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The real facts about Initiative 42

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Facts can be friends or enemies. They can please, tease or torture us. Unfortunately, they can be manipulated, taken out of context, been twisted like barbed wire into razor-sharp, formidable deterrents to accurate understanding. And oftentimes, it is the politicians who are the handiest at putting up these fences.

So it is with the current debate swirling around Initiative 42, the proposed constitutional amendment to require our Legislature to abide by its own K-12 funding law. Education opponents in the Mississippi Legislature want us to believe that fully funding our public schools will force them to cut the state budget or even raise taxes. But the facts they cite are mutations of the truth and are based on skewed logic.

A year ago, nearly 200,000 Mississippians gave these lawmakers instructions about school funding when they signed petitions to place Initiative 42 on the Nov. 3 ballot. Each petition contained a roadmap complete with directions for phasing in full funding over seven years. Surely our elected state leaders can follow simple instructions.

The plan is very clear:

General fund revenue in the state budget has increased annually an average of 4.8% from FY 2004 through FY 2014. That revenue growth is estimated at 3% annually through FY 2022 – a conservative projection level when compared to the 4.8% growth level over the past 10 years. Using these averages and projections, the phase-in funding plan offered by the petitioners calls for the following:

- Using not less than 25% of that annual 3% growth – or \$37.5 million of \$150 million in projected revenue collections – to reach the additional \$265 million a year in current dollars, which will be needed to provide Mississippi's public school students with an education that is adequate and efficient by contemporary standards. And it would take only seven years to do it.

Each petition clearly stated: *“Funding the initiative will not require a reduction in, elimination of, or reallocation of funding from any currently funded programs.”*

We must remember that the Mississippi Adequate Education Program is the law, adopted by the Legislature in 1997 to provide our schools adequate funding for a quality education. And yet, lawmakers have abided by their own law only twice in those 18 years, fully funding MAEP during election years in 2003 and 2007. The result is that Mississippi public schools have been shortchanged at least \$1.7 billion.

Our legislative leaders are doing all they can to create a climate of fear by telling anyone who will listen that the sky will surely plummet to earth if they're forced to follow their own law and give our children the resources they need for an adequate education. Does that even make sense? These

lawmakers are holding public education hostage, and they are putting our children's futures at risk.

As the mother of two kids in the Starkville Oktibbeha School District, I see first-hand how our schools are shortchanged by the Legislature, and I know how this underfunding hurts our students. Look around the state and you will see schools without adequate supplies such as textbooks and computers. Facilities are dilapidated, buses are unsafe and a quality learning environment is sorely lacking.

The more than 5,000 children in our local city and county schools have been shortchanged nearly \$17 million by the Legislature since 2008. That's enough money for 170,000 textbooks or 56,000 computers or nearly 50 new teachers for 10 years. When our state leaders shortchange our schools, they create a financial imbalance and they pressure our cities and counties to raise local taxes to try to bridge the gaps. Enough is enough. This is our tax money, not theirs.

Initiative 42 offers a responsible, common-sense approach to funding public education. It requires no budget cuts to any state agencies using the seven-year phase-in plan that Mississippi voters gave to lawmakers in 2014. The numbers bear this out. Supporters of Initiative 42 understand Mississippi's limited financial resources and are not asking for complete funding immediately upon passage of the constitutional amendment.

In 1770, our future president John Adams said: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence: nor is the law less stable than the fact."

Our state lawmakers would be wise to remember Mr. Adams' words the next time they begin bending the facts to serve their agenda.

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