

Revisit: 24

MSMS Proposals

From Mac Alford <Mac.Alford@usm.edu>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 12:30 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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Dear Dr. Boone,

I am a 1993 graduate of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science and am now a professor of biology at the University of Southern Mississippi. My two years at MSMS were among the best of my life, and that experience gave me opportunities to grow in many ways and even study at university for free (through various scholarships).

I do not have strong feelings about whether MSMS should stay at the W or move to MSU, but I do have strong feelings about state funding: the state should provide adequate (better) funding for MSMS. Personally, I think that the school looked better in 1993 than it does today, as we (men) stayed in Peyton Hall and the ladies stayed in Fant, both lovely buildings more centrally located on campus, and we did not have to pay any room or board fees. So, whatever decision is made, please work hard to ensure a strong, consistent funding model that will benefit our MSMS graduates far into the future.

Best wishes,
Mac

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Mac H. Alford, Ph.D., Professor and Curator of the Herbarium
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Save MSMS: Safe, Pedestrian-Friendly, and Unique

From Kristin M H Bach <krimshowitt@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 10:43 AM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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Dear Dr. Donna Boone and Members of the Mississippi Department of Education

I write to you today with a heavy heart after reading the two proposals from MSU and MUW regarding the future of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. As an alumna of the school, I hope there is a way forward that will help fulfil MSMS students' and faculty's needs.

MSMS is a top-tier school, consistently ranking among the best public high schools in the country. This success is due not only to its outstanding academic programs and learning opportunities but also to its ability to attract top students from across the state each year. When I applied to MSMS, I was eager for an opportunity to leave my previous school, where I was neither academically challenged nor shielded from bullying. I dreamed of a school where the courses would be difficult, yet interesting and my peers would be interested in learning alongside me. This is exactly what I got at MSMS. Had I not had that opportunity, I would have switched to an online school, graduated early, or discontinued schooling in order to get a GED and attend university as soon as possible.

Although my family was initially hesitant to let me move four hours north of my hometown at just sixteen, they understood that this opportunity was the right choice for me. They also learned through my application and interview process that Columbus was not full of tailgating, fraternities, and other potential distractions or dangers for a young person out on their own for the first time. Our portion of the MUW campus was private and just for us, but at the same time, we could go by foot to a cafe, a thrift store, various churches, or the river on the weekends with no issues.

Starkville, being home to a major university, has a vibrant social scene that includes parties, fraternities, and other distractions that may not be ideal for high school students, especially in a boarding school setting. Columbus, by contrast, offers a quieter, more focused environment with fewer distractions, helping students maintain strong academic and personal development without the interference of over 20,000 students in a bustling university town atmosphere. Columbus also offers a more pedestrian-friendly environment compared to Starkville, with more accessible areas for students to walk to and from school, community centers, or other facilities. This can promote independence and enhance the quality of student life. In contrast, Starkville's larger size and its dependence on vehicular traffic may limit students' ability to move around freely, which could hinder their sense of autonomy and connection to the local community.

I am certain that my family would not have supported my decision to attend MSMS had the school been located in Starkville. I am also certain that being closely integrated with SOCSO would have made the school less appealing to me. Going with this option as proposed will lead to a less diverse and/or less strong group of students coming to MSMS. In addition, you will have more students and parents, who are not satisfied with the experience.

I understand the funding challenges MSMS has faced in recent years, and I recognize the need for significant repairs or replacement of its facilities. However, it is crucial that a solution for MSMS be found that prioritizes safety, pedestrian accessibility, and uniqueness—without using MSMS as a means to indirectly improve the facilities or academics at SOCSO.

If it is decided that Starkville is the right option for the school, it is important that MSMS stays its own separate entity and protects its students and community. If Starkville and MSU cannot offer this, maybe Hattiesburg, Cleveland, Senatobia, Oxford, Scooba, Itta Bena or Brookhaven could be possibilities? Are there thoughts about a cooperation between MSA and MSMS, similar to the Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts? Combining unique students would be a better solution than combining with a standard public high school.

MSMS changed my life, and I hope it continues to have a similar impact on others for many years to come. Doing so will not only help reverse Mississippi's brain drain but also contribute to the long-term growth of the state's economy. By demonstrating that we value academically gifted students and invest in their growth, we can encourage them to stay and build Mississippi's future.

All the best,
Kristin Howitt Bach
MSMS Class of 2015
University of Mississippi Class of 2019

MSMS PROPOSALS

From Tim Carter <pacesetter2114@gmail.com>

Date Wed 2/26/2025 7:39 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

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Whichever proposal is selected it is imperative that housing for the students be a priority. I conducted a facility assessment for security cameras on the campus and the conditions of the dormitories were deplorable and unsafe.

The students who are shared with a residential school situation should not have to live in the conditions that were found/observed during the assessment.

It was a surprising walk through.

Sent from my iPhone

MSMS RFPs

From Thomas Easterling <thomasgeasterling@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 4:07 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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Dear State Board of Education Members,

Thank you for issuing the Requests for Proposals to Mississippi University for Women and Mississippi State University regarding the future of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. MSMS desperately needs investment in its infrastructure. The RFPs acknowledge that doing nothing simply isn't an option. Please find below three items for consideration as you weigh the merits of each proposal. To be frank, it does not matter to me *where* MSMS ends up. However, I care deeply about ensuring the school's cultural continuity, which is essential to its long-term success. I also plead with you to give representatives from MSMS a seat at your table when you are deliberating the merits of the RFPs. MSMS is different from a college; it's even more different from a regular high school. Proceeding without consulting MSMS leadership will result in costly mistakes.

Autonomy from Regular High School Standards and Settings

When the legislature created the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, it recognized the existence of a statewide, academically gifted cohort of young people who need college-level resources to thrive. MSMS faculty *must* have academic credentials that would allow them to teach at the college level; regular licensure is *desired*. As a result, MSMS has developed strong, primary relationships with universities rather than with other high schools. Faculty use autonomy from the standards and testing mandates that affect teachers at other public schools to create an achievement-based, college-oriented culture.

Any proposal that affects MSMS must acknowledge the original intent of the legislature to provide a college-oriented learning environment or the culture that has brought success to MSMS will suffer profoundly. Students do not want to see fights in the cafeteria—there has *never* been one at MSMS—or lose class time for pep rallies or get picked on for being nerdy. Students come to MSMS to experience a college atmosphere. They are significantly less likely to come if they find themselves spending time and sharing resources with Starkville high school students.

Architecture and Investment

When speaking with architects about plans to renovate Peyton and Fant, which are shuttered dorms on the MUW campus, MUW and MSMS representatives were told to plan for costs of about \$200,000 per bed for either renovation or construction of new residence halls. Proposals for MSMS need to accept that financial reality. Proposals should account for future maintenance and repair costs.

Proposals should also acknowledge the need for 21st century educational spaces that facilitate project-based learning and collaboration between teachers. Separate halls for departments will be a thing of the past. Bell schedules will be different and will certainly be more aligned with college than high school. Maker spaces and exhibition facilities will be forward-facing, crucial educational spaces in the twenty-first century. A new educational building needs to give MSMS students and faculty primary access to these spaces. Sharing them with another high school will result in significant departures from MSMS' pedagogical and content goals.

Governance

Because MSMS' governance is hard for outsiders to understand, stakeholders have been less likely to come together to ensure appropriate funding for it. A strong proposal should articulate with great clarity MSMS' relationships with its governing board, its infrastructural funding mechanisms, and the faculty and staff who create its living/learning environment. Its governance must be independent of other institutions; its funding must come exclusively from the state and from its foundation to assure its autonomy.

I taught at MSMS from 2004-2024 and currently serve as its Director for Academic Affairs. I graduated from the Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts, and have friends who teach at the Arkansas School for Math, Science, and the Arts. My experiences as a student and an educator affirm the extent to which schools like these improve the lives of intelligent, ambitious young people. They offer our state a return on investment that is both quantifiable (communities that invest in STEM education enjoy growth at a substantially higher rate than those who don't) and anecdotal (just talk to one of our thousands of alumni). I am grateful that the State Board is paying attention to MSMS' needs. I strongly encourage you to consult with MSMS leaders before deciding on one of the proposals before you.

Sincerely,

Thomas G. Easterling III

Director for Academic Affairs

MSMS Proposals Stakeholder Feedback

From Alan Elgin <alanelgin01@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 12:32 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

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Hello,

My name is Alan Elgin, and I am an MSMS 2019 alum. I have read through the proposals from MSU and MUW and wanted to share my thoughts on them. My thoughts are below:

MSMS is a special place, and the academics that the school provides its students are certainly a part of making it so special. However, the community and traditions that exist at MSMS are the biggest contributors to creating such a special place. I believe that the MSU proposal greatly disregards this piece of the MSMS experience. Being around peers at the same academic level creates the unique opportunity that MSMS provides, but creating a partnership with SOCSO undermines that experience. In addition, the MSU proposal, while focused on a future possibility for MSMS, largely leaves MSMS and the improvements that could be created for the institution on the back burner. The proposal focuses more on how MSU and SOCSO would benefit from the opportunity to move MSMS, rather than how MSMS becomes a better version of itself at MSU. The version of MSMS provided in the MSU proposal largely provides the same opportunities that MUW currently provides or expressed opportunity for growth in their proposal. In addition, the MSU proposal does not provide many details in terms of implementation. It largely says that they will do the things asked to be touched on by MDE, but it does not detail how they will provide those things.

For these reasons, I believe that the MUW proposal is a better option for the future of MSMS. MUW fully understands the situation that MSMS is in and gives actionable steps to create a better MSMS while still keeping what makes MSMS so special. In addition, the MUW proposal provides a cheaper alternative to the one brought forth in the MSU proposal. However, both options require funding, and as stated in the MUW proposal, MSMS is grossly underfunded compared to similar institutions. I urge the MDE to properly fund MSMS regardless of the option that is chosen in the end. If Mississippi truly wants to create more opportunities for the state's gifted and talented students, it starts with providing the most successful option for those students with the proper funding.

I also feel that the process thus far has not provided the proper consideration that MSMS deserves. Each institution was given only a short timeframe to put these proposals together with no regard for other options. I implore MDE to consider providing more thought into the process of moving such an important and vital institution.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,
Alan Elgin

Cynthia Everitt
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February 26, 2025

Dr. Donna Boone
Chief Academic Officer
Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street, Post Office Box 771
Jackson, MS 39205-0771
secondaryeducation@mdek12.org

Subject: Concerns Regarding the Proposed Future Location of MSMS

Dear Dr. Boone,

I am writing as a concerned alumna of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS) in response to the recent proposals submitted by Mississippi University for Women (MUW) and Mississippi State University (MSU) regarding the future location of MSMS. After a careful review of both proposals, I must express my strong opposition to either institution being granted stewardship of MSMS.

As a graduate of the inaugural class of MSMS (1990), I have remained deeply committed to the school's mission and success. Over the last three decades, I have financially supported MSMS, including personally covering the room and board fees for students when the fees were first instituted. Additionally, I have most recently contributed to the school's admissions process by serving on the Final Selection Committee for the MSMS Class of 2026. My long-standing dedication to MSMS has reinforced my belief that its continued success is contingent upon maintaining its independence and preserving its rigorous academic standards.

Although I currently reside in Texas, I am also a property owner in Mississippi. My commitment to the state and MSMS is reflected in my decision to purchase my second home specifically based on its proximity to both MSU and MSMS. This underscores the importance I place on the school's continued presence and its ability to provide an exceptional educational experience to Mississippi's most talented students.

