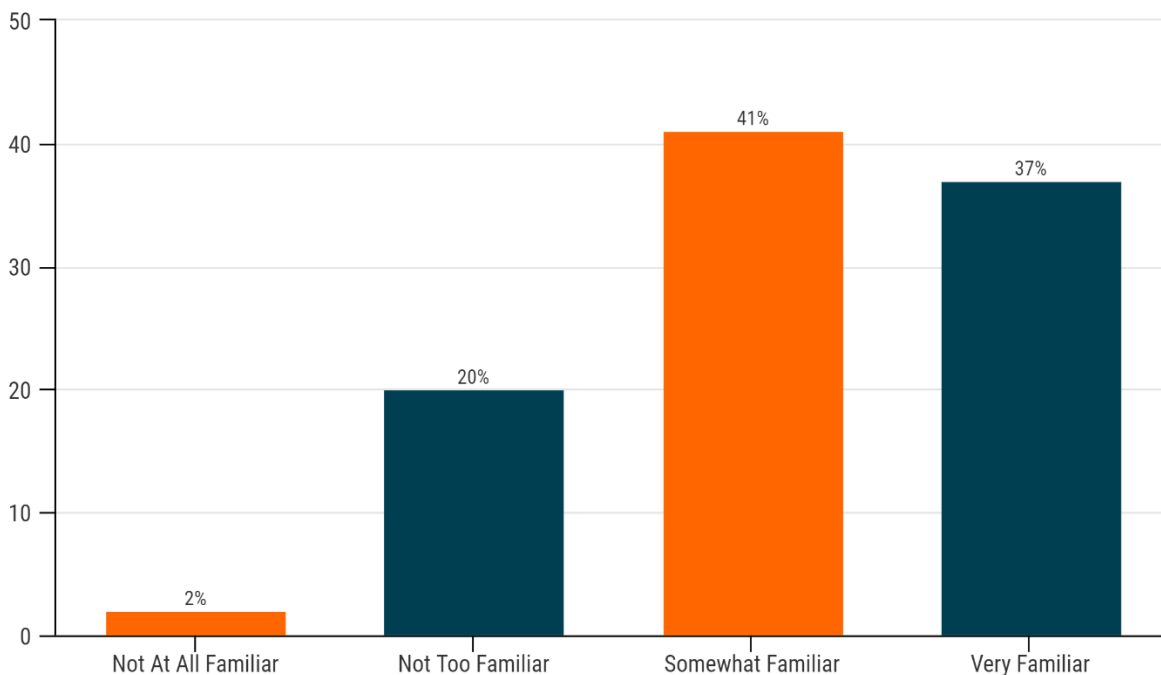
Yes	No
88%	12%

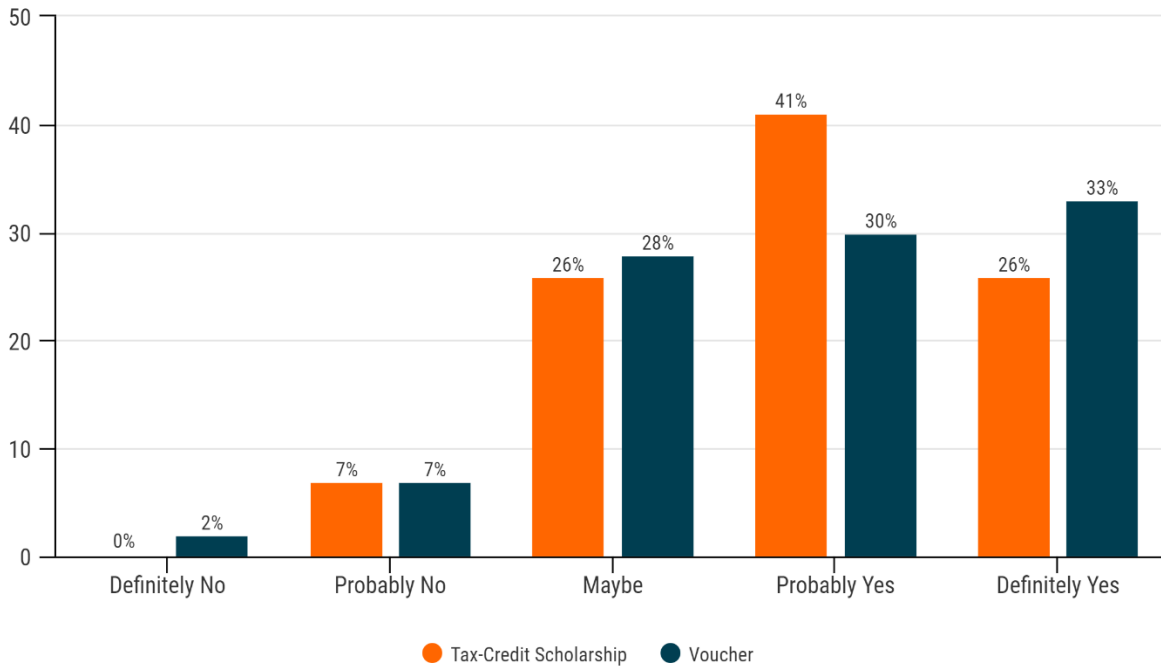
### Are Private Schools Familiar With School Choice?

