# Why we must steal this from Mississippi

The dust is finally settling on the January 15, 2026, election. The chaos of the violence and the silence of the internet shutdown are slowly fading into the background. Now the hard reality of our perennial problems has arrived with the release of the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results.

The story is a familiar one. The data confirms a stubborn inequality in education: excellence remains a narrow privilege of the golden triangle of Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono, which swim in aggregate As, while the rest of the country scrambles for crumbs.

The *Daily Monitor's* reporting paints a grim picture of this divide. While Kampala and Wakiso shine, a district like Oyam has schools where no pupil scored in Division One. It is just the tip of the mountain, because further in the rural north and east, and the far-flung west, many schools have become factories for Division U (Ungraded), where a candidate failed to meet the minimum requirements to be placed in Divisions One to Four in PLE, typically due to very low scores across subjects.

We usually explain this as the result of a lack of teaching materials, poorly paid teachers, half-collapsed classrooms, corruption and hungry children from poor homes.

To find a fix, we could look in many places, including the US state of Mississippi. According to an article in *The Week*, "How Mississippi Moved from the Bottom to the Top in Student Reading Achievement Scores," January 14, 2026, for decades Mississippi was the poorest and least educated state in the US. In national rankings, it was stuck at the bottom, often 49th out of 50. It had the same crushing poverty and low funding we see in most of upcountry Uganda. Yet over the last decade, Mississippi pulled off a literacy miracle, rising to the very top for student progress.

The secret? They did not spend more money. They changed how children are taught to read.

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Most Ugandan classrooms rely on a look-and-say method. Children are taught to recognise words by their shapes, like pictures. A child sees the word cat and memorises the image. But the human brain can only store so many pictures. When that child encounters an abstract word like planet, they hit a wall and start guessing. This guessing is where academic failure begins.

Mississippi switched to the "Science of Reading". This method ignores a word's shape and focuses on decoding its individual sounds. Instead of seeing, for example, "planet" as a single block, the child learns the sounds p, l, a, n, e, and t. Once they blend these six sounds, they are not memorising; they are cracking a code. Once a child has the code, they can read any ordinary word in the world.

This is critical for us because 83 percent of Ugandan children are learning poor. According to UNESCO, they cannot read a simple text by age 10, which is roughly Grade Four. This is our Primary Four gate.

From P1 to P3, our children are taught in local languages. In P4, the system suddenly flips to English for every subject. If a child spent three years just memorising word shapes in their mother tongue, they are defenceless when they meet English textbooks. They cannot read the Science or Maths problems, so they fail them. The urban-rural gap becomes a permanent, deep knowledge divide.

Mississippi solved this by creating a Reading Gate at the end of the third year. If a child cannot read fluently by then, they do not move on. In Uganda, we prefer automatic promotion, pushing children forward regardless of whether they have learned anything. Mississippi stopped this. If you cannot read, you stay at the gate.

Crucially, staying at the gate is not a punishment. These weak students get immediate, intensive help in small groups.

This is where the Ugandan approach needs to shift. Better results require a massive budget. Mississippi proved that innovation is cheaper than building more walls.

In Uganda, an inspector is someone who arrives to find fault, check attendance or bark at teachers. In Mississippi, the inspector became a coach. The coach sits in the classroom and helps the teacher manage a large group, demonstrating how to teach the Science of Reading. When a poorly paid teacher sees their students actually cracking the code, they find a professional pride that money cannot buy.

To keep the system honest, Mississippi introduced a simple A-to-F grading system for schools. A school's grade was not based on its facilities, but on how much progress its students made in reading.

In Uganda, we judge schools mostly by P7 results. This is like checking a tree's health only after it has stopped growing. The Mississippi model would enable us to see failure years before PLE. It shows us that poverty is no excuse for illiteracy.

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