

Passage of education initiative will not hurt state budgets

By Sissy Lynn
Ridgeland MS

Suppose the president of a Mississippi community college told anyone who would listen that the state Legislature should not fully fund public schools. Suppose that same president advocated that the same Legislature should break its own law by not adequately giving our schools the resources they need.

Though it sounds crazy, that's just what the president of Meridian Community College did in his Sunday column in this newspaper – and we should all be alarmed.

Initiative 42 – a 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, as predicted in gloom-and-doom fashion by MCC President Scott Elliott. In fact, every petition signed by nearly 200,000 Mississippians to put 42 on the Nov. 3 ballot contained a very specific plan for phasing in the funding to avoid such concerns.

On each petition signed last year is a roadmap, a blueprint for funding our schools. It states:

“Funding the initiative will not require a reduction in, elimination of, or reallocation of funding from any currently funded programs. The initiative will be funded by maintaining current funding levels for public education through the 12th grade adjusted for inflation, and then devoting to public education not less than 25% of future increases in general fund and other tax collections in order to achieve the constitutionally required level of adequacy and efficiency in the public educational system by a target date of Fiscal Year 2022 and maintain it in the future.”

For example, the state's general fund revenues are projected to increase over Fiscal Year 2014 levels by about 3% annually, which will produce an additional \$150 million in Fiscal Year 2015. Twenty-five percent of that would be \$37.5 million. A similar amount for seven years would reach the additional amount needed to provide Mississippi's public school students with an education that is adequate and efficient by contemporary standards.

Dr. Elliott's prediction that the sky will fall if we fully fund our public schools is not his alone. In fact, our legislative leaders are doing all they can to create a climate of fear. They are holding public education hostage, and one must wonder whether Dr. Elliott's words were his own or those of others who control the purse strings of his community college.

As the mother of two children in the Madison County School District, I see first-hand how our schools are shortchanged by the Legislature, and I know how this underfunding hurts our schools. Look around the state and you will see schools without adequate supplies such as textbooks and computers. Facilities are dilapidated and classroom sizes are expanding with no end in sight. Since my son started kindergarten six years ago, classroom sizes in his school have grown from an average of 20 or 21 students per class to 26 or 27. That's too many kids in a single classroom.

Lauderdale County and Meridian schools have been shortchanged \$44 million by the Legislature since 2008. In Meridian, school officials recently stated that they would have to delay important school projects to provide the needed technology that is lacking for their students. That decision was a direct result of the Legislature's repeated decisions to underfund our schools.

All public schools leaders – including community colleges and senior universities – should embrace finding the resources to make our K-12 students successful. It's a sad day when our higher education leaders are manipulated by threats from legislative budget-makers.

The way I see it, education is the one issue that has the potential to improve the quality of life for every single person in our state. Mississippi is dead last in the country when it comes to educating our children. But because education influences everything from poverty, crime, health and economic development, our poor standing in education ultimately affects us all.

We, the supporters of public education in Mississippi, hope that Dr. Elliott remembers his mission as an educator and votes for Initiative 42 on Nov. 3.

• • •

Sissy Lynn of Ridgeland is a wife and mother of two Ridgeland public school students. She also was chosen 2015 Parent of the Year by the state Department of Education.