Most private schools in Mississippi are familiar with school choice. When asked, “Are you

familiar with school choice programs, such as tax-credit scholarships or school vouchers,” 78 percent said they were either very familiar (37 percent) or somewhat familiar (41 percent). Only 22 percent said they were either not too familiar (20 percent) or not at all familiar (2 percent). (See Figure 1 below.)

*Figure 1: Private school familiarity with school choice*



*Figure 2: Would your school participate in a Tax-Credit Scholarship or Voucher program?*

### Would Schools Participate In A School Choice Program?

Private schools were then asked if their school would participate in a school choice program, if enacted. The question was broken down into two options: a tax-credit scholarship program and a voucher program. Tax-credit scholarships allow taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credits for donations to organizations that provide private school scholarships. Vouchers direct money from the state to a private school on behalf of a parent.

Some view tax-credit scholarships as preferable for private schools because funds come directly from scholarship-granting organizations rather than directly from the state, but in our survey private schools reported little preference and are supportive of both programs. More than 60 percent said they would likely participate in either program.

Twenty-six percent of respondents said they would participate in a tax-credit scholarship

program while 41 percent said they probably would. Twenty-six percent said maybe, while seven percent said they probably would not. No respondents said they definitely would not.

When asked about vouchers, 33 percent said they would definitely participate and 30 percent said they probably would. An additional 28 percent said maybe. Seven percent said they probably would not and two percent said they would not participate. (See Figure 2 above.)



Table 5: Average concern level for specific rules and regulations (1= Very Low, 5= Very High)

Rule/ Regulation	Average Concern Level
Accommodations for Students with Special Needs	3.83
Paperwork and Reporting	3.51
Testing and Accountability	3.42
Tuition and Fees	3.42
Curriculum and Instruction	3.32
School Eligibility for Program (e.g., register with state)	3.27
School Admissions & Enrollment Guidelines	3.21
Student Eligibility for Program (e.g., income limit)	3.15
Financial Reporting & Disclosure	3.02
Teacher/ Staff Certification & Licensure	2.93
Building Safety & Security	2.81

### What Rules And Regulations Concern Private Schools?

Most private schools expressed at least some concern over potential state regulations that might accompany private school choice funds. (See Table 5 above.) Respondent schools were most concerned with rules pertaining to:

- Accommodations for Students with Special Needs
- Paperwork and Reporting
- Testing and Accountability
- Tuition and Fees
- Curriculum and Instruction

### Do Private Schools Serve Students With Special Needs?

Contrary to prevailing wisdom, most private schools in Mississippi do serve students with special needs. Among respondents, nearly 70 percent of respondents reporting serving some students with special needs. (See Table 6 below.) While each school could choose multiple disabilities, the disabilities they were most likely to serve were:

- Speech or Language Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Developmental Delay
- Autism

- Intellectual Disability

Table 6: Does Your School Serve Students With Special Needs?

Yes	No
70%	30%

### Are Schools Participating In The Special Needs ESA?

Separate from this survey, this report also reviewed participation in Mississippi's Equal Opportunity For Students With Special Needs Program, more commonly referred to as the Special Needs ESA.<sup>v</sup>

Passed in 2015, education scholarship account funds can be used to purchase a wide variety of educational services and products, including private school tuition, educational therapy, tutoring, textbooks, curricular materials, and more.

