

# Clarion Ledger

## **UPDATE: Mississippi Legislature ends 2019 session, after last-minute school voucher fight**

March 29, 2019

Geoff Pender and Giacomo Bologna

UPDATE: The Mississippi Legislature has adjourned "sine die" -- without set return -- to end its 2019 regular session.

Many lawmakers, including Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, addressed their respective chambers for what will likely be the last time, as they are either not seeking re-election or are running for higher office. Reeves is running for governor this year, after serving the maximum two terms as lieutenant governor.

Retiring Sen. Tommy Gollott, R-Biloxi, helped close out the session with a brief thank-you speech, after serving in the Legislature for a record 50 years.

Reeves said: "We have not always agreed, but we have always treated each other with respect and dignity ... I have been called every name in the book except a Christian ... I'm not sure that dictator is not the nicest name I've been called by some ... As we conclude the eighth legislative session, despite all the disagreements we've had ... I will tell you that every single morning that I've gotten up in the morning as lieutenant governor, I looked in the mirror the single biggest critic I've got was looking back at me .... Every single thing I did as lieutenant governor was because I believed in my heart was the best thing for Mississippi."

UPDATE: The Mississippi Legislature is about to end its 2019 regular session and leave the Capitol. After the House moved a bill to increase public funding for private schooling on to the governor Friday morning, the Senate -- which had proposed the measure at the eleventh hour -- quickly followed suit.

UPDATE: House Speaker Philip Gunn, on his third attempt, whipped enough of his GOP majority votes to remove a hold on a bill that would increase public funding for private schooling.

ORIGINAL STORY: The Legislature is in a stalemate Friday morning after House Democrats and many Republicans said they were hoodwinked Thursday into voting to increase funding for a [private school voucher program](#).

Lawmakers say the Senate proposal led by Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves to add \$2 million to private school funding for special needs students — [a proposal killed earlier in the session](#) — was sneaked into a bill to fund dozens of state construction projects.

The measure was held on a motion to reconsider it on Thursday, and on Friday an effort to table that motion, send the bill on and end the 2019 legislative session failed, as 14 Republicans joined the Democratic House minority to halt the bill moving on to the governor.

The issue of public dollars for private schooling is a sticky one for lawmakers seeking re-election this year. Public school advocates see it as a threat to public K-12 funding and support. The Legislature's watchdog committee has issued a report critical of the special needs voucher program.

Public school advocates lit up lawmakers' phone lines Thursday night and Friday morning, and many GOP House members first thing Friday changed their original votes on the bill, as many Democrats had done Thursday night after discovering the private school funding in the bill.

Republican House Speaker Philip Gunn said the increased voucher funding was a late-session deal with Senate leaders and his House members should have known it was included in the \$27 million construction project bill. Gunn's team continued to whip votes Friday morning in an effort to send the measure on to the governor.

Gov. Phil Bryant on Friday urged lawmakers to pass the bill with the voucher funding on to him, although he said he would have preferred it hadn't been sneaked into the construction projects measure.

"It's always better to put bills in categories in which they belong," Bryant said. "But at this time in the session, sometimes you have to amend the vehicle that you have. I would have preferred it to be open and transparent and in education, but I do respect and appreciate the fact that the lieutenant governor is fighting for special needs children."

The measure also angered many Senate lawmakers, who also held the bill up with a procedural motion. The construction bill is part of the annual appropriation bill for the state Department of Finance and Administration. If lawmakers were to end their annual session without passing DFA, it would likely force them back into special session before the new budget year begins July 1.

The legislation means Mississippi could spend up to \$5 million on the program starting July 1. Its passage also upends pledges from members of both parties not to increase funding for the scholarships.

Nancy Loomer, president of the Parents Campaign, said she and other public education advocates believed they had successfully defeated the expansion of vouchers this session, but had been warned there might be attempts to include it in other bills.

"This sort of action is completely reprehensible, hiding a \$2 million appropriation in an unrelated agency bill — intentionally hiding it from the body, from the members of both chambers, is really beyond the pale," she said.

Grant Callen, president of Empower Mississippi, a group that advocates for school choice and lobbied for expanding the special needs private school program and funding, praised the move Thursday to increase the funding.

"It's always been a false choice to argue that the Legislature could either give teachers a raise or help students with special needs on the ESA wait list," Callen tweeted. "Yesterday, the Legislature did both because both were needed, and I applaud them for it."

**More:** [Mississippi lawmakers shocked they voted for \\$2 million more in private school vouchers](#)

**More:** [Bills offer universal vouchers for kindergarteners, first-graders, foster children](#)

**More:** [School choice is NOT a Trojan horse](#)

**More:** [School choice is a Trojan horse](#)

Contact Geoff Pender at 601-961-7266 or [gpender@gannett.com](mailto:gpender@gannett.com). Follow him on [Twitter](#).

Retrieved from: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2019/03/29/mississippi-legislature-off-rails-over-private-school-vouchers/3309232002/>