For the past 37 years, neither MSU nor MUW have been steadfast advocates for MSMS. Their participation in the school's success has been largely superficial, and neither institution has demonstrated a consistent commitment to securing MSMS's financial stability through legislative support. Instead, both universities appear to be positioning MSMS to address their institutional challenges rather than prioritizing what is best for MSMS students, its academic rigor, and its legacy of excellence.

MSU's proposal suggests an approach that would intertwine MSMS with Starkville's public school system, potentially diluting the unique, immersive educational experience that MSMS has historically provided. The risk of compromising the academic intensity that has defined MSMS is significant and must be carefully considered. Moreover, the proposal does not appear to ensure the level of autonomy and specialized support that MSMS requires to continue offering an unparalleled education to Mississippi's brightest students.

On the other hand, MUW's proposal raises concerns about the university's long-standing reliance on MSMS to bolster its institutional viability. Over the years, MUW has leveraged its association with MSMS to sustain itself, yet this relationship has not resulted in a demonstrable increase in direct support or advocacy for the school's long-term sustainability. There is no compelling evidence that retaining MSMS at MUW's campus without better legislative support will provide the structural and financial security necessary to uphold the high academic standards that MSMS students deserve.

MSMS's success is rooted in its ability to function as an independent institution dedicated solely to providing an elite-level education to Mississippi's most talented students. Any decision regarding its future must prioritize maintaining this independence and ensuring that its standards of excellence remain uncompromised. The Mississippi Department of Education must consider options that protect MSMS's unique mission rather than allowing it to be repurposed to serve the interests of universities that have not demonstrated a true commitment to its success.

I urge the Department of Education to reevaluate these proposals with the best interests of MSMS students at the forefront of the decision-making process. The future of Mississippi's most gifted students should not be determined by the financial or political needs of larger institutions, but rather by what will best preserve and enhance MSMS's mission for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope that the Department will take these concerns seriously as it moves forward with this decision.

Sincerely,



Cynthia Bright Everitt
Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Class of 1990

March 4, 2025

Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street, Post Office Box 771
Jackson, MS 39205-0771

Re: Mississippi State Board of Education seeks stakeholder feedback on MSMS proposals

Dr. Donna Boone:

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science unlocked my full potential. The incredibly shy, anxious girl who moved into the dorms at MUW graduated as an outgoing, courageous young woman who gave our commencement address at graduation. In that speech, I stated that the greatest gift of MSMS is the community we build together. I still believe that today.

My name is Mary Frances Holland, and I graduated from MSMS in 2015 and the University of Mississippi in 2019. I was born and raised in George County, where my family still lives. I have represented Mississippi around the world via scholarships from the State Department and currently support the interests of Mississippi's manufacturers in Washington, D.C.

While I decided to apply to and attend MSMS because of the academic rigor and opportunities, my personal transformation was due to the dedicated staff and curriculum, unique residential setting, and tight-knit student body. I was able to excel in the classroom because I was supported by students who shared a common goal – to become the best and brightest of the state by broadening our perspectives. That is the true, untold beauty of MSMS – that students from across Mississippi come together to learn with and from each other.

While I appreciate the State Board of Education and Mississippi Department of Education's initiative to address the MSMS's current challenges to ensure its sustainability for the future, the Mississippi State University proposal does *not* align with the pillars of MSMS – Scholarship, Creativity, Service, and Community.

Most importantly, the proposal to combine MSMS with SOCSO undermines the ethos of motivated, like-minded students coming together from across a breadth of backgrounds. MSMS needs to be a stand-alone institution with autonomy to meet the needs of its students – not to be controlled by a school district. MSMS students thrive in its close-knit community, and performance will decline when they are forced to participate in classes and activities with non-MSMS students, who do not have the same commitment and motivation.

Furthermore, the loss of a centralized, convenient college campus atmosphere will not help students prepare for life at university, which is the express goal of MSMS residential living. The current MSU plan isolates students to a high school campus that is not guaranteed to meet their extracurricular needs. The current SMART bus route schedule is insufficient to provide students access to MSU's main campus because it only runs every *two hours*. Additionally, the MSU proposal posits that MSMS has never had access to a substantial sidewalk and bike path system. In fact, students have enjoyed an extremely walkable community, in the MUW campus and city of Columbus, for over 35 years.

Regardless of the two proposals, I strongly urge you to fully fund the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. As has already been outlined by the MSMS Foundation's public letter, MSMS is a proven success and economic engine that moves Mississippi forward, despite

decades of inadequate funding, particularly when compared to our neighbors in Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

I thank you for your consideration and suggest that you take to heart the following lesson that all MSMS graduates understand: the "Opportunity for Excellence" is not a guarantee – it must be fought for and invested in to be achieved.

Mary Frances Holland
Associate Director of Economic Research
National Association of Manufacturers
mfholland96@gmail.com

Commentary on Proposals from MUW and MSU

From Joey Knight <knightj25@themsms.org>

Date Sat 3/1/2025 11:15 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

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Dear Dr. Boone and Whomever Else It May Concern,

First, I would like to express my gratitude to both Mississippi University for Women and Mississippi State University for their thoughtful consideration in housing MSMS. It is encouraging to see the investment in providing Mississippi's best and brightest students with a unique high school experience that fosters academic excellence and prepares them for future educational endeavors. As a current senior at MSMS, I would like to share my perspective on the proposals submitted by both institutions.

MSU's proposal offers notable benefits, including access to advanced research labs, college library resources, and a newly constructed modern residential hall. However, it appears to overlook a fundamental aspect of why students choose MSMS. MSMS students do not seek a traditional high school experience; rather, they are drawn to the school for its rigorous academic environment and its focus on preparing students for post-secondary education. While extracurricular activities such as sports and performing arts are valuable, they are not the primary motivation for attending MSMS.

Additionally, a major concern with MSU's proposal is the potential loss of MSMS's autonomy through its integration with the Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. The independence of MSMS has long been a defining characteristic of the school, ensuring that students receive an education tailored to their unique academic needs. Any restructuring that compromises this autonomy could detract from what makes MSMS such a distinctive and successful institution. While I appreciate MSU's offer and commitment, I believe the proposal does not fully align with the needs and expectations of MSMS students.

MUW's proposal presents a continuation of MSMS's established structure while offering expanded educational opportunities, such as access to an AI lab, mentorship programs, and enhanced research collaborations with other institutions. Additionally, it highlights the critical issue of MSMS's current underfunding—approximately \$16,000 less per student compared to similar programs in neighboring states. Addressing this funding gap is essential for the long-term success and sustainability of MSMS.

However, MUW's proposal places significant emphasis on the past relationship between MSMS and MUW rather than clearly outlining future advancements and growth opportunities. While historical success is important, MSMS students and stakeholders require a more detailed vision of how MSMS will evolve and benefit from MUW's offerings. Without clear details on future initiatives, it is difficult to fully assess the long-term advantages of remaining at MUW.

Given the strengths and shortcomings of both proposals, I believe more time is necessary for both institutions to refine their plans. A stronger focus should be placed on how MSMS will thrive in the years to come, ensuring that any relocation or continued partnership prioritizes the unique academic experience that students seek when choosing MSMS. While both proposals hold potential, revisions should incorporate direct student input and a clearer roadmap for MSMS's future development.

I sincerely appreciate the efforts of both institutions in putting forth these proposals and look forward to seeing further refinements that better address the needs and aspirations of MSMS students.

Best regards,
Joey Knight

408 6th Street South
Columbus, MS 39701

March 4, 2025

Dr. Donna Boone
Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street
Post Office Box 771
Jackson, MS 39205-0771

Dear Dr. Boone:

As a 2004 graduate of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, I am extremely proud of what alumni, students, faculty, and staff of MSMS have accomplished since its founding. Over the past three years, however, I have been disappointed by the State Board of Education's oversight of MSMS. The search for a new executive director following Dr. Germain McConnell's departure was mishandled and caused real damage to MSMS, which eroded stakeholders' trust in SBE's stewardship. While the current leadership of the school has made great strides toward improvements at MSMS, SBE's actions related to potential relocation show a concerning lack of transparency and understanding of the school's most pressing needs.

First and foremost, the request for proposal regarding a potential relocation has not been conducted in a fair and open manner. There is no record of the membership of the MSMS Subcommittee of the Board of Education readily accessible online for citizens to know who is responsible for making decisions about this public institution. Only two sites were invited to bid, despite the inevitable possibility that other locations in the state of Mississippi could be viable options, and those two entities were given only 12 business days to respond. On top of that, the SBE provided the public less than one week to provide input. The opaque and inconsistent nature of the process thus far does not give stakeholders much confidence in the judgment of the decision makers.

Additionally, SBE has demonstrated a lack of proactive interest in supporting MSMS' primary operational and financial needs for years until a small faction of individuals who stand to benefit from location to a specific city began to promote their agenda. If SBE conducted itself as an engaged steward of this important asset to the State and taxpayers of Mississippi, then it would be a visible and vocal champion of the accomplishments of MSMS students, faculty, and staff and consistently advocate for sufficient funding from the Legislature to ensure that MSMS can maintain enrollment and its academic and residential facilities. Unfortunately, there has been no explanation as to why the funding that MSMS did receive from the Legislature for the initial phases of remodeling facilities at Mississippi University for Women was abandoned during Dr. Donnie Cook's tenure as executive director. Now, taxpayers across the State of Mississippi are being expected to go along with plans to subsidize a major construction project that disproportionately benefits a single school district, which, unlike MSMS, has its own tax base.

In my review of the only two proposals on the table, I am disappointed that Mississippi State University's plans relegate MSMS to a shell of itself. MSMS has produced impressive results that any high school nationwide would want to have on its resume, but the reason why it has been so successful is a result of the entire student experience. Students who make the life-changing decision to leave their hometown and transfer to MSMS do not do so to re-enroll at a traditional 7A high school. MSMS works because it creates a wholly unique environment that enables gifted and talented young people to thrive and gives them opportunities they would never have anywhere else. Furthermore, MSMS' mission is not limited to excellence in the specifically named disciplines of mathematics and science. MSMS expects students to pursue overall academic achievement, which is why its faculty and offerings in subjects such as literature, history, and foreign languages are so strong. MSMS also demands a level of personal development and maturity that is unmatched in a traditional high school environment. Students are truly transformed from the day they walk on campus to the day they graduate, and that experience has a lasting impact on their entire lives.

It is worth noting that other states with public magnet boarding schools invest orders of magnitude more in them; that none of our sister schools in other states are located on a Division I college campus; and that athletics, arts, and music are still offered as part of the student experience just like at any other school, but I trust that you have received sufficient letters refuting the myths that have been levied against the school's reputation and best interest.

Thank you for accepting my feedback on the future of MSMS, and I hope you will provide additional opportunities for the public to weigh in and provide more visibility into the decision making process before coming to a final recommendation to the Legislature.

Regards,

Emily Liner
MSMS Class of 2004

Response to RFQ Proposals for the future of The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science

From Ashton Lollis <ashtonlollis24@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 11:12 AM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

 1 attachment (144 KB)

Lollis_Ashton_Response to RFQ Proposals for MSMS.pdf;

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Dear Dr Boone and whoever else it may concern,

First off, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to receive comments and suggestions from the stakeholders of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS) to implement a plan for the future of such a prestigious school. As an alumnus, it makes me exceptionally ecstatic to see the time investment for improving and expanding the facilities for Mississippi's Best and Brightest. Being an undergraduate scholar at Columbia University's School of Engineering and Applied Science, I frequently reminisce of my 11th and 12th grade years to remind myself that I would not be where I am today without the foundation that was built at MSMS. Below, I have attached my full thoughts on the proposals on MSMS.

I hope that you find these comments helpful and please update me on any developments or decisions that would be made.

