

## MY FELLOW EDUCATORS,

There's something exciting about the start of a new school year. New faces, new energy, new chances to become our best selves and make a difference in the lives of our students. Thank you for being part of a long tradition of dreamers who believe so strongly in the possibility of a brighter future that you devote your present to the demanding work of educating young minds.

It is an honor to represent you as your Mississippi Teacher of the Year. I know the amount of time, effort, and heart that goes into teaching, and I am in awe of my fellow educators. Mississippi's recent rise in national educational rankings has been celebrated as the "Mississippi Miracle" and it is due to your hard work. Not only have you reversed the learning slides caused by COVID disruptions, you've also adopted new teaching styles and leveraged new technologies while addressing a growing need for Social Emotional Learning in students. Mississippi educators truly are miracle workers.

I encourage you to step into your power as professionals. You have achieved many markers of success in your career: field experience, advanced degrees, grants, and awards. I strongly believe that teachers should be esteemed by the public in the same elite category as doctors, lawyers, and scientists. We are experts in the field of education. We work directly with our students every day and know their needs better than anyone else. Ask yourself what would make the school system work better for you and your students, and present your innovative ideas to your administration as a solution to a problem. Start small, take ownership of the process, and use your first success as a teacher leader to inspire others.

When we improve the schools we work in, we improve the schools our students learn in. Let's connect with each other to brainstorm ideas and share experiences, whether that's in-person at schools and conferences or online via email or social media. Let's work together to show society that education is an esteemed profession and demonstrate that it is worthy of our resources. Let's step into our power as professionals to start creating the future we want for our children.



**YOURS SINCERELY,**

*Ashley Barefoot*

**2025 MISSISSIPPI TEACHER OF THE YEAR**

