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Initiative 42 is about children, not budget cuts

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Children have an uncanny ability to spot insincerity and to see through falsehoods. They watch the world unfold around them and listen to conversations we wouldn't expect them to understand. They digest the smallest tidbits and form opinions based on the actions of the adults who will guide them into adulthood.

So we must wonder what our children are thinking when they hear and see our elected state leaders doing all they can to scuttle public education in Mississippi. We must wonder what they're thinking when those leaders voice opposition to providing more teachers and textbooks and computers and school buses for their schools. Do our kids feel valued? Do they believe that they're important?

We all recall the scene in "To Kill A Mockingbird," when a lynch mob forms outside the jail where Atticus sits in an effort to protect his accused client. As the moment intensifies, Jem, Scout and Dill run to him and refuse to leave despite his fervent orders. Suddenly, Scout recognizes one member of the mob as the father of her schoolmate and politely inquires about his son. In his mind, the father is asking himself, "What will my boy think of me for what I'm about to do?"

And that is precisely the question we must all ask ourselves as the debate over Initiative 42 unfolds this summer and fall. That debate currently centers on funding our schools once the ballot measure passes on Nov. 3.

Initiative 42 – the proposed constitutional amendment to require the Legislature to abide by its own K-12 funding law – will not require state agencies to cut their budgets, nor will it cause our taxes to be increased, despite the scare tactics being used by our state leaders. In fact, every petition signed by nearly 200,000 Mississippians to put 42 on the ballot contained a very specific plan for phasing in the funding over seven years to avoid such concerns.

On each petition signed last year is a roadmap, a blueprint for funding our schools. The plan is very simple:

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 nearly 200,000 petition signers calls for:

- 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 Mississippi 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 \$1.7 billion.

Our legislative leaders are doing all they can to create a climate of fear. They are holding public education hostage and they are putting our children behind the eight ball in terms of a quality education. But even our children know that the sky will not fall if we fully fund our public schools.

As the mother of three kids in the Oxford public schools, 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 nearly 7,000 children in the Oxford and Lafayette County schools have been shortchanged \$20.9 million by the Legislature since 2008. That's enough money for more than 200,000 textbooks or 70,000 computers or more than 60 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.

The bottom line is that NO budget cuts to any state agencies are necessary or required 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.

Our state leaders should embrace, not fight, full funding for public education. We stand at an historic crossroad, one that will decide whether we want to truly put our children first or remain stuck in our self-made quagmire of inaction. Initiative 42 is the way forward.

As we decide, make no mistake, our children will be watching.

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