

CASE STUDY

Outcomes Over Activity

How Mississippi moved beyond “any job is a good job” to focus on mobility and accountability



Building a workforce system focused on mobility

Mississippi faced a persistent challenge: critical industries struggled to fill in-demand roles, even as many residents remained in low-wage jobs with limited opportunity for advancement.

Leaders recognized a disconnect between how workforce success was measured and what workers and employers actually needed. While programs emphasized job placement, many placements did not lead to long-term stability or upward mobility.

At the same time, employers continued to report gaps in higher-skill roles, and public investments were not consistently aligned to those needs.



COURTNEY TAYLOR, PH.D., PCED

Executive Director of Mississippi's
Office of Workforce Development,
AccelerateMS

As Mississippi moved forward, several priorities emerged:

- **Focus on living-wage, in-demand roles** – Prioritize pathways that lead to jobs paying a sustainable wage, rather than entry-level roles with limited progression
- **Align training to real employer demand** – Fund programs tied directly to hiring needs and hold employers accountable for outcomes
- **Use funding more strategically** – Shift investment toward gaps where intervention can meaningfully change outcomes
- **Operate with speed and accountability** – Continuously evaluate programs and reallocate funding when results do not meet expectations

Where the system was breaking down

Mississippi identified a fundamental disconnect between how workforce programs were designed and what workers and employers actually needed. While systems emphasized job placement and participation, many roles offered limited opportunity for advancement, and employers continued to face gaps in critical, higher-skill positions.

This misalignment meant that even as activity increased, long-term outcomes did not.

What Mississippi was doing

- Training for entry-level roles
- Measuring success by enrollment
- Funding programs without hiring outcomes



What workers and employers really needed

- Pathways to living-wage careers
- Advancement, not just placement
- Talent for high-demand, hard-to-fill roles

The result was a system that produced activity, but not mobility.



Defining the right problem to solve

Mississippi did not expand workforce programs broadly. Instead, the state took a disciplined approach to identifying where intervention would have the greatest impact.

These are the steps they took to create the process for funding programs.

1

Look at the data.

Mississippi started with labor market data (Lightcast, JobsEQ) and state longitudinal outcomes to understand which jobs were in demand, where talent gaps persisted, and which programs were not leading to strong results.

2

Pressure test locally.

The state then pressure-tested those findings with employers, community colleges, workforce boards, and regional partners to identify what the data was missing and where gaps were most urgent on the ground.

3

Apply a hard filter.

Before prioritizing any role, Mississippi asked a simple question: does this job lead to a living wage (at least \$20/hr)? Roles that did not meet that threshold were not prioritized for state investment.

4

Define “priority occupations.”

They used these defined inputs for roles they analyzed:

1. Is it in demand?
2. Does it pay a living wage?
3. Does it require intervention to fill?

Any job that didn’t check all three boxes was deprioritized.

5

Validate with outcomes.

They didn’t stop at planning. They looked at:

- Are people getting jobs?
- Are employers hiring from programs?

If not, they stopped funding the program.

How Mississippi turned strategy into execution

Mississippi was able to shift its hiring strategy because of a few unique factors: upfront clarity on workforce needs, flexible funding outside traditional channels, and a workforce board structured for action.



Pre-Defining What Matters

They started by getting clear on what success actually looks like: programs tied to meaningful outcomes.

To reset, they focused on a clear standard:

- Roles had to be in demand,
- Pay a living wage, and
- Lead to real hiring.

Data informed decisions, but employers and regional partners validated what mattered in practice.



Funding Pipeline Outside of WIOA

Mississippi's ability to scale programs up or down comes from funding outside WIOA constraints.

- Training tax diversion from unemployment insurance (since 2005) supports ~\$30M annually for in-demand training
- Flexible funding enables rapid pivots when programs don't deliver results
- Strong audits and board oversight ensure funds are used effectively and can be quickly reallocated

Example: Programs were shut down when employers weren't hiring graduates.



State Workforce Board Structure

Mississippi's workforce board is built with business at the center, enabling faster, outcome-driven decisions.

- Private sector—led by design: executive committee includes five industry leaders (governor and lieutenant governor appointees)
- Sets real performance goals tied to outcomes, not checkboxes
- Operates with speed, avoiding typical state bureaucracy
- Combines subject matter expertise with politically aligned leadership

What Mississippi did differently

Mississippi translated its strategy into a set of operating principles that reshaped how workforce investments were made.

