

company's vice president of strategic initiatives. "We know that motivation is a big part of achievement," she told me. "If students see they have the ability, they may put in the effort."

That's all well and good, but I worry that this is yet another example of us in education not wanting to level with kids about what's feasible for them based on their level of academic achievement. Aptitudes show potential, but people can only realize their potential if given the opportunity for training and practice.

Sadly, we know that many young Americans today do not have the opportunity to reach their potential. Difficult early-childhood experiences and poor instruction in elementary and middle school cause many students to arrive at high school desperately behind in basic skills. I worry that giving underprepared students a report about their aptitudes and career potential without shoring up the basics could amount to false hope. A student might be told, for example, that they have the aptitude to make a great computer engineer. What they won't be told is that a failure to

master math facts in elementary school, or a weak foundation in algebra, or inability to pass calculus amount to high barriers that will be difficult to overcome.

The lesson, as is often the case, may be that we need to start earlier. So let me offer a suggestion for anyone preparing to congratulate a kindergarten graduate. Please tell those little tykes' parents that one of their most important jobs is to help their children figure out who they are and what they are good at. And that another critical job is to watch like a hawk for any signs that their children are struggling academically and, if so, to do something about it—the sooner the better. That's the kind of message that might actually allow kids to reach for the stars.

*Michael J. Petrilli is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, and an executive editor of Education Next.*

## SCHOOL LIFE

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new. And then we were coming in saying, "This is really how you teach reading." And we had teachers coming out of the professional development who actually were in tears, saying, "I feel like I failed all these kids I've had before me." Our point was, no, move forward. You can't change the past, but you can affect the future by doing exactly what you need to be doing. So, part of it is a give and take. But when it comes to students and what they need, I stand firm.

**How about your schools of education? In the ed reform era, I feel we've given ed schools a pass, assuming there's not much we can do to improve the preparation of teacher candidates.**

I have found the institutions of higher learning slower to move and change than I think they should be, because "this is the way we've always done it." And you've got professors at some universities who are still wedded to the whole-language method of reading instruction. We've tried to work with them over the years, and I think we've made some progress. But in my policy role, I realized, you know what? We have the authority to approve their programs, so let's do that. Let's evaluate their programs. And everybody came to the table. I think one came kicking and screaming, "How dare you mess with my ed prep program?" But I've been pretty public about this. I don't think it's fair for people to pay for a four-year degree, and then the state has to come in behind it and pay for more professional development to get them to where they need to be on day one. Students coming out of ed prep programs, in order to be licensed in the state of Mississippi, have to pass what's called a foundations of reading assessment based on the science of reading. I want to find out what's the first-time pass rate by educator prep program. They don't want us to publish those data, but to me the data are what the data are. So that's one thing I've been talking to the team about. Let's figure out how we can get this together and get this published.

**Is that going to happen?**

I think so.

**What was your biggest mistake? Anything you did badly? Or didn't do and wish you had?**

I will be frank with you about my biggest mistake: I was very naive. It was 2016, I think, and I'd been in the job for a couple of years. The U.S. Department of Education, at the time, would send out what they call "dear colleague" letters to the states with updates and new information. Typically, what I did was take these letters and push them to the districts and say, "Here's what we're getting from USED." No comments about it, just "here it is." Then I got one that came jointly from USED and the Department of Justice on LBGTQ guidelines, which I sent out. I was not prepared for the response, "How could you put this information out there?" It became known as the "Bathroom Letter," [which stated that DOJ and DOE should "treat a student's gender identity as the student's sex for purposes of Title IX and its implementing regulations"].

Even the governor was asking for my resignation over passing along this letter. That was a lesson to me about being more conscious of the political environment. But it stunned me, because I don't discriminate when it comes to children.

**What's your parting advice to your 49 colleagues?**

Stay focused on children and their outcomes, and keep looking at the data to make sure you are doing exactly what you should be doing to give every child access to as many different opportunities as possible. I used to tell my teachers when I was a principal, I want you to treat each day like this is the only day they've got, because when the bell rings at the end of the day, you can't get this day back. And so, what are we going to be doing each and every day to make sure we're doing the best for children?