All the best,

Ashton Lollis

Ashton D. Lollis | Student

Columbia University

Email: Ashtonlollis24@gmail.com

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ASHTON LOLLIS

MSMS Class of 2024

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3 March 2025

Donna Boone
Chief Academic Officer

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359 North West Street, Post Office Box 771, Jackson, MS 39205-0771

RESPONSE TO RFQ PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE MISSISSIPPI SCHOOL FOR MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE

Dear Dr Boone and whoever else it may concern,

First off, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to receive comments and suggestions from the stakeholders of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS) to implement a plan for the future of such a prestigious school. As an alumnus, it makes me exceptionally ecstatic to see the time investment for improving and expanding the facilities for Mississippi's Best and Brightest. Being an undergraduate scholar at Columbia University's School of Engineering and Applied Science, I frequently reminisce of my 11th and 12th grade years to remind myself that I would not be where I am today without the foundation that was built at MSMS.

However, there were limitations on what could be possible for the academic and social environment due to declining health and limited space of the facilities that MSMS operate. The proposals from both The Mississippi University of Women (MUW) and Mississippi State University (MSU) both seeks to address the necessary expansions and improvements to the #1 Public High School in the state. Here are my thoughts from these documents:

Residential Life

For more than a decade, it has been well-known that MSMS has needed new residential halls. Since its beginning, the dorms that have been occupied by MSMS students have always been “hand-me-downs” (buildings that MUW had vacated which are not suitable for comfortable living). In the proposal from MUW, the university stated that they have been working with MSMS administrators to design a “master plan” to place up to two new buildings that could potentially accommodate up to 400 new students and a building that serves another purpose. I think this would not only improve the living situation held currently by the students, but would also put the school’s vision into a reality to expand to more students and even expanding to the 10th grade. The proposal by MUW also continues by stating the potential of renovation of MSMS’ previous dorms: Peyton and Fant. In my opinion, I do not believe that a full restoration (including gutting, deep cleaning, sanitation, etc.) of such a large scale for just one building that houses approximately 150 students, which will cost \$22 million dollars, will be as effective as just building a new dorm that will accommodate 400 students, which cost \$34 million dollars.

On the other hand, MSU’s proposal would create residential halls in the same area of their partnership school along with the proposed new Starkville High School, both from the Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. While it does accommodate the envisioned expansion of MSMS to more students, this does not fit the goal of ensuring MSMS’ vision without the benefit of the Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. It should be known that MSMS, a specialized school, is and shall always be independent from any other school districts in Mississippi and their influences.

Student Affairs

In order for students to thrive at such an academically rigorous school, maintaining a great mental health must be a required part of their studies. Currently at MSMS, in order to graduate, students must receive 12 hours of wellness and 2 wellness seminars each quarter in order to graduate. I am safe to say that this type of wellness is possible like a place on MUW campus because of the relatively close recreational area to MSMS facilities along with green spaces and areas of open space indoors. However, MSMS does share facilities with Columbus, MS and MUW to host home athletic games which could possibly run into a problem at any time. At MSU, these places would also be readily available for MSMS’ student body use, but the only problem with this proposal is that the students would need shuttles to go to the recreational center on campus which would could hinder others motivation to go workout. They also run into the same problem with sharing facilities with the University on athletic events.

Academics

Since its inception, MSMS has been innovator in the realm of secondary school's academics. According to Niche, before the COVID-19 pandemic, MSMS was the 6th ranked public high school in the nation and just this year, the school became the 62nd ranked public high school in the nation, a 233 spot increase since just last year. Also, the faculty of MSMS has consistently ranked in the top 10 for best in the nation. The school thrives on the strong community of those who collaborates with the school to make these strides possible, something that would not be lost if MSMS stays at MUW.

In fact, according to the proposal from MUW, it seems that this community strength would increase with more dual enrolled classes being available to students at MSMS. However, there are limitations that would limit the Best and Brightest at MUW. MSMS is a STEM academic school. Most graduates after high school tends to go school for any discipline in the STEM, with most students going into some sort of engineering or technological science. With MUW being a school whose students focuses on nursing or related topics, the University classes don't quite align with MSMS students needs. But this not only goes with academics inside the classroom but also outside. Research for those students are quite limited because of the different interest of the school's students, which is why students usually travel to MSU, a more engineering heavy school, to conduct research and take dual enrolled classes online.

MSU's proposal for MSMS academic affairs would be ideal for the student's interest on the campus. The access to a library of courses that could be taken in high school would create an environment where high school students can shop around and explore majors, interest, and communities. Not only that, the "cutting edge research" would allow students to dive into their personal interest even more. However, there are problems with this proposal. MSU would also allow students of Starkville High School to take courses at MSMS. This type of access from the Starkville high school allows for unjust treatment to those interested in attending MSMS. Students, without even going through the formal process of applying to MSMS, would essentially be allowed to "attend" MSMS just because they attend Starkville High. This is unjust to those who are qualified to be at MSMS but were rejected due enrollment issues. MSMS is a school for the Best and Brightest and should be kept that way forever.

Conclusion

The proposals for MSMS' future has brought to light many of the limitations that comes on the day-to-day basis since MSMS does not have its on campus. But at the end of the day, these proposals means nothing without the adequate funding to put one of these plans into drive. But these aren't the only problems that comes with the proposals. We must question traditions like Tales from the Crypt, faculty & staff and their possible relocation, and changing daily operations at the academic level. But the school should not forced into a decision so quickly. There must be in-depth research into the locations, proposals and possible other option. In fact, one possibility that pops up in my mind is an Independent Campus with the Mississippi School for the Arts within the Golden Triangle Area. I also believe that MSMS should bring along their own proposal alongside the Universities before a decision is made. All of these things are essential to the future of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science and shall take time.

Again thank you for allowing for input into the situation and I can't wait to hear the decision into such an amazing establishment.

Ashton Lollis

Ashton Lollis

Elizabeth J. Morgan

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Columbus, MS 39705
480-818-4542

28 February 2025

Dr. Donna Boone
Chief Academic Officer
Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street
Post Office Box 771
Jackson, MS 39205-0771

Re: Stakeholder feedback on MSMS proposals

Dear Dr. Boone:

Thank you for soliciting stakeholder feedback regarding the written proposals from the Mississippi University for Women (MUW) and Mississippi State University (MSU) regarding the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS). I am deeply concerned for the future of my beloved alma mater. As a graduate of the class of 1995 and an 11-year faculty member, I feel that I have a unique perspective on the history, service, and preservation of MSMS as Mississippi's flagship secondary school.

MSMS has four core ideals: scholarship, service, creativity, and community. After reading the proposals from both MUW and MSU, it seems that neither potential partner has a firm grasp of the core of MSMS. These ideals have guided MSMS since our founding, and we need any partner to hold these ideals in solidarity with us. Neither proposal, in its current form, delineates a clear vision for the health and growth of MSMS as an independent entity with an eye on our ideals, history, and achievement and a continued vision for future success. I have significant reservations regarding both proposals, several of which I will detail below; however, I feel strongly that the MSU proposal, as written, is harmful to the future of MSMS and all of the districts we serve, so I will address some of those concerns first.

From page 2 of the MSU proposal:

They (MSMS:E students) will also have an opportunity to be dual enrolled in the SOCS (Starkville Oktibbeha County School District), which will allow MSMS:E students to take Advanced Placement and other specialized courses with SOCS students, experience extracurricular activities with SOCS, and build relationships and comradery with SOCS students and faculty.

MSMS already offers several "Advanced Placement and other specialized courses", particularly special topics and independent study opportunities based on student needs. Partnering with SOCS gives little to no advantage to MSMS students but would

unquestionably give an unfair advantage to SOCS D students, without regard to other students across the state. Furthermore, placing students who have made the choice to leave their homeschools back into a regular high school environment is counter to the MSMS mission of “meeting the individual needs of gifted and talented students”. MSMS was created to serve students from across the state of Mississippi. Any partnership with another district would (1) dilute our ability to impact all students in Mississippi and (2) provide preferential treatment to students from one particular district (SOCS D), which is unconscionable, at best, and is in direct opposition to the mission of the MSMS that I know, support, and love.

Community is one of the four basic ideals of MSMS. Students come to MSMS for a variety of reasons, with a primary one being the unique population of learners historically present in the MSMS student body and the highly qualified faculty, who come together as a unified learning community. Based on my history with MSMS, I can say with utmost confidence that this has been true since MSMS’s early days and still holds today. The MSMS community is a safe learning environment where students are consistently encouraged to strive for academic and personal growth and improvement through both their trials and triumphs. This is a rare environment that I have not experienced at other institutions, and I fear its loss if MSMS does not remain independent.

MSMS has the most qualified faculty in the state, with all instructors holding earned master’s degrees and many with earned doctorates. We are ranked among the best in the nation. Our students are selected based on a three-fold application process with careful attention to their potential for growth and success at MSMS. I see absolutely no logical reason a student would choose to take courses with SOCS D students and less qualified faculty. Furthermore, the inclusion of SOCS D at every point in the MSU proposal is an obvious ploy to get additional support from the state for their district without regard to the thousands of other students across the state in other districts.

From page 3 of the MSU proposal:

One of the founding parts of MSMS’s mission is to share teaching practices, curriculum, and innovative approaches with all teachers in the state. This partnership will rekindle that part of MSMS:E’s mission, accelerating opportunities to work with the SOCS D teachers and leverage the scores of outreach activities MSU conducts already for K12 around the state.

MSU is correct that we focus on providing outreach to teachers and students in the state, and this is and has been an ongoing practice for MSMS. Many of my colleagues and I have developed and delivered professional development to teachers across Mississippi and the nation through workshops and conferences hosted by MSMS and state and national organizations. Furthermore, we conduct outreach activities for scores of elementary and middle school students each year. The idea that we need to

“rekindle” that part of our mission shows that MSU does not have a clear picture of MSMS, and it is downright insulting.

From page 6 of the MSU proposal:

MSU is already supporting MSMS’s existing plans to develop academic opportunities in data science, while discussing support for cyber security and bioengineering. Easy access to adjunct faculty in data science, cyber security and bioengineering courses is the perfect way to leverage MSU’s capabilities to enhance academic opportunities and reduce costs. In addition to courses, MSU has research underway in all three MSMS growth areas that would complement and extend academic classes. Opportunities for further collaboration to expand activities would also exist with SOCSO.

MSU has been a supportive partner for MSMS students interested in research opportunities. This partnership has been running effectively since my days as an MSMS student, and it does not necessarily require MSMS to be located on or adjacent to the MSU campus. I have been coordinating this partnership through MSU’s Office of Research and Economic Development for nine years. These newly proposed partnership areas could also be accomplished in a similar fashion, if needed. With respect to SOCSO, there is again no indication of how any collaboration would benefit MSMS students. The continued inclusion of SOCSO demonstrates only one-way benefit, which isn’t a partnership at all.

From the Conclusion on page 7 of the MSU proposal:

Adding it all up, this proposed MSMS:E, SOCSO, MSU partnership will be a highly efficient and effective use of local and state tax dollars and bring a high return on the local community’s and the State of Mississippi’s investments. This partnership will be a reason for people to move to our state, it will support and boost economic development, be a model for others in the state, and most importantly, create a fantastic learning environment for the state’s best and brightest students.

The proposal does not support these claims, and I fail to see the benefit to MSMS students for any partnership with SOCSO, which stands to benefit the most or perhaps be the only true beneficiary of this proposal. Where does that leave MSMS? Additionally, the MSU proposal includes letters of support from several Starkville/Oktibbeha County officials. None of those address the unique nature of MSMS or the opportunity we provide for academic, social, and emotional growth of our student population. There is no demonstrated care or concern for my students aside from attesting that Starkville has been recognized as the “Best Small Town in the South” by USA Today. I see little to no concrete evidence for support of MSMS student growth beyond the benefits that we could provide to SOCSO, and I am quite distressed

by this. I do not see how this will create a “fantastic learning environment ...” for MSMS. Decades of MSMS faculty and staff have already created a fantastic learning environment.