In a short time, this program has become very popular for families who have children with special needs. During the 2015-2016 school year, in the first year of the program, just 251 of the 434 available scholarships had been awarded by the beginning of the school year. But by the next year the program reached maximum capacity of 425 students before the

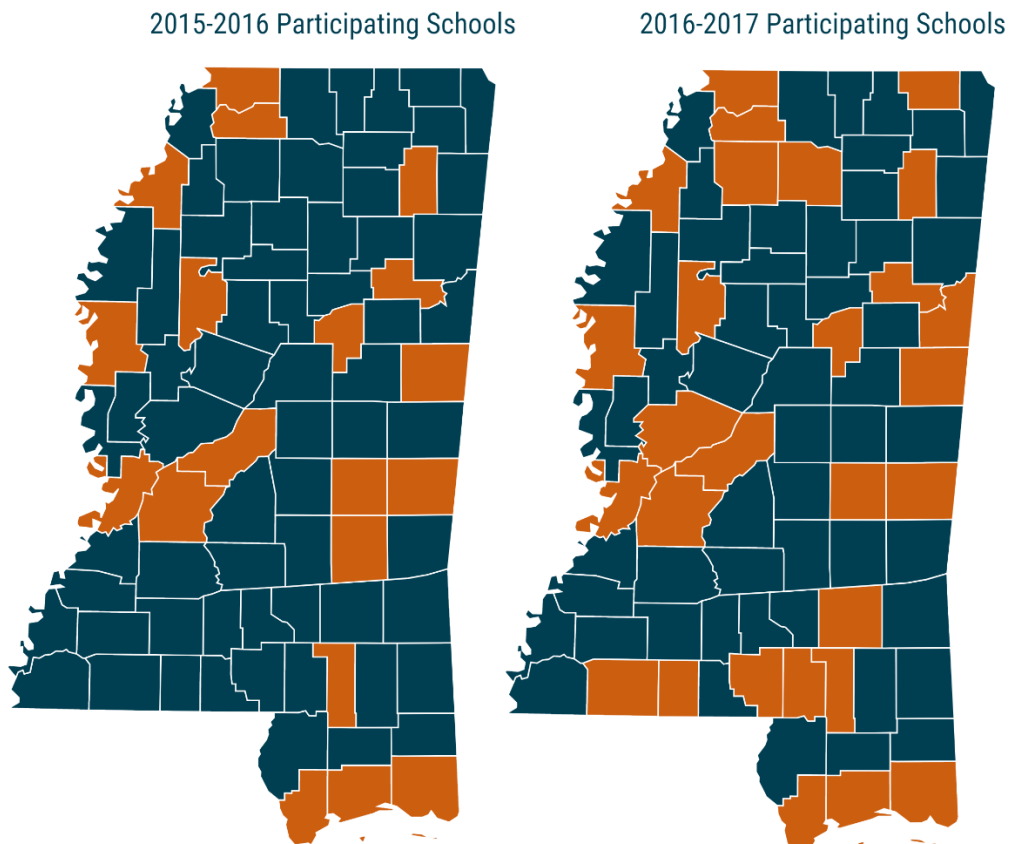
2016-2017 school year.<sup>vi</sup>

For the 2017-2018 school year, the program was bumped up to 434 scholarships and again reached full capacity before the school year. In fact, after a lottery in July for the remaining seats, more than 200 families remained on the waiting list for the program.

Additionally, the number of schools participating in the Special Needs ESA program grew by more than 70 percent from year one to year two. According to data from the Mississippi Department of Education, reimbursements have been filed for 80 different private schools during the 2016-2017 school year, including five schools in Shelby County, Tennessee. Last year, in the first year of the program, students

attended 46 different private schools. This included three schools in Shelby County. (See Figure 3 below.)

*Figure 3: Counties with schools participating in the Special Needs ESA*



Counties in orange have at least one school participating.  
Source: Mississippi Department of Education

## Conclusion

The purpose of this survey was to gauge private school opinions on school choice and test their interest in participating in a school choice program. The survey found that private schools are very familiar with school choice and they are overwhelmingly interested in participating.

A full 78 percent of private schools said they were familiar with school choice. This compares with just 51 percent in Arkansas, a state that is, like Mississippi, new to school choice.<sup>vii</sup>

Additionally, 63 percent said they would likely participate in a voucher program and 67 percent said they would likely participate in a tax-credit scholarship program. (Less than 10 percent said they probably would not, or would not, participate.) And private schools have the seats available today to serve thousands of more students, with estimates showing between 7,811 and 10,351 open seats.

Legislators should carefully design programs and resist efforts to place burdensome regulations on schools that participate in school choice programs. Private schools should be allowed to maintain their autonomy, free of government regulations that stifle academic growth. In a system where families have choices, parents serve as the true measure of accountability.

Today, Mississippi's private school sector is well-positioned to expand the current Special Needs ESA. Overwhelmingly, private schools want to serve more students and could do so immediately if school choice programs were expanded.

