

Can the Mississippi Miracle Happen in Prescott, Arizona?

What, you say, is the Mississippi miracle and why should I care? The miracle in Mississippi is a surprising improvement in that state's public school student's mastery of the English language. For years, Mississippi has been ranked as the last state in the union when it comes to student performance in public education. Some states even defended their own public school performance by pointing to the lower ranked southern states with Mississippi being at or near the bottom. Now, that excuse no longer works as a startling improvement in Mississippi's student proficiency begins to take shape—called by some the Mississippi miracle.

Over a span of ten years, Mississippi went from near the bottom in fourth grade reading proficiency to twenty first in the nation. The improvement in Mississippi student literacy was so notable that other southern states have adopted similar programs and are beginning to show like results.

So what exactly did Mississippi do to achieve this miracle and why should we Arizonans take note? Mississippi emphasized specialized training in reading, focused on phonics, and instituted a grade retention policy for third graders who could not read at an acceptable level of proficiency. If a child could not pass a screening test, which were frequent, they were held in third grade, given special attention, attended summer school, and provided focused literacy instruction.

It worked! In fact, Mississippi was ranked fifth in the nation in fourth grade reading in 2019 based on national testing.

Hurray for Mississippi, but how does this apply to Arizona? In the Prescott Unified School district (PUSD), state testing of student proficiency in English Language Arts shows only fifty three percent of third grade students achieving a passing score. By eighth grade, those achieving a passing score declines to forty percent. Proficiency in math is generally lower. Why is this? One possibility is that ninety eight percent of PUSD students advance from one grade to the next without delay, regardless of proficiency. If a student cannot read at grade level in third grade, why wouldn't we expect their literacy problem to grow over time? These children are being left behind with lifelong impact on them and our society. The solution to this problem seems to be something along the lines of what is being done in Mississippi. While I do not agree with retaining a student in grade, I strongly believe in that state's aggressive intervention at the third grade level. The PUSD should take the following steps:

Third grade students should be tested for proficiency in English and math at the beginning of the year and then quarterly. Teachers should guide the testing according to what was taught in class. A student who does not pass the quarterly exam with high proficiency should be assigned a tutor to reteach the areas in which they are deficient during the next quarter. If the student is unable to pass the final quarter exam, they should attend mandatory summer school intervention classes then retest at the beginning of the next school year.

The PUSD is making an effort to address this problem, but test scores would be higher and rising rather than declining if these efforts were working. I strongly believe we must summon the will and resources to do the above or we will continue to see the majority of our children fall behind and suffer the consequences.