The MSU proposal is a nice, glossy document that shows either a lack of understanding or a distinct disregard for all that MSMS is and has been to the students of Mississippi for over 35 years. The proposed partnership with SOCSO is one-sided and does not in any way address the unique nature of our student body and our residential community, aside from providing room and board facilities. This proposed three-way partnership must not be given credence, as it is unlikely to enhance the future of MSMS.

Regarding the MUW proposal, facilities are absolutely the greatest detriment to the sustainability and future growth of MSMS on the MUW campus. From page 1 of the MUW proposal:

Facilities. For the past two years MUW and MSMS have worked together on MUW’s new Master Plan to ensure that MSMS’s present and future needs are being addressed. ... Funding for MSMS has not kept pace with the school’s needs; MUW has space for the Board of Education and the Legislature to address the facility priorities of MSMS.

While I appreciate that MUW has included MSMS in some planning as of late, this inclusion has been a long time coming. I wholeheartedly agree that funding has not been adequate to meet the current and future needs of MSMS, and that must change; however, the buildings used to house MSMS operations are MUW property, and MUW’s disregard for their upkeep demonstrates a distinct lack of stewardship for their resources. From my perspective, MUW has had ample opportunity to support MSMS by advocating for increased funding alongside MSMS, which would benefit both institutions. Without continued significant support for MSMS from the Mississippi Department of Education and the State Board of Education, and perhaps significant pressure on MUW, I have substantial concerns regarding the upkeep and maintenance of MSMS facilities here.

From my layperson’s perspective, MUW serves as landlord for MSMS’s tenancy. In standard landlord-tenant agreements, the landlord is generally responsible for the upkeep of facilities. It is my understanding that this has never been expressly stated in any agreements between MSMS and MUW, and it shows a distinct lack of thoughtful planning and oversight, with multiple parties at fault. This must be rectified for the continued health of MSMS. I do not see that this is addressed in the proposal from MUW outside of stating that increased funding for MSMS is necessary. Again, this is a significant concern.

With regards to the “Articulation agreements for coursework” on pages 3 and 4 of the MUW proposal, there is a lot of verbiage without much meaning or consideration for

the actual needs of MSMS students. For example, the proposed “joint honors experience” and “MSMS Saturday Institute” show a lack of understanding, or a blatant disregard, for the multitude of experiences and opportunities that MSMS faculty already seek to provide for our students. If these are so important, why haven’t they been articulated before this juncture?

From page 4 of the MUW proposal:

MSMS has been recognized as having the best public high school faculty in the nation. On multiple occasions, individual faculty members have been recognized at both the national and state level for teaching excellence in their disciplines. The W proposes to engage MSMS teachers with MUW’s Connie & Tom Kossen Center for Teaching & Learning, according to their interests, to participate in faculty development workshops and to provide a space for the outreach programs to Mississippi teachers that MSMS faculty lead.

This seems to indicate that MUW understands that MSMS teachers provide valuable collaboration and leadership for teachers across the state, and yet this partnership between MSMS and MUW has not been in place for the past three decades, or certainly not in the last decade. It seems that only when MUW is threatened with losing MSMS are they truly interested in investing in the existing partnership. This is disheartening.

From page 5 of the MUW proposal:

Two residential facilities continue to be designated for MSMS students. Goen and Frazer Hall are both 46,437 square feet. These facilities were built in 1967 and 1968 and can house 200 students each, including the Residential Director and Assistants. Both facilities had major bathroom renovations in the summer of 2024 with new interior paint in Goen. In the summer of 2025, Frazer will receive new interior paint.

These improvements are good and necessary; however, they are in no way a long-term solution to the facilities needs of MSMS. These nearly sixty-year-old buildings are obsolete with outdated or failing systems. Bathroom renovations and painting aside, those buildings are likely approaching end-of-use and do not allow for future growth of MSMS. As a leader in residential education for high school students, MSMS facilities should match our student outcomes, which are outstanding year over year. We are in dire need of facilities improvements to continue our mission and be able to grow, and there is not a clear plan in the MUW proposal.

In short, MSMS left an indelible impression on me – so much so that I have dedicated the last 11 years of my professional career to another generation of MSMS students. While I can honestly see some academic advantages to partnering with MSU as a Research-1 University, I see at best no benefit, and at worst, a detrimental,

fundamental alteration of MSMS, by any proposed partnership with SOCSO, or any other traditional school district for that matter. This proposed partnership with SOCSO must not be promoted. The MUW proposal lacks evidence that MSMS will be treated as a full partner, which continues to be disconcerting, but MUW is able to recognize MSMS as an independent entity with distinct merits. Neither the MSU proposal nor the MUW proposal show an understanding of the historical position of MSMS and neither shows a clear path towards growth and continued success.

I want to see MSMS as the most robust version of the “Opportunity for Excellence” that it has been for over three decades. The university partnership that best serves MSMS and the students who seek this opportunity is the one that will preserve the legacy of what has been and will promote the future of what can be. The partnership will honor the founding faculty and inaugural students who built MSMS on the ideals of scholarship, service, creativity, and community, while focusing on growth, improvement, and longevity to ensure that MSMS is available for generations of Mississippi’s gifted and talented students yet to come. Neither proposal, as written, is a match for those goals.

In making your decisions, please take to heart the future of Mississippi’s gifted and talented students and MSMS, which has served those students well for over 35 years. The MUW proposal, while flawed, does recognize MSMS as an independent secondary learning institution, which is of utmost importance. The MSU proposal, as currently written, seeks to make MSMS a part of the SOCSO, which gives short shrift to the thousands of students across other districts that MSMS has impacted and can impact in the future. MSMS should unequivocally remain an independent school, and I firmly believe that with the support of the Mississippi Department of Education and the State Board of Education, MSMS can remain a place for students from across Mississippi, without detrimental, fundamental changes to its mission and ideals. I remain hopeful that MSMS will continue to be an “Opportunity for Excellence” for all of Mississippi’s students.

Respectfully submitted,



Elizabeth J. Morgan, Ph.D.
MSMS Class of 1995 Alumna
MSMS Chemistry Faculty Member (2014 – present)

Proposals for future of MSMS

From Jason Palagi <jpalagi72@gmail.com>

Date Sat 3/1/2025 8:39 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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To whom it may concern,

As a faculty member of MSMS, I found it disturbing that neither proposal truly addressed the major needs of MSMS.

The MSU proposal, with its integration of MSMS into SOCSO, would fundamentally change the nature of MSMS. It really seems like nothing more than trying to leverage funding for MSMS into the SOCSO. It was clear from reading their proposal that whoever composed it did not investigate what MSMS provides for its students in terms of dual credit and AP classes currently. The proposal fails to take into account the unique environment and culture of a small school intensely focused on academics in such a way that students are prepared for challenges they will face in nationally competitive colleges and careers.

The MUW proposal suffers from focusing on using MSMS to rehabilitate buildings that MUW has let sit in a state of disrepair for over 20 years. Further, the residence halls they propose for us to rehabilitate cannot accommodate 150 students each, which is the target enrollment.

Since its inception over 30 years ago, MSMS has not had a building designed and constructed for its needs, despite its students winning national achievements year after year and having a nationally recognized high school faculty. The students of MSMS deserve facilities worthy of their achievements and illustrative of their rank among the nation's top students.

Cheers,
Dr. Palagi

MSMS Proposals

From Naomi Buck Palagi <enaomib@yahoo.com>

Date Sat 3/1/2025 8:05 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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Dear Dr. Boone,

I have read through the MSU and MUW proposals for future housing of MSMS. I currently have a child enrolled in MSMS and hope to have another one enrolled in future. While I had been a bit on the fence about the possibility of MSMS moving to MSU, after reading the proposals I am 100% opposed to moving to MSU given those parameters.

A few points I want to make:

- my child and the vast majority of MSMS students blossom and thrive in a setting that is specifically geared to their accelerated, in-depth academic success with an eye to becoming key, influential participants in our world
- tying MSMS to any school district dramatically changes the character of the school, which is a wonderful amalgamation of students from across the state who are given a collegiate atmosphere and take that forward into impressive college and professional careers
- MSMS does not need more activity options - the students, faculty and staff do a great job of creating and sustaining the activities that enhance their academics, although of course some of those activities do need increased resources. Throwing them back into a regular high school setting dilutes the purpose and without a doubt, the success of the school.
- MSMS clearly needs more funding for better facilities and more instructors to keep up the amazing work they have been doing. Tagging MSMS onto SOSD so that that district gets more money is simply not a solution that fits this problem.

In closing, following through with the MSU plan is essentially closing what is and has been for decades an incredibly successful school. Please don't let that happen on your watch.

Sincerely,
Naomi Palagi
MSMS parent

MSMS proposals

From Rachel Cody Pfister <racody@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 12:15 AM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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To the Mississippi Department of Education,

My name is Rachel Pfister, and I was a student at MSMS from 1999-2001. I am writing about the proposals by MSU and MUW regarding the future of MSMS.

I, like many other MSMS students, was the first in my family to attend college. Not only did I receive two bachelor degrees, but I also went on to get my PhD. This is not unusual for MSMS alumni - many of my cohort went to university and a large amount went on to obtain advanced degrees. We are a formidable force across the entire United States in the fields of mathematics, education, microbiology, medicine, law, and engineering. MSMS supported our interests and academic goals in a way few high school students get to experience. MSMS continues to provide a nationally renowned educational experience to high schoolers and is a true jewel in the state of Mississippi.

When I attended MSMS, I lived in Fant Hall and the boys lived in Peyton Hall. Peyton was devastated by the tornado in 2002. The students eventually moved to Goen and Frazer Hall. I have only seen pictures of these dormitories, but they are appalling in the living conditions. I know MUW has made strides to repair and renovate issues, but not enough has been done for the existing and future students. No student should have to go "home" to mold, backed up sinks, outdated and broken furniture, and peeling paint.

I am grateful that the Mississippi Department of Education recognizes that something must change for the future of MSMS. I have read the proposals from MSU and MUW about their plans for the future of MSMS.

Honestly, I find both plans to be subpar for the needs of MSMS students. I realize this doesn't provide an easy answer, but that is my opinion based on my experience at MSMS and as the parent of current high schoolers. MSU's proposal for MSMS to share the Starkville High School does not recognize that experience of MSMS alumni and students. MSMS is not just an extension or partner of a high school; it is more a partnership with a university. My worry with the MSU plan is that MSMS students will be treated as an extension of Starkville High School, not even its own entity. Furthermore, if the MSU plan is implemented, the students will be far removed from all semblance of community. MSMS students are high schoolers removed from their family and friends of their homes. Being geographically separated from any central community locations further isolates them and makes them reliant on school shuttles or students with cars. One important part of the MSMS experience when I attended

was that we could walk within a certain geographic distance of the school, visit stores, go to the gym, and even attend church. We didn't require a shuttle or a car to do so. We were able to feel like we were part of the community and not always "at school." I do like MSU's plan to better incorporate college credits into MSMS courses, and I believe MSU has better science, library, and research facilities than MUW. But with the geographic separation of the school from the remainder of MSU - how often will students be able to access those things? And if they do, how will they remain safe in a large and heavily populated college campus?

MUW's proposal is subpar in other ways. MUW does not seem to recognize the actual extent of the problems that MSMS students have and are facing. The dorms need more than fresh paint and new lobby furniture. Those are great steps, but the dorms should be completely renovated and made modern. Even better would be to have dormitories that are closer to the academic facilities. The proposal to renovate Fant and Peyton Hall and return MSMS students would be fantastic, but this seems to not be MUW's intention. That seems to have been added on as an afterthought idea. MUW's other facilities, including libraries and educational facilities were extremely dated and inferior to MSU's when I was a student at MSMS. I do not know their current state so it would be disingenuous of me to comment on them. However, I am doubtful that MUW's claim that these facilities could compare with those of MSU.

