

EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI



UNLEASH MISSISSIPPI



UNLEASHING EDUCATION AND WORK IN A POST-CORONAVIRUS WORLD

This coronavirus crisis strikes at the heart of our mission at Empower Mississippi—to ensure that every Mississippian has access to a high quality education and the opportunity to find meaningful work. Both areas—education and work—have been profoundly disrupted.

While these disruptions have caused enormous hardship, they also present us with an opportunity to reimagine what education and work in Mississippi will look like going forward.

EDUCATION

For years, we have been calling for increased innovation in education tailored to the unique needs of Mississippi children and their families. The traditional brick and mortar classroom may work for many, but it does not work for every student in every situation.

The coronavirus pandemic forced the state to institute emergency education waivers, rolling back red tape that would have prevented learning and teaching during the crisis and offering an opportunity to consider whether certain requirements and limitations should have been there in the first place. Instead of rushing to return to things as they were, Mississippi should solve issues that existed long before the pandemic.

Expand access to virtual learning.

With students currently able to learn fully online and efforts to shore up technology infrastructure underway, Mississippi should increase virtual offerings for students to prepare for the future and expand educational opportunity for all.

- Expand the Mississippi Virtual Public School to a full-time public option.

- Use the MVPS platform to enhance course choice throughout the state.
- Give districts freedom to form virtual partnerships, offer virtual programs and courses statewide, and access the virtual providers that work best.
- Ensure that waivers to use federal funding flexibly for technological purposes remain in place.
- Ensure the virtual school option remains in Mississippi's Education Scholarship Account program.

Reduce barriers for teachers to enter the classroom.

Testing requirements for entry into educator preparation programs have been temporarily lifted to mitigate the crisis' impact on the teacher pipeline. Mississippi should continue to remove ineffective barriers to teaching by permanently delaying licensure testing until program completion and by giving schools access to a wider talent pool.

- Remove PRAXIS testing requirements for entrance into Mississippi educator preparation programs.
- Delay the deadline for pursuing standard licensure for teachers with a Special Non-Renewable License until their third year of holding the license.
- Reinstitute international teacher reciprocity.
- Work with schools to study the indicators of teacher quality in practice and provide freedom for schools to develop their own teacher residency programs.

EMPLOYABILITY

This pandemic has impacted work in some catastrophic ways, with a record breaking unemployment surge. A job allows each of us to provide for the material needs of our families, but it also provides purpose and gives meaning to life. For those who have been furloughed or have lost their jobs, we must do everything we can to remove barriers to work and create the opportunity for them to become reemployed.

A few months ago, Mississippi's economy was growing. Employment was high. Wages were rising. The government's response to the virus included an economic shutdown that leaves us in uncharted territory. Fortunately, there is a blueprint for getting people back to work and our economy roaring again. It starts by addressing regulations that make it harder for people to earn a living, creating a high opportunity environment when we most need it.

Remove occupational licensing barriers to work.

Mississippi requires individuals to obtain an occupational license before they can work in dozens of fields, from landscaping to cutting hair. Licenses can act as a barrier to entry, making it more difficult for individuals to work in the field of their choice.

- Require boards to create a "fast-track" licensing option, especially in high-demand fields.
- Expand the authority of Mississippi's occupational licensing review board to revise burdensome licensing requirements.
- Universal recognition of licenses issued by other states.
- Implement a pilot red tape reduction program focused on removing regulations that stifle job growth.

Remove barriers to remote work.

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the move to working remotely in many fields. While many jobs cannot be performed remotely, Mississippi should ensure that our laws do not discourage this trend. As a state with a relatively low cost of living, Mississippi can become a hub for remote work and also slow brain drain.

- Preempt local regulations that prohibit working from home, as long as the activity does not impact neighbors.
- Require professional licensing boards to revise rules that prohibit working from home, where applicable.

Remove barriers to work in the healthcare field.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a bright light on questions around health care capacity and our ability to ensure that patients get the care they need when they need it. Ensuring this requires an environment that allows patients to have access to qualified medical professionals.

The provision of healthcare services is one of the most heavily regulated fields in Mississippi. While some regulations are important to ensure patient safety, many only serve to deter competition in the marketplace, diminishing the supply of labor for the healthcare field and inflating prices for consumers. Many of these regulations were suspended across the country to help fight coronavirus and should be permanently repealed.

- Expand the scope of practice laws to allow healthcare providers to practice to the full extent of their training.
- Allow all Mississippians to access telemedicine services from a qualified medical professional anywhere in the country.
- Allow Mississippi doctors, nurses, and therapists to meet with their patients virtually without having to seek additional licensure.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

The state will collect less tax revenue this year as a result of the economic downturn. These new budgetary pressures only underscore the need for the state to continue reforming our prison system to safely decrease Mississippi's high incarceration rate. Instead of investing even more into prisons, we can focus our limited tax dollars on other priorities that help get Mississippians back to work.

Safely reduce the state's dangerously high incarceration rate.

- Ensure that most individuals can earn parole consideration after serving 25% of their sentence for a non-violent offense, and 50% for crimes of violence.
- Limit the impact of the state's habitual offender enhancement by excluding nonviolent offenses and offenses older than 10 years.
- Expand consideration for compassionate release to individuals who are particularly vulnerable to disease and pose a large cost to the state.

Create pathways to work for people leaving the prison system.

- Expand access to driver's licenses by allowing MDOC identification cards to serve as a prerequisite for obtaining a state ID.
- Expand expungement provisions to allow individuals with multiple nonviolent drug offenses to apply for expungement after a period of time.
- Ensure that unrelated criminal convictions do not prevent individuals from obtaining a license to work.