## About The Survey

Empower Mississippi conducted this survey by reaching out to private schools in Mississippi during the spring of 2017. This included an introductory email and multiple follow-up emails to private schools that had yet to complete the survey. Before the conclusion of the survey, we also called every school that had yet to complete the survey.

To start the survey, we needed to identify every private school in the state. Because these schools are independent, there is no central directory of schools. Instead we relied on online directories from accrediting associations including the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), Mississippi Association of Independent Schools (MAIS), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS), and the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI).

We also identified schools using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is located within the United States Department of Education, and Private School Review, an online database where schools provide and update their information.

However, we recognize there are unaccredited schools that likely are not on any database. Therefore, an exact calculation of the number of private schools or students attending a private school is virtually impossible to determine.

For our survey, we reached out to 182 private schools. Preschool programs that may also offer a kindergarten class were not included in this survey. Fifty-seven schools completed the survey.

## Appendix: Survey Questions

Below are the questions asked of the survey participants:

1. Name of School
2. Current enrollment
3. What is the total number of open, or vacant, seats in your school?
4. Ideally, how large would you like your school to grow if there was sufficient demand and parents could afford your schools?
5. What is the combined tuition and fees at your school for lower school, middle school, high school?
6. Approximately what percentage of students at your school receives financial assistance?
7. Are you familiar with school choice programs, such as tax-credit scholarships or school vouchers?
  - a. Very Familiar
  - b. Somewhat Familiar
  - c. Not Too Familiar
  - d. Not At All Familiar
8. Tax-credit scholarships allow taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credits when they donate to nonprofits that provide scholarships for students to attend private school. If enacted, would your school participate in one of these programs?
  - a. Yes
  - b. Probably Yes
  - c. Maybe
  - d. Probably No
  - e. No
9. Vouchers give parents the freedom to choose a private school for their children, using all or part of the public funding set aside for their children's education. Under such a program, funds typically expended by a school district would be allocated to a participating family in the form of a voucher to pay partial or full tuition for their child's private school. If enacted, would your school participate in a voucher program?
  - a. Yes
  - b. Probably Yes
  - c. Maybe
  - d. Probably No
  - e. No
10. Which rules and regulations concern you the most about private school choice programs? List various regulations.
  - a. Accommodations for Students With Special Needs
  - b. Building Safety & Security
  - c. Curriculum & Instruction
  - d. Financial Reporting & Disclosure
  - e. Paperwork & Reporting
  - f. School Admissions & Enrollment Guidelines
  - g. School Eligibility for Program (e.g., register with state)
  - h. Student Eligibility for Program (e.g., income limit)
  - i. Teacher/ Staff Certification & Licensure
  - j. Testing & Accountability
  - k. Tuition & Fees
11. Do you currently have children with special needs enrolled in your school?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
12. If yes, please select the disabilities students in your school have.
  - a. Autism
  - b. Deaf-blindness
  - c. Developmental delay
  - d. Hearing impairment
  - e. Intellectual disability
  - f. Multiple disabilities
  - g. Orthopedic impairment

- h. Serious emotional disturbance
  - i. Specific learning disability
  - j. Speech or language impairment
  - k. Traumatic brain injury
  - l. Visual impairment
  - m. Other health impairment
13. Do students take a nationally norm-referenced test?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Depending on the database, the number of schools and students' enrollment can fluctuate. Private School Review lists 235 private schools in the state serving about 53,000 students<sup>i</sup> while NCES records show 308 private schools serving just under 44,000 students.<sup>i</sup> However, after reviewing survey responses from individual schools, that number decreased to less than 34,000 when students in preschool were excluded.

<sup>ii</sup> This estimate was calculated based on enrollment from the survey and total enrollment from NCES.

<sup>iii</sup> Mississippi spent over \$9,700 per student during the 2015-2016 school year when state, federal, and local funds were accounted.

<sup>iv</sup> "Private elementary and secondary enrollment, number of schools, and average tuition, by school level, orientation, and tuition," National Center of Education Statistics, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_205.50.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_205.50.asp)

<sup>v</sup> The Mississippi Department of Education provided all data on private school participation in the Special Needs ESA.

<sup>vi</sup> Maximum capacity is based on funding for the program; not the number of seats authorized for the program. The number of authorized seats began at 500 for the 2015-2016 school and is supposed to grow by 500 each year.

<sup>vii</sup> Andrew Catt, "Exploring Arkansas' Private Education Sector," EdChoice, August 2016, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Exploring-Arkansas-Private-Education-Sector-by-Andrew-Catt-1.pdf>



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