MUW has a huge advantage over MSU in that the MSMS facilities are essentially their own part of the campus without being completely removed. Students are able to visit areas of Columbus without needing a shuttle or car. They are able to find and build community with the city in a way that would not be possible with Starkville.

I hope that the Mississippi Department of Education reviews both proposals and is able to find a solution that benefits the MSMS students as they deserve. They deserve to have safe and modern homes. They deserve to have educational facilities that meet their demands. MSMS has shown again and again that they produce exceptional students and future professionals with substandard facilities. Imagine what they could do with facilities that are deserving of them. MSMS students also deserve to have the opportunity to be treated as their own institution - not an add-on to an existing high school. And finally, MSMS students deserve to be able to have access to community amenities, churches, stores, etc without relying on transportation. It can be isolating to be so far from home and always feel that you are "at school." Provide them the opportunity to have community.

I realize this may be beyond the reach of the MDE, but I hope that both MUW and MSU are pushed to better understand MSMS students and the MSMS experience and needs. I hope in doing that, both universities are able to put forth better proposals that better meet the students' needs - as humans, as teens, as students. I also sincerely hope MDE supports the future of MSMS with funding considerations that will meet the needs of students. MSMS students are an amazing representation and asset to the state.

Thank you,
Rachel Cody Pfister, PhD
MSMS Class of 2001.
USC BA Anthropology and BA Psychology class of 2005
UCSD PhD Communication, class of 2016.

Feedback on MUW and MSU proposals for MSMS

From Lori Pierce <lpierce@themsms.org>

Date Sun 3/2/2025 9:31 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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I have been teaching World Languages at MSMS for 15 years now. In this time, I have had the great opportunity to learn about MSMS from some wonderful colleagues, including several of the original teachers at this school. In terms of how we teach and interact with each other here, I don't think there is a better model for quality teaching. I am anxious to continue working in an environment like this. In the time I have been at MSMS, our facilities have never been the best, but their condition has really deteriorated to the point that those issues are now interfering with our ability to actually hold effective classes in Hooper and for students to be able to study in the residential life buildings. I am glad that the request for proposals was made so that we could see just what is on the table with both MUW and MSU. Here is what I think about those two proposals:

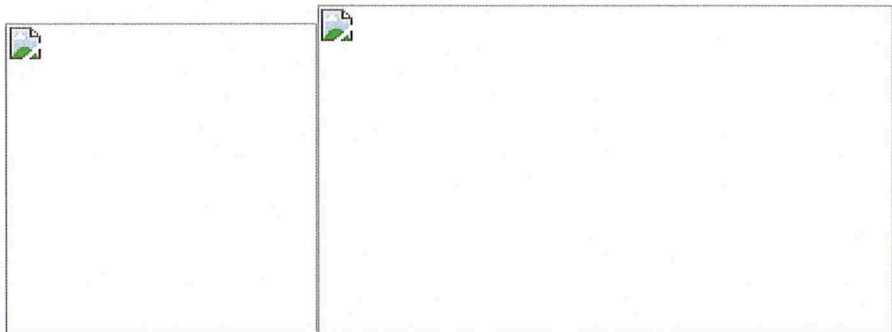
- 1) MSU's proposal to combine MSMS with Starkville High in the SOCSO would fundamentally change MSMS and effectively erase all the amazing culture and traditions that support great academic achievement. I have three children, one who graduated from MSMS and two who graduated from Starkville High School, so I feel I'm in a pretty good position to evaluate a merging of the two and it would be a disaster for MSMS. Our ability to create a school with a primary focus on academic achievement is in large part because of the community we create by being separate. My daughters who went to SHS focused on music and theater and had great starts at SHS that they would not have gotten at MSMS. One is now a professional event manager and the other is a sophomore vocal performance major with parts in two operas already under her belt. However, they did not get the focus on academic achievement that my oldest child got at MSMS. My daughters at SHS thrived on the extracurriculars in music and theater. My child at MSMS was like all the other MSMS students and went there for better academics, not for extracurriculars. For a time I taught Speech and Debate and coached our competitive team. It was always understood that academics came before S&D and participation in tournaments was optional if classwork was too much that week. MSMS students often forego extracurricular opportunities in order to focus on an exam or a paper. I don't think SHS would take kindly to this attitude from team members.
- 2) The RFP asked both schools to identify funding sources outside of the legislative process. I assume you were expecting the universities to offer some financial assistance. MUW did not offer anything beyond their current services (which are in many cases inadequate) and MSU simply pawned off responsibility to the SOCSO, selling out MSMS in the process. One thing I think is perfectly clear from these proposals is that our funding is going to have to come directly from the state legislature. I hope you are working on that.

As far as I see it, the details beyond these two observations are negotiable. The big issues are our independence as a separate entity and funding for the buildings we desperately need. What was the most disappointing part of reading through these proposals was the apparent fact that neither of these universities is willing to go out on a limb for MSMS. And to date, neither has MDE or the state

legislature. Given the number of successful graduates and the students who continue to love MSMS and who are taught well and prepared to enter any university in this country, it is very disappointing not to be supported at anything but a survival level. I have a close friend from high school who teaches at the Arkansas School for Math, Science, and the Arts and I visited their school a year ago along with some of our students. Their facilities are much better than ours and they are continually building more.

I hope you can become our champions. I think we have proven that we are successful at doing what MSMS was created to do.

Lori LeVar Pierce, she/her



MSMS Proposals

From Bradley Prewitt <brad@prewittgroup.com>

Date Sun 3/2/2025 7:34 AM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>; shaw.prewitt08@gmail.com
<shaw.prewitt08@gmail.com>; Mindy Prewitt <mindyprewitt@gmail.com>

External Email

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Dear Dr. Donna Boone: cc Mindy Prewitt, MD (MSMS 1991) and Shaw Prewitt (MSMS 2026)

I have read through the MSU/SOCSD and MUW proposals to secure MSMS's future. My context is unique in that my son Shaw is a current 11th grader at MSMS and my wife Mindy is a 1991 MSMS graduate. Mindy was the second class at MSMS. Unfortunately, being older, there was no MSMS for me to consider, though academically and intellectually I would have been well qualified. My wife Dr. Prewitt (Tupelo internal medicine/infectious diseases specialist) is going to be PLUS president next year; PLUS is the "PTA" of MSMS. My son Shaw is going to page for Lt. Gov. Hosemann the week of March 24. He paged for Senator Wicker last year; he is very interested in public policy.

I was not surprised by the proposal from MSU/SOCSD as I talked to Dr. Keenum in the fall about it. Mark and I worked together for many years for the late Senator Cochran on the Hill. He has done a great job at MSU. I was interested in the MSU angle because MUW is such a poor partner to MSMS in accommodating its needs. Case in point is our (Shaw and me) getting a MSMS wrestling team started this school year. Shaw is a HS wrestler (had to give up football to go to MSMS) and without a team would be denied a major outlet for physical and mental attainments. So we worked closely with Ginger Tedder - who is great! - and with the meager resources available we got a used mat from Lewisburg HS and a volunteer coach and started. We just had our first state champion two weeks ago - the first in MSMS history and it's in wrestling! So how did MUW fit in ... the school could offer no place in Stark (the fitness complex) to put in a mat that breaks down. MUW is an unappreciative host. They claim in their letter all these accommodations and it is rubbish. I called the President's office weeks ago because the kids could not even work out in the weight room - that is not even used by MUW students. It's a ghost town. MUW has vacant spaces galore but MSMS was forced to put the mat in one of their two existing facilities - in a band room. MUW's fate deserves its own hearing but all the poor proposals in the letter you received you can toss those in the trash. I mean, frankly, any new offering in the letter should be given now without the impetus of this proposal. MUW dings MSMS for all sorts of cafeteria charges and such. MSMS is basically a tenant farmer on the MUW plantation. They are not respected. And the facilities are terrible. During a recent cold snap my son came home - they could not heat the building past 47F. The dorms are trash. These kids give up a lot to move to MSMS. Nearly 60 year old designs don't cut it.

That being said, MUW is a great campus for MSMS. It's quiet, safe (not so safe around it!), and slow. And it's pretty enough. There are some buildings that have POTENTIAL with some money and with MUW getting a new attitude on enabling MSMS versus having it on its dying plantation.

As to MSU, I think the proposal is disappointing quite frankly. I know EVP Shaw, and the product is really uninspired. I would have proposed integrating MSMS closely with several of the centers, such as HPC2 and CAVS and the Vet School and the Engineering, Architecture, and other platforms. I don't see that. What I see is MSU proposing MSMS become part of SOCSO's plantation. It's just an adjunct set of buildings on the side of a new HS. Wonder whose going to help pay for SOCSO's new physical plant - the State of Mississippi. Yes, we all will chip in via MSMS. Starkville HS is an urban school district. I used to do school board law for Pascagoula MSD in a separate life. I know the legal perils of managing students and teachers. Mixing these MSMS kids in the cafeteria and sports programs is not good. MSMS kids are often unique. Shaw is well rounded - Eagle Scout, football, 4H (we have a ranch), politics, three varsity sports - but others are nerdy and quiet and quirky. Their families send them to MSMS to blossom but not be crushed by the peer pressure of an inner city school. MSMS sports are ancillary but not primary. That disappoints a student as Shaw but probably not most of the MSMS students. The study requirements are intense. The sports are mostly outlets to burn off some steam and stay in shape. Thrusting MSMS into Starkville HS activities puts them competing with one of the top public school athletic programs in MS. And the MSMS kids really don't have the time to mesh with those sports. It's obvious David Shaw had no clue as to MSMS's schedule - THEY ARE NOT ON BLOCK. Shaw has 6 to 7 classes per term. He can't go to a 130pm sports period - which counts as a class (absurd). There is no academic credit for sports at MSMS.

I think the residence on the side of SOCSO is insane. And I don't think SOCSO gets the headaches they will have with MSMS. You can't mix those populations! As to the budgets and governance, I realize the Arts School has some arrangement with Hazlehurst but this blend further emasculates MSMS and makes it truly the runt in the litter. It has no taxing authority like a district. It will have no separate property. It will have no independent budget. What this means is the MSU proposal will further erode MSMS because no parent is going to send their kids to what will be an AP residential program of Starkville HS. That's it - period. All this is turns out to be a bond issue additive to Starkville's need for a new HS. More plantation - less autonomy - less "special". For the \$85M I believe is sought under this proposal, there is plenty of meat on the bone to pay for an independent MSMS campus, but of course, this does not serve SOCSO's purpose of having the state pay part of its new HS facility tab!

What MSU should have proposed is a separate campus - they have tons of land! - and tied the academic / research might of the Tier 1 university into the MSMS curriculum platform. That works - that is better. But it's apparent that know one still really gets MSMS in this realm. They don't appreciate how MSMS is attempting to pull a few kids from the frankly mediocre academic experience that most Mississippi public schools offer. What MSMS has is old fashioned learning. Fast paced classes, with very capable teachers, with loads of homework, lots of tests and deliverables, requiring lots of study time seven days per week. That sounds like my HS experience. But my experience as a parent 35 years later is the opposite. Block schedule - sports as a graded class - no homework - no pressure - slow pace - etc... Even better districts such as Tupelo have dialed it back a lot. I don't think most kids - even the best ones - come out prepared from MS public schools IF they want to go somewhere better. I am not knocking the schools but I am saying it's hard to nurture exceptionalism anywhere but MSMS. That's right - exceptionalism. No other school can squeeze that out of the students. Sure, there are National Merit Finalists at other HS situations - like Oxford. But MSMS does something no other school has. And Mississippi needs more EXCEPTIONAL students to come back here. We lack leaders. We have great people. Mississippi's problem is always at the top, though the top will never admit that.