*This edited interview originally appeared on the Fordham Institute's Flypaper blog. It is also available at educationnext.org.*

# “How’d You Do It?”

*Mississippi’s superintendent of education explains state’s learning gains*

**C**AREY WRIGHT, Mississippi’s state education chief from 2013 to June 2022, led a raft of reforms in the state, including the adoption of higher academic standards, a focus on teacher training and professional development, and a statewide mandate to retain struggling readers in 3rd grade. During her tenure, students in Mississippi achieved greater learning gains than those in any other state.

Shortly before Wright’s retirement, Robert Pondiscio, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, spoke with her about her work.

**Robert Pondiscio: Usually, those in your role shouldn’t buy green bananas; people don’t last long. But you’re one of the longest-serving state chiefs. How’d you pull that off?**

**Carey Wright:** You don’t do this job alone. I had an amazing leadership team that believed in the same kinds of things I did about children and the importance of putting children first and foremost. And you’ve got to have a pretty hard shell, because you’re going to have your detractors. Since my feet hit the ground I’ve heard, “Why in the world are we hiring somebody who is not from Mississippi? She’s not from around here.” That’s continued to this day. I try to stay out of the politics. I knew I wasn’t going to get anything accomplished if I was seen as partisan one way or the other. I’ve been very clear that my focus is on improving student outcomes in the state and not leaning toward either side of the aisle. I think people have respected that.

**But surely it’s easier to get things done at the state level when one party is calling the shots.**

Well, yes and no. Yes, because my state education committee chairs are very supportive. But no, because not everybody puts a priority on education. There was a culture of low expectations here. We’d been 50th for so long that I think people had given up on education getting any better. You had to accept that it’s not at the top of everybody’s priority list. Sometimes when you make decisions based on what’s in the best interest of children, it does not make adults’ lives easier. Looking back, I watch the pride that has taken place across the state with our children doing as well as they are. People are like, “Wow, our kids really can achieve more!” I have always believed they could achieve more.

**I’ve always been skeptical that state-level policy can really move the needle or shape classroom**

**practice productively. But Mississippi is the outlier. How’d you do it?**

People can be resistant to change, but I’ve found that data and accountability will drive the behaviors you want to see in schools and in classrooms. If you put what’s important to change student outcomes in policy, people are going to pay more attention to it. We put that out in the public so parents and communities and other stakeholders could see what was happening inside their schools and districts in a transparent and neutral way. We didn’t slant the data. We reported the data. Sometimes that made people happy, and sometimes it made people not so happy. My point is, if you’re not happy with the data, then what are you doing to change it?

**But Mississippi’s not the only state in the country that worships at the altar of data and transparency.**

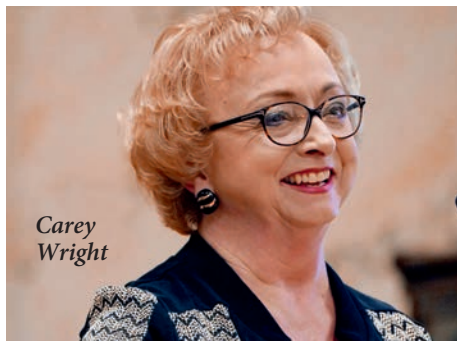
I think it’s the strategies we’ve put in place. We’ve been very clear that we are teaching the science of reading and providing a tremendous amount of professional development. I’m a firm believer in building teacher and leader capacity because I think people want to do the very best they can, but some come to those classrooms with more gifts than others.

Our coaching strategy has been very strong, but unlike [other states], we hire the coaches. I was not going to just give the money to the districts and let them hire the coaches, because I feared some principals or superintendents might use it as an opportunity to move an ineffective teacher out of the classroom and make him or her the literacy coach. We have hired every single coach we have out there.

**On the one hand, you paint a picture of a warm working relationship with districts and teachers. On the other, with coaches, you’re saying “Those are my employees, not yours.” Where do you draw the line between being the state authority and having an ongoing, productive working relationship with districts and teachers?**

There are times when things have to be non-negotiable. When it comes to what I believe, based on research, experience, input, or what’s in students’ best interest, I’m not going to waver. If I vacillated every time I got pushback, we’d never get anything accomplished. Like the science of reading, I believed so strongly that was going to be the [focus of] professional development. For some teachers, it was brand

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Carey Wright

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