		What most states do:	What Mississippi did:
1	Funded fewer programs—but only where outcomes mattered	"We can train more CNAs this year."	"We need more HVAC technicians and electricians in this region—fund programs that lead to those roles."
2	Required employers to hire from the programs they helped shape	"We'll train people and hope employers hire them."	"We'll fund this program if you're hiring from it. If not, we stop funding it."
3	Defined the problem first, then funded solutions	"Here's a program we want to run—can you fund it?"	"We need 200 skilled trades workers. Who can train them, and how quickly?"

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		What most states do:	What Mississippi did:
4	Paid people to complete training, not just enroll (MS Reconnect)	"Training is available if you can afford the time."	"We'll cover your training and pay you while you complete it—so you can actually finish."
5	Built new capacity where the system fell short (Talent Solution Centers)	"Our community colleges don't have the capacity to train for that."	"Then we'll build the capacity—partnering with providers to stand up training where it's needed."
6	Shut down what didn't work and reallocated funding	"This program has always been funded—we'll keep it going."	"If it's not leading to hiring or advancement, we stop funding it"and move the money."

Talent Solution Center

WHAT IS IT

Talent Solution Centers are a flexible way for Mississippi to quickly expand training capacity in high-demand areas.

- **State-led, partner-operated model**

The state establishes the facility and structure, while community colleges or training providers deliver instruction

- **Built for specific workforce gaps**

Centers are designed around priority occupations (e.g., construction, skilled trades) in regions with unmet demand

- **Faster than traditional program expansion**

Avoids delays tied to institutional constraints, approvals, or funding cycles

- **Designed to be adaptable**

Centers can be scaled, repurposed, or transitioned as workforce needs change

EXAMPLE (ILLUSTRATIVE):

Expanding construction training capacity

The challenge

A region experiences rapid growth driven by new projects and economic development. Demand for construction workers increases, but existing training providers lack the capacity to meet it.

The response

Mississippi establishes a Talent Solution Center in the region and partners with a training provider to deliver programs aligned to employer demand.

The result

Training capacity expands quickly, allowing more workers to enter high-demand roles without waiting for traditional systems to scale.

MS Reconnect

WHAT IS IT

MS Connect is a workforce program designed to help unemployed and underemployed individuals complete training for in-demand, living-wage roles.

- Covers training costs for priority occupations
- Provides stipends (~\$10/hour) while participants are in training
- Includes performance gates to ensure progress and completion
- Focuses on roles aligned to employer demand (e.g., trades, technical roles)

WHY IT MATTERS

Traditional workforce programs assume access is the barrier. Mississippi identified a different problem: **completion**.

- Many individuals cannot afford to stop working to attend training
- Even when programs are available, people drop out due to financial pressure

MS Connect addresses this directly by making it financially possible to complete training.

“ When people understand what the wage is on the other side, they’ll do what they need to do to get there.”



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EARLY RESULTS

Shifting the system



Same dollars, sharper focus. The state now backs fewer programs and only the ones that lead to real living-wage jobs.

DOWN FROM 90,000

6,000

Fewer people, trained more deeply for specific projects, not basic safety for everyone

FUNDED EVERY YEAR

\$30M

Directed to in-demand, living-wage occupations

THE HARD FILTER

\$20/hr

Wage floor. Roles below it don't get state dollars.

Capacity built in priority sectors

AiM UP

Robotics maintenance training now running in **5 regions** of the state, with funding protected to keep it going.

aimupms.org

MAIN

The **nation's first** statewide AI network, with every postsecondary education partner taking part.

mainms.org

FACET + EnCORE

48 instructors trained statewide so far, plus a pipeline of near-retirement pros moving into teaching.

acceleratems.org/encore/

DRAFT

Delta Regional Agricultural Flight Training, protecting the supply of skilled ag pilots and safe operations

deltastate.edu

Build MS

Construction trades training scaled up fast through this employer partnership.

buildmississippi.com

Accelerate + universities

Engineering interns placed at Mississippi companies instead of out of state, plus LEAN training at **50% cost share**.

acceleratems.org/talent-solutions/

About us



Opportunity@Work works directly with federal, state, and local governments to modernize hiring, expand career pathways, and implement skills-based talent practices that open public sector jobs to workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs).

We provide the data, tools, guidance, and peer learning environments that help public sector leaders remove unnecessary degree requirements, improve hiring efficiency, and build more inclusive and effective workforces.

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