

Achievement School District Task Force Statement of Need

Dr. Carey Wright, Mississippi State Superintendent of Education, has recognized the need to re-structure the method by which the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and the State Board of Education (SBE) address the lowest performing schools and districts in Mississippi. For nearly twenty years the MDE has employed a “Conservatorship” model in which the state takes complete control of districts failing to adhere to minimum accreditation and/or accountability standards. During this process a Conservator is assigned to the district by the SBE, the local board is dissolved and the local Superintendent is no longer in place. The Conservator acts as the lone decision-maker while replacing both the local board and the local Superintendent. Historically, the Conservator has been a retired educator who has demonstrated strong leadership ability during his/her career. This person has not normally been a person who lives in, or has served in the local district before, which may contribute to the lack of long-term success.

The Conservatorship model has proven to be a short-term answer to a long-term problem; evidenced in the fact that Mississippi has now taken control of four districts at least twice over the last twenty years. The current model is successful in turning around student performance, safety, financial, and governance problems that exist, but maintaining the positive change has been a challenge. By current statute, when the state relinquishes its control over a district, the state has absolutely no control over the decision-making process in the district. In some cases, this has led to a return of the same problems, which existed before the state take-over.

The MDE recognizes that other states have attempted to solve this problem in a number of ways; and we believe examining different options will only improve our current model. To this end, MDE has established an Achievement School District Task Force made up of educators, business leaders, legislative leaders, and other stakeholders to examine all options available, which could affect positive, long-term change in low-performing schools and districts in Mississippi. The task force will meet monthly over the next 8-10 months to discuss the causes of low-performance in schools and what methods can be used to cause systemic change, not only in the low-performing schools, but also the communities which so often have a strong influence over the success or failure of local school districts.