As to MDE and MSMS, the school needs a budget worthy of its mission. The fact that the school can barely afford a singlet for the kids to wear in a wrestling meet is atrocious. The current state at MSMS reveals that MDE is perhaps not jockeying for MSMS hard enough either. But look at Alabama and peer states. Again, we are Mississippi - we have potential but do we execute? MSMS needs its own school board - enhanced governance - and adequate funding. Otherwise it will die. They are losing students now because the impoverished state of its location. And the sad thing is the two proposals don't address the problems well. MUW is an embarrassment and MSU/SOCSD relegate MSMS even further to a lackey.

I would say the best possible scenario is MUW is put to death as an institution, MSU takes over the campus, MSMS gets money to take on renovated dorms, and MSMS can occupy some better facilities. That won't happen because MS does not terminate colleges. So the second best outcome is MSMS goes to MSU but it has a much separated (by significant distance) facility - fenced and protected - that is much better integrated into the academic and research heft of MSU, and left with its own autonomy and budget. I think the MDE board should recommend further study and refinement of the MSU proposal with MSMS participation. This is the problem for MSMS - if the director talks outside his or her lane to help MSMS he or she may get fired. So MSMS has totally clipped wings and is prohibited from talking unless permitted. That is understandable but really pitiful. Again, more of this plantation emerges and MSMS is the constant sharecropper.

Sorry for the length but no one at MSMS can say anything so I will

Godspeed, Brad P.

R. Bradley Prewitt

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Outlook

Public Comment about MUW and MSU's Proposal Regarding MSMS's Operations and Location

From Thomas Robinson <trobinson@themsms.org>

Date Mon 3/3/2025 12:18 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

 1 attachment (128 KB)

Letter Replying to MSMS's Future Operations and Locaton (March 2025).docx;

External Email

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the MDE organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

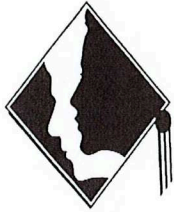
Greetings Dr. Boone,

It is with great appreciation to have an opportunity to submit a public comment about the proposals from MUW and MSU regarding MSMS's operations and location.

A respectful perspective and unique viewpoint as a member of the MSMS community within the ResLife department is attached.

Thank you very much for your time and the service that you provide to our state!!





The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science

An Opportunity for Excellence

March 03, 2025

Dr. Donna Boone
Chief Academic Officer

Dear Dr. Boone

As an employee with the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS), I perform duties within the ResLife department. Mainly, the duties I perform are within the residential hall for the male residents. After nine years of service, I take no position on a potential move of MSMS from its original home at the Mississippi University for Women (The W). Our staff really appreciate the State Board of Education and the Mississippi Department of Education's initiative to address the challenges occurring within our facilities constructed in 1965, to ensure their sustainability for future operations. This effort is critical toward promoting the good health and well-being of MSMS students, faculty, and the ResLife staff while supporting academic success at MSMS. When thinking about this ordeal, the three thoughts that come to mind are:

- * In 1987, why was MSMS originally located at MUW?
- * In 1987, why wasn't MSMS originally located at MSU?
- * What has changed to cause a discussion about relocating MSMS from MUW to MSU?

With those three questions presented, ordinarily children are protected from adult controversial and conflicted discussions. Now, the concerns consider how are current students, future students, and former students dealing with the uncertainties about MSMS's operations and location. My hope and desire are that this situation will not present a long-term negative effect on the students. There is no doubt that everyone supports the safety and well-being of teenage, high school students. MUW is a small and manageable campus regarding student safety and well-being. MSU is a large and difficult to manage campus regarding student safety and well-being. A comparison between high school students and college students recognizes the former group is young and impressionable while the latter group is curious and exploring adulthood.

The parents for both groups of students, as well as other adults associated with the students' education, growth, and development, possess desires and goals for the students to become productive citizens. Basically, the desires and goals related to high school students are to protect teenagers from themselves when considering unwise decisions teenagers may make. On the other hand, the desires and goals related to college students are to lend college students support with receiving educational degrees to acquire employment. MUW and MSU presented excellent proposals regarding campus life and benefits to students related to facilities, services, amenities, and other activities. Apparently, MUW and MSU's objective for MSMS students is to succeed academically, professionally, and in life.



The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science

An Opportunity for Excellence

Since MUW and MSU presented excellent proposals that apparently possess similar objectives for MSMS students to succeed academically, professionally, and in life, it may be productive to suggest that MUW and MSU present a joint proposal that support MSMS's operations and location. This issue about MSMS's operation and location becoming a public controversy and conflict may negatively affect the teenage students in the long-term of their life. There should be an immediate resolution to this issue and an apology should probably be issued to MSMS's current students, potential future students, and former students for causing a distraction to their educational experiences. A student summit will likely restore the students' faith in our society.

Thank you very much for your time and the services you provide to the state!!



The Mississippi School
for Mathematics and Science
An Opportunity for Excellence

Thomas A. Robinson

Frazer Hall Assistant Hall Director

Frazer Hall Staff

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Proposals for housing MSMS

From Rebecca Scott <rebeccaberryscott@yahoo.com>

Date Wed 2/26/2025 9:54 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the MDE organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Dr. Boone,

I am the mother of an MSMS senior (Nora Scott '25) and I have been highly dissatisfied with the process initiated only a few weeks ago by MDE. I think that we stakeholders should have been asked first, not last, to give input about the current status of the school- its facilities, its teachers and staff, residential life, and its partnership and location at MUW.

First, I am disturbed that this attempt to secure funding for Starkville-Ok Co schools and mitigate tax liability for their residents is so thinly-veiled and that our public leaders are unabashedly promoting this sort of nepotism. The obvious ulterior motive creates an insurmountable barrier of suspicion as to whether or not this has, in fact, anything to do with improving MSMS and securing its future for another generation of Mississippi families.

As a MS taxpayer helping to fund the school, I want MSMS to remain as it was originally intended: an extraordinary, residential school separate from any other public high school and beyond the jurisdiction, control, or influence of a regular school district. MSMS teachers and administrators should have full autonomy to guide and instruct their students without political pressures or constraints.

I would like to see an investment in the current MSMS facilities on the MUW campus. Over my daughter's two years at the school, there have been numerous mechanical issues- fire alarms, carbon monoxide concerns and evacuations, as well as mechanical issues (mostly heating and air) in the classrooms. I would also like to see the state focus on maximizing the enrollment, ensuring that the maximum number of kids and families have the support necessary to make the life-changing decision to attend MSMS.

I was pleasantly surprised when Southern offered full scholarships to all MSMS graduates last spring and equally thrilled when MUW did the same this fall. I thought then- and still think- that for MSU to claim that they prioritize keeping MSMS talent in the state when they cannot even make the same scholarship offer as these smaller, less-funded universities, is a self-serving falsehood.

Finally, I believe that it is time to put these "proposals" on the back burner and convene a group of real stakeholders- parents, alumni, teachers, staff, people from the MSMS Foundation, and the MUW staff - to discuss how best to optimize MSMS for the future.

Thank you,
Becky Scott

Sent from my iPhone

March 4, 2025

MS Department of Education:

I am writing to express my support in having the Mississippi School for Math & Science to remain on campus at Mississippi University for Women in Columbus. First let me give you my background as an explanation where my ideas come from. I am a proud alum of Mississippi State University (MSU) where I got two undergraduate degrees (class of 1997) and a master's degree (class of 2000). My master's degree is in student affairs where I took classes in student development theory among other things. For more than 20 years, I worked on multiple college campuses working directly with college students including time working at MSU, the University of Memphis, Mississippi University for Women, the University of Alabama and the University of Mississippi Medical Center. I hope you will see from my background that I understand college campuses, both big and small.

Honestly, I was surprised when I heard that anyone would ever consider moving MSMS to MSU. I've read the reports as well as other media resources about this issue over the last month or so. The RFP from MSU has multiple issues. First of all, it puts the MSMS students on a small campus with another high school. I visited MSMS in the 1990's and considered enrolling there, but I ultimately decided it wasn't for me. Part of the draw to MSMS is that it is a special and unique experience for academically talented students who have earned a spot in the prestigious school. And honestly, many of those students don't feel like they fit into their own high schools. In the MSU plan, they will be with another high school on their campus in their town. It waters down the experience for the students and certainly makes it much less prestigious. It also puts those students back the same environments that they came from in their regular high schools.

Secondly, the MSU proposal is absolutely a terrible idea because of its proximity to a large SEC school with an active Greek Life system as well as an active party culture. It is IRRESPONSIBLE of the Department of Education to even consider this option. I worked at MUW for 7 years, and I know how difficult it was to keep the students safe and segregated on that small, liberal arts campus. It would be impossible to do that on campus at MSU. I am confident that students will be harmed by this move if this is what you decide to do. And I think there are parents who would never send their students there because of that reason. These are not adults who can make adult decisions yet. They are high school kids, and that should be considered. It is a reckless decision to be sure.

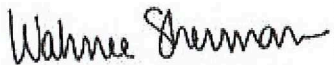
Finally, the MSU proposal costs more than twice what the proposal at MUW costs. The state has HABITUALLY underfunded MSMS at MUW. So many of the issues I've heard folks (including many legislators) complain about in terms of residence halls and other facilities could be fixed with more funding. But that funding has never come to MUW. The idea that the State Legislature and the Department of Education would consider giving such a huge sum of money to MSU to build new facilities when they won't even help to renovate

buildings at MUW is a slap in the face to the taxpayers of Mississippi and especially to the MUW campus.

I almost didn't write this letter because, honestly, it seems as though minds are already made up and that the process has been rigged from the beginning to favor MSU. If this was truly an open process that was about finding the best location for MSMS and doing what is best for those students, then why wasn't the RFP process open to all 8 IHL institutions? Why not allow everyone to write a proposal of what they could offer? It just seems as though that wasn't allowed because the Department of Education had already decided that MSU was to be the home of MSMS. Otherwise the decision to only allow two schools to submit an RFP is incredibly problematic.

As I said from the beginning, I am a proud alum of Mississippi State University. I also spent 7 years working at Mississippi University for Women. I understand both places and their culture and what they have to offer. MSU is not the place for MSMS, and it is NOT what is best for those high achieving high school students. Please don't let politics play into what is best for MSMS and its future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wahnee Sherman". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Wahnee Sherman, Ed.D.
MSU Class of 1997
MSU Class of 2000

Alan Stancill, PhD, CPA
105 Cypress Pointe Rd
Starkville, MS 39759

March 4, 2025

Dr. Donna Boone
Chief Academic Officer
Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street
Jackson, MS 39205

Dear Dr. Boone,

I am writing as a parent of an MSMS senior. First, let me say that I am encouraged that MDE and the state legislature are taking steps to address the facilities issues with MSMS. I say facilities because that, in my opinion, is the main concern with the school. Despite these facility limitations, the faculty and staff are providing a superior education for the students who choose to attend. I know MDE is already aware of the excellent performance by MSMS students on comparable metrics, like the number National Merit Finalists, relative to neighboring math and science schools in Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas, despite those schools spending double or more per student compared to Mississippi.

From a parent perspective, my son has had an excellent experience throughout his time at MSMS, and I am grateful for his opportunity to attend such a great school. He is thriving there, and I believe he finally found "his people". MSMS has challenged him both academically and personally, leaving him well-prepared for the transition to college. It has afforded him opportunities to engage in activities and experiences that would not have been available in a traditional school setting.

I have reviewed both proposals and find them somewhat lacking, but I think that is likely a result of the short timeframe provided for proposals. To me, the MUW proposal is largely a status quo with a few enhancements, but with adequate funding. It is a model that has worked for over 30 years and would continue to work if properly supported by the state. Because MUW is the "known quantity" in this scenario, I will spend more time addressing my concerns with the MSU proposal.

I believe the MSU proposal completely misses the spirit and culture of MSMS. Spend some time on the MSMS campus and around its students, and you quickly learn that MSMS is not just a school, but a community. My fear is that community would be lost with the MSMS-SHS hybrid proposed by MSU. The proposal says it offers MSMS students the opportunity of a traditional high school experience. I would argue that if they wanted a traditional experience, they would have stayed at their home school. But these students are looking for more, and they experience they want would be diluted with this partnership. The idea of having them dual enrolled in SOCS and taking classes at SHS, while also allowing SHS students to take MSMS classes, makes this sound more like a residential annex of the state's top students by SHS. This is further insinuated by the proposed joint extracurricular activities between the two schools. This does not sound like a proposal for a new school but rather a merger of two schools. As a parent, this is not an arrangement that I find attractive. I would not send my child to MSMS under this joint school proposal.

I do understand the benefits of having MSMS adjacent to the MSU campus and its facilities. But I also understand the complicated logistics of high school students living on a major college campus. One such limitation is the limited access to library and recreational facilities that MSMS students would have at MSU versus the more open access they have now at MUW. Overall, I would view the MSU proposal much more favorably if the new facility were completely separate from any SOCSO facilities.

Although my son is graduating in a few months, I am fully committed to supporting MSMS and its mission to help Mississippi's best and brightest reach their potential. Ultimately, the most important result of this process is the long-term success of MSMS, wherever it may end up. I believe it is an invaluable, and in some cases life-changing, opportunity for Mississippi's best and brightest and I am glad that the legislature and MDE are finally paying attention.

Thank you for taking the time to read my thoughts on this matter. I am excited about the future of MSMS and what its students and faculty can achieve with appropriate funding and facilities. Please contact me if you would like further comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan Stancill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A" and "S".

Alan Stancill

March 3rd, 2025

Dr. Donna Boone
Chief Academic Officer
Mississippi Department of Education (MDE)
359 North West Street
P.O. Box 771
Jackson, MS 39205-0771

Dear Dr. Boone:

I am an alumnus of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS), a long-time educator of gifted students, and a mental health professional. I am writing to you to voice my thoughts about the proposals from Mississippi University for Women (MUW) and Mississippi State University (MSU) regarding the future of MSMS. From my background and current positions, I do not find either plan to be particularly satisfying, but I believe the facts, evidence, and likely outcomes lead to the conclusion that one plan is dangerous to the very existence of MSMS and has the potential to stagnate its future growth and educational programming. The MSU proposal alters not only the location of MSMS—which is not critical in my opinion—but more importantly its identity in a substantial way. As seen in the MSMS Student Handbook, publicly available online, Mississippi’s only residential high school for gifted youth operates on the ideals of Scholarship, Service, Creativity, and Community, so I shall frame my remarks using those principles.

Scholarship

When I was a student at MSMS many years ago, I greatly benefited from the curricular knowledge gained in my classes there, but the true long-term benefit was learning *how to learn* and conduct research to engage in informed problem-solving. Learning can certainly take place both in and outside the classroom, but my experience as an educator and the research literature indicate that gifted students thrive when around other gifted students who are highly motivated to learn. I recall an MSMS student from a few years ago raising his pre-MSMS ACT composite score by 11 points before he graduated; he attributed his great success to being in a motivating and supportive environment that he did not have at his former school. A major concern I have is that the MSU proposal seems to advocate for a good deal of “sharing” that seems markedly beneficial to Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District (SOCSD) more so than MSMS. By having mixed MSMS and SOCSD classes, it puts the gifted MSMS students back in a situation not unlike their former schools, and I imagine their academic motivation will suffer. In time, this result would likely decrease applications to MSMS rather than increase them.

On a similar note, I think a major issue of fairness occurs with the MSU proposal that would allow SOCSD students to take advanced coursework at MSMS. If several hundred students go through the effort to apply, be interviewed, and compete to become a member of an approximate MSMS class size of 120, how would it be fair to suddenly allow SOCSD pupils to take MSMS classes without going through that process? I am sure that there would be gifted students in the

Mississippi Delta, DeSoto County, the Gulf Coast area, etc. that either did not apply or were not accepted into MSMS who would love to take classes not offered at their school that MSMS specializes in, but they would not be able to do so simply because they are not in close proximity to MSMS the way that SOCS D students would be in the MSU proposal. Another matter of fairness arises when one considers unvetted students being allowed to take the rigorous courses at MSMS. What if SOCS D students enroll in MSMS classes that they later find themselves woefully unprepared for and suffer academically with poor grades? That is not fair for these aspiring SOCS D students. As a mental health professional, I do not want to see these kids set up for failure and all the negative consequences from excessive stress levels.

My understanding is that the proposals from MUW and MSU were also supposed to include information about enhancing the numbers of the student body at MSMS. However, I am seriously concerned that MSU's plan might actually decrease applications to and enrollment at MSMS. I believe that MSMS accepts a dozen or so students each year from Starkville. That figure corresponds to approximately 10% of an average class size of 120. However, if students in SOCS D do not have to apply but can still take MSMS classes, then why would they choose to be subjected to the rigorous application process? What if they think they are only interested in advanced biology courses but have no desire to take MSMS's required classes in physics? Losing 10% of a class of adequately prepared students from SOCS D would severely harm recruitment at MSMS. In addition, local SOCS D students who attend MSMS might be more tempted to withdraw from MSMS when the academic pressures become very real to them towards the end of the first semester of junior year at MSMS. It is much easier to leave by walking across the street—quite literally based on the proposals—than to suffer a bit and receive encouragement through resilience when there is a more extensive withdrawal process.

Service

MSMS students pride themselves on being active in many community service activities each year, and I am sure that would continue in either Columbus or Starkville. However, I fear that the MSU proposal would actually decrease MSMS students' opportunities for service and leadership in clubs and sports in the long-run. As a former MSMS student, I still remember the appeal of being able to essentially form any club as long as I could find a faculty sponsor. I think it is very possible that the joint administrations of MSMS and SOCS D might feasibly want to consolidate some resources that might mean more joint clubs rather than separate ones for both MSMS and SOCS D. For example, it might be projected that there is not enough demand to have a student branch of Habitat for Humanity for both institutions, so a combined one is formed. Suddenly, an MSMS student who wants to be club president is competing with 1,400 students from Starkville High School rather than only the 240 at MSMS. As most people would agree, most high school elections are far more about popularity than ability to lead, so MSMS students would be at an inherent disadvantage in this scenario. A similar issue relates to athletics where I think the MSU proposal is naive or inadequately thought-out at best. MSMS students are not really known for winning state athletic competitions, but MSMS does occasionally enroll a star competitor or two within a cohort. It was not until the year after I graduated that MSMS won its first basketball game! It seems likely that most MSMS students would not make it through team tryouts in most sports competing with SOCS D students, so the number of MSMS students getting exercise for their mental wellness and the experience of comradery of being on a team

would greatly diminish. It would be unfortunate to stymie a young person's enjoyment and passion for a sport in this manner. I also am afraid that most public school coaches would not fully understand the academic rigors of MSMS and why students might not be able to attend practice because they needed to study for the Calculus III test the next day.

Creativity

Regarding creativity in the arts, there might be an advantage for MSMS students being able to make use of the much larger visual and performing arts courses available to SOCS D students due to their having significantly more than the two art/music teachers MSMS has. However, current MSMS students can take any MUW arts class with permission and as long as it fits within their schedule, so I do not think they are impeded in these pursuits at their current location in Columbus. I am concerned that the current MSU proposal might actually harm MSMS students' intellectual/academic creativity, though. I found their plan to strikingly emphasize career/technical education (CTE) and workforce development throughout, and that is neither the focus of MSMS nor the reason why students choose to apply and enroll at MSMS. It certainly seems that whoever put together MSU's proposal lacked a good understanding of the identity and culture of MSMS. CTE certainly has a place in our state and with many of its students, but the academically gifted students of MSMS need the broad educational background and STEM-centered curriculum to fuel their interests and to achieve their academic and career goals. I can certainly see that many MSMS students may need the knowledge to change a tire on their vehicles, but that does not mean they need to go to a shop class to learn how to problem solve in that manner.

Community

For those of us who had the opportunity to attend MSMS, we usually all tell a similar story about how we applied because of the appealing advanced academics, but we stayed and are more strongly impacted to this day by the community we found at MSMS focused around a mutual love of learning. Without a doubt, expert faculty who were actually passionate about teaching in their subjects and late night conversations with fellow students with similar interests still resonate with me many years after crossing the stage with my diploma cover in hand. Those of us who call ourselves MSMS alumni can all share our trials and tribulations we endured—and hopefully persevered through—during two of the most influential years of our lives. We may be years apart in age, but it never fails that this shared bond forms a connection that enables us to have a conversation that usually leads to thoughtful reminiscences and reflections of or about MSMS. As is probably no surprise, I enjoy discussing MSMS and extolling its virtues whenever and wherever I have the chance. In January of this year, I had the chance to talk about MSMS with a school counselor from a school only a couple of counties away from its current home in Lowndes County and less than an hour's drive away. Unfortunately, she had never heard of MSMS, and I tried for approximately half an hour to explain its structure, purpose, location, and community/culture. It seems that she initially had trouble wrapping her head around the idea that MSMS was not the Math and Science Department at MUW but a separate high school located on their campus. Fortunately, I think I finally helped her have a better understanding, and she seemed to think that MSMS was a good thing for the state to have for its young people. This exchange became much more relevant after I had read both the proposals from MUW and MSU

about the future of MSMS. I have begun to wonder that if I had difficulty differentiating MSMS from its host campus of MUW, how on earth would I be able to provide distinction among MSMS, SOCSO, and MSU if the MSU proposal were to become reality. For example, I imagine the conversation might go something like this with a hypothetical person I may meet at a conference on the Gulf Coast: “MSMS partners with Starkville High School on the campus of Mississippi State University.” “So, that school is run by the University?” “Well, no. MSMS has some of their own buildings but shares others with Starkville.” “Oh, I see. They are like an Academy or Academic Institute within SOCSO like those that Gulfport has.” “No, MSMS’s autonomy is respected.” “Ah...I’m sorry, but I am still confused and don’t quite get it.” [Silently, to myself: “Me, too.”]. This potential confusion paves the way to make MSMS student recruitment more challenging as we would be seen as less unique and a subsidiary of much larger partner institutions. If MSMS cannot adequately explain who they are and how they operate, then that would likely make potential parents and students less willing to investigate further or ultimately matriculate to MSMS. “Why would I send my kid to Starkville High School when we have AP classes here? Besides, our team beat their team this past year anyway!” While it may sound nice for MSMS students participating on Starkville High School’s athletic teams or clubs, I think this idea only confuses MSMS’s identity and autonomy even more. Unfortunately, the current MSU proposal provides little in elucidating who is responsible for what (e.g., human resources management and business support) in the three-way partnership and merely states that a planning committee will decide later. A *committee* does not decide the *community* of an institution.

Conclusion

In summary, I believe there are many problems with the MSU proposal for the future of MSMS as it seems that it will likely deteriorate the identity of MSMS and ultimately impede its future growth and educational programming. If these are the only two options, it seems much better for MSMS to remain on the MUW campus. However, I would advocate for a third option: allow MDE more time to consider MSMS’s future and consider asking MSU to provide an alternate proposal that does not essentially combine MSMS with SOCSO. In fact, I would love to hear an option where MSMS’s new facilities are built across Highway 182 at the Research Park, which would greatly benefit the young scientists at MSMS. MSU is fortunate to have a lot of land, so I suspect there is probably space on the other side of campus close to the Veterinary School on Blackjack Road. Honestly, I think the best location option in Starkville would be one that mirrors the benefits of the smaller MUW campus: MSMS having space on the central part of MSU’s campus such that all vital areas are within easy walking distance without the need for shuttles. Of course, I have no doubt that there are logistical challenges to these alternate proposals as well. I simply do not think a fair comparison exists to make a good recommendation to the state legislature at this point that maintains MSMS’s identity and provides for its long term growth and sustainability.

Whether MUW or MSU hosts MSMS in the future, I assume there will need to be some sort of planning committee for new facilities similar to what is outlined in the MSU proposal towards the end of the document. In that one, I was deeply concerned and confused about why the 7-member committee supposedly focusing on the future of MSMS only included a single MSMS representative, the Executive Director. Why would the other three entities in this “partnership”

have twice as much say in matters than the institution that is the sole reason for the committee's existence? Any MSMS alumnus would tell you that while the friendships made at MSMS are important, the "heart and soul" or "lifeblood" of the school is its faculty, so why are they not represented on a committee deciding what the state's most academically emphasized school looks like and how it functions? At the very least, I think there should be equal representation for MSMS on a Future of MSMS planning committee, but there is certainly an argument that the more relevant stakeholders should compose a higher percentage of the advisory group.

Finally, I wanted to say a simple "thank you" to Dr. Boone and MDE for allowing alumni, educators, and concerned Mississippians a chance to provide feedback about the proposals for the future of MSMS. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heath Stevens". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'H'.

Heath Stevens, Ph.D., LSC, NCC, NCSC, ACS

MSMS proposals

From Philip Taff <philipctaff@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 3:59 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

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Dr. Donna Boone,

After reading the MSU and MUW proposals for the future of MSMS, I have a lot of remaining questions about which would be better for future MSMS students.

A major question to me is how the physical separation between MSMS and MSU would affect future MSMS students. The proposal emphasizes this as a benefit for student safety. But it also makes it more difficult to use some of the other possible benefits of the MSU proposal. For example, MUW's proposal shows just how much MSMS students make use of their library and gym. Having those college facilities a bus ride away (vs. the very short walk at MUW) would likely discourage students from making as much use of them. Or perhaps it will result in MSMS students spending much more of their time on the MSU campus, eroding the safety benefit.

I don't see much in either proposal about MSMS faculty. The excellent teachers at MSMS were a huge part of what made my time there a wonderful experience. How would either proposal affect recruiting, retention, and support for the top notch MSMS faculty?

One item in the MSU proposal sounds particularly concerning. Giving MSMS only one representative on the seven-member Planning Committee does not sound likely to result in an outcome that sufficiently takes into account the needs of MSMS students. SOCD gets more representatives and though they are supporting more students they are not residential students who will spend their evenings, nights, and weekends here. MSU gets more representatives even though its role is that of a supporting partner. Is this proposal for MSMS's benefit or MSU's?

Some shortcomings of the MSU proposal would be easy to fix. Using the MSU post office would be very inconvenient. For example, MSMS students who may be awaiting care packages from home needing to make the trek over to MSU to receive it. But that could be solved by including a mailroom and package locker in the MSMS dorm.

MSMS is a Mississippi gem. I hope the state increases support and develops a strong plan to build on that tradition of excellence for future MSMS students.

- Philip Taff
MSMS class of 2003

MSMS proposal comments-alumni

From Katrina Vizzini <katvizzini@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 4:07 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the MDE organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello Mississippi Legislators!

My name is Katrina Vizzini and I am a proud alumnus of the MSMS class of 2006. I would like to start by thanking all of you and the state for founding, funding, and continuing to support MSMS all these years.

I have seen the proposals put forth by MUW and MSU and I have some concerns. Namely: the proposed shared space with Starkville High School. I have the story about why below, but have also made some points at the very end addressing some particular economic impacts my attending MSMS provided the state.

MSMS is a school that is meant to enrich the entire state, not one county in particular. I believe the current proposal provides extensive benefits to the Starkville/Oktibbeha county school district while providing obstacles to MSMS in maintaining its culture, its experience, and overall, its existence.

By sharing classrooms, common areas, and other facilities with non-MSMS students, you remove one of the biggest drivers of MSMS's success: fellowship. Exclusively having classmates that are just as eager to learn and research as you yourself are allow students, like myself, to have identities outside of being the "smart kid." It allows kids a reprieve from bullying-something myself and most of my classmates experienced in hefty doses at our home schools. And it fosters a sense of healthy competition: you are no longer running a race with people in a different league, limiting how much you push yourself, you're running with the best of the best and you have bigger targets and aspirations.

I have the somewhat-specific experience of having attended both SHS and MSMS. Starkville High was, to put it mildly, not a pleasant experience. It was so bad that after one semester I left Starkville High to finish up my sophomore year as a home school student before making my way to MSMS. I cannot imagine MSMS being able to thrive with the SHS environment enmeshed within it.

Financial impacts:

Had MSMS not existed as it was, I am unsure if my family would have moved to Mississippi at all. The public non-MSMS schools available did not meet my parents' requirements for academic excellence when they were considering the employment opportunity. Myself and my younger brother Sean Vizzini are both alumni and my older brother, Anthony Vizzini, would likely have attended if we moved before

the application deadline for his junior year. Instead, my brother was forced to dual enroll in MSU his junior year of highschool to maintain academic rigor.

My father, Dr. Tony Vizzini, was employed as a state employee, serving nearly 7 years as the department head for Mississippi State University's Aerospace Engineering department. While there, he was instrumental in getting businesses to work with Raspet Flight Research Laboratory-bringing in significant tax dollars for the state as well as hundreds of jobs. Additionally, I attended MSU, as did both of my brothers.

I currently work as composite materials engineer for a government contractor in Huntsville, AL serving our nation's defense needs. I also work with my industry's professional society and am always looking for ways to collaborate with the facilities and faculty I got to know at Mississippi State University. Previously, I worked at Toray Composites in their research laboratory where we had research projects that we funded with the USM polymer science department. A connection I already had due to collaborations between USM and MSMS.

While I may no longer reside in Mississippi, my time at MSMS is cherished and impacts the career path I walk, continuing the ties I have to the state. It continues to influence decisions I make, that in turn, benefit the state of Mississippi. Knowing the classmates I had at MSMS and their potential, I can only imagine the impact the class of 2006 has on the state, let alone what ALL the graduates of MSMS have done.

Please: keep funding MSMS. Protect this absolute gem of an institution. Whether the state deems it better to keep MSMS at MUW and revitalize the buildings, or move it to MSU, I do not have an opinion and defer to your expertise. All I ask is to please not ruin it by merging it with a traditional high school. I thank you for your time and for the opportunity to provide feedback.

Thank you,

Katrina Vizzini
MSMS Class of 2006
662-648-8064

The Future of MSMS

From Keyana Washington <keyanawashington@gmail.com>

Date Tue 3/4/2025 4:14 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

Cc cedric washington <cedric.washington@gmail.com>

External Email

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Dear Dr. Boone,

We are writing as proud graduates of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, class of 1998, to express our deep concern for the state of our alma mater. When we visited 2 years ago, we were shocked and dismayed to see the state of the facilities of the best high school in Mississippi and one of the top high schools in the country. This cannot continue to be the case. MSMS requires immediate upgrades to its facilities in order to continue to produce competitive students who will go on to be doctors, engineers, scientists, professors, dentists, attorneys, politicians, and agriculture specialists. We are glad to know that you have requested proposals from MUW and Mississippi State. We are opposed to combining MSMS with any other high school, including Starkville High School, in any way. One of the unique elements of MSMS is its independence from other high schools and ability to draw talented students from all over the state. MSMS needs full, adequate funding earmarked by the legislature to bring it up to standards of neighboring schools. We urge you to work to preserve one of the very best things that Mississippi has going for it - ensure MSMS is fully funded now and in the future.

We currently live in Buford, GA and are zoned for Seckinger High School, which is a very impressive public high school focused on STEM and AI. We would be happy to help arrange a site visit as plans are being developed to renovate and build new academic spaces at MSMS. If there is any other way we can assist, please let us know.

Sincerely,

Dr. Keyana Washington, MSMS c/o 1998

Cedric Washington, MSMS c/o 1998

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Keyana R. Washington, MD, MPH

keyanawashington@gmail.com

(404) 375-7296 - mobile

"You only get to live life once but if you do it right, once is enough" -Unknown

MSMS - proposals

From Brandy Williams <brandywilliamsrn@bellsouth.net>

Date Sun 3/2/2025 4:40 PM

To SecondaryEducation <secondaryeducation@mdek12.org>

External Email

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the MDE organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Dear Dr. Donna Boone,

I am writing to you with concern for the future of MSMS. I have reviewed both proposals and have thoughts regarding both.

To preface my comments, I have a son that graduated from MSMS in May of 2024. I have a daughter who is interviewing March 22nd with the interest of being accepted to MSMS for her junior year (August 2025), and I have a 7th grader that admires both of her older siblings and aspires to become a graduate of MSMS herself. I am a single mother of three academically gifted children. I have strived to teach them to do their best, achieve their goals, and to be fiercely independent in being successful and happy in their lives.

MSMS has a proven track record for guiding academically gifted children to reach their goals. This educational institution deserves the funding from the state to sustain the best environment for these students. The residence halls on the MUW campus are outdated and need serious renovations. My son could care less about the residence hall, the 1960 shared bathroom facilities, the mold in the ceiling by the elevators and the HVAC issues. It was a shame to see these things. I encourage you and your colleagues to make a visit to both Goen and Frazer residence halls and imagine your child living there for 2 years of their lives. What funds would you allocate to correct the facility issues?

MSMS has the absolute best faculty and student culture that one could want for their child. This is why my son thrived and achieved his academic goals. He scored a 35 on his ACT, earned the honor of being named a STAR student, and a National Merit recipient. He has moved on to attend Mississippi State University where he continues to thrive. He began with 20 credit hours earned at MSMS with dual credit and AP classes. He is mature, intelligent and extremely happy. He maintains a 4.0, offers to tutor others that need extra help, and stays in touch with the lifelong friends across many cultures, ethnicities, from various regions of the state that have moved off to other states to further their college education. MSMS is the major contributing factor for my son's success in academics and some of his closest friendships. For this, I am forever grateful. I am hopeful to afford my other two children this rich academic and social experience to foster their future success and happiness.

MUW - this campus is small and charming. It was a safe and quaint environment for high school students to integrate into. The resident hall facilities were very dated and in need of renovations. The classrooms were fine, but likely in need of updates as well. The shared spaces on the MUW campus were nice. Proper funding could make the MUW campus a sustainable location for the future of MSMS.

MSU - this proposal was surprising with the integration into the Starkville High campus. I think this is a bad idea and part of what makes MSMS culture special. MSMS kids are academically different and more focused on academic success than traditional students. MSMS kids are interested in escaping the stereotypes, the high school drama, and excited for a learning environment with more students like them and being pushed by the caliber of faculty MSMS maintains. MSU location, not integrated with Starkville High, would provide more interest and acceptance from parents considering to allow their child to enroll at MSMS.

Please do your best to make the best decision for some of the state's most academically talented students and the high caliber faculty. MSMS deserves adequate funding, with a mix of students from all areas of the state. Please reach out for any additional information that I may provide.

MSMS has my full support.

Sincerely,

Brandy Williams

Mother of Jackson, Allison, and Carly

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