

# The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science — A Turning Point in the Conversation

The debate over relocating the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS) appears to be resolved with the Starkville-Oktibbeha School District's announcement that MSMS will not be included in plans for its new high school. This decision reflects the clear and effective leadership of President Miller, whose steady advocacy — joined by the unified support of the Lowndes County Board of Supervisors and the City of Columbus — helped keep MSMS rooted where it belongs.

## 1. A Win for Steady Leadership

*The Columbus Dispatch* article by Cadence Harvey on Sept. 26 — “MSMS no longer part of Starkville High School plan” — marks a clear victory for The W and for President Nora Miller's measured, principled leadership.

After months of uncertainty surrounding relocation rumors and political maneuvering, this development reaffirms what The W community has long known: MSMS thrives where it is. Rather than meeting controversy with confrontation, President Miller modeled the very discipline her alma mater teaches — calm persistence, evidence-based advocacy, and a refusal to be drawn into reactive rhetoric. Her leadership helped re-center the conversation on outcomes and public value.

**This moment represents more than a temporary win. It signals that policymakers, stakeholders, and the public are beginning to recognize that the W-MSMS partnership is not a problem to be fixed but a model to be reinforced. This is the message we will need to carry forward.**

## 2. From Defense to Direction: Reframing Support

The discourse surrounding MSMS has too often been defensive — centered on protecting the program from relocation or consolidation. It's time to replace the *“fight to keep”* frame with one that celebrates *“why it works.”*

The goal now is to highlight mutual value and shared success:

- **MSMS thrives at The W** because the small-campus setting, shared academic resources, and mission alignment create a nationally recognized model of math, science, and leadership education — all while operating at one of the lowest per-student costs in the nation.
- **The W has carried the state's responsibility with grace**, absorbing costs and maintenance to ensure excellence endures. This quiet stewardship deserves recognition, not reduction.
- **Together, they produce results Mississippi can showcase with pride** — superior student outcomes, national rankings, and a replicable model for public excellence.

By reframing the message toward mutual value rather than institutional threat, we create space for legislators and agency leaders to move from defensiveness to shared ownership — to “save face” by doing the right thing.

## 3. The Next Challenge: Preventing Starvation by Neglect

With relocation apparently off the table, there remains another potential risk: slow attrition through underfunding.

If the Mississippi Department of Education chooses not to move MSMS but instead starves it of resources, the effect will be the same — a slow erosion of quality that makes future closure or consolidation seem inevitable.

To guard against this, advocacy should now center on sustained investment rather than crisis response:

### **Advance a “Strengthen What Works” Campaign**

Emphasize MSMS stands as one of the state's nationally ranked success stories that continues to set the standard for advanced education in Mississippi. For more than three decades, MSMS has proven what's possible when talent, opportunity, and innovation meet. Rather than sidelining that success, the state should strengthen it. Expanding the specialty school model elsewhere makes sense only if the standard bearer remains fully supported and positioned to lead.

### **Tie Funding to Results**

Present measurable outcomes — college matriculation rates, in-state retention of graduates, national recognition — to show legislators that every dollar invested returns tangible public value.

### **Expose the Cost-Efficiency**

The W provides facilities for MSMS at one of the lowest effective costs in the nation. Rather than a lease, MSMS pays the university a maintenance fee of less than \$0.70 per square foot for more than 164,000 square feet of dedicated academic and residential space — far below market rates for comparable classroom and laboratory facilities. By contrast, the average national cost of providing and maintaining similar space is estimated between \$4 and \$6 per square foot. This deeply discounted arrangement has saved the Department of Education millions of dollars over the years — but at the expense of both institutions' long-term sustainability.

### **Make Shared Investment a Point of Pride**

The W's ongoing support should not be viewed as charity but as a **true partnership in public education**. Legislators and education officials should be invited to take visible pride in the success they've helped sustain — a model of shared stewardship that demonstrates fiscal responsibility, educational excellence, and the power of collaboration between state institutions.

## **4. A Forward-Looking Vision**

Now is the moment to pivot from crisis to creativity. The W and MSMS can together frame a forward-looking vision rooted in innovation, workforce development, and talent retention:

- **Pipeline of Opportunity:** Young women and men graduating from MSMS can flow directly into The W's leading programs — health sciences, leadership, business, and education — ensuring Mississippi retains its brightest talent.
- **Shared Visibility:** A joint communications plan can elevate both institutions nationally — linking MSMS's STEM success with The W's legacy of access, affordability, and outcomes.
- **Modernization as a Joint Priority:** Instead of debating location, focus on facilities that directly impact students' daily lives. Call on the Legislature to invest in modern residential halls and academic facilities that serve both The W and MSMS students. The most immediate need is student housing. While constructing new halls would be ideal, a more cost-effective solution could be the renovation of Frazier and Goen Halls — a project that would require a phased investment plan or temporary housing solution — ultimately would significantly improve safety, accessibility, and quality of life.

- **A Model for Specialty Schools:** The W–MSMS partnership can serve as the template for any future “specialty schools” — proof that excellence flourishes best when innovation is anchored in stability.
- **The Power of Six Scholarship:** This is a full-tuition scholarship offered by The W to all graduates of MSMS, as part of the ongoing partnership between the two institutions. This standing offer means that eligible recipients will have **100% of their tuition paid** at The W — making a college degree far more accessible.

## Closing Perspective

The Dispatch article confirmed what has been evident all along: Mississippi already possesses a world-class educational partnership in Columbus. The question now is whether the state will nurture that success or quietly let it fade.

President Miller’s leadership has shown that steady resolve can shift the narrative. What comes next must build on that same steadiness — reframing the conversation from relocation risk to renewed investment.

Mississippi has the opportunity to make MSMS and The W a shared triumph of public education — a living demonstration that visionary leadership and responsible stewardship can turn a century-old campus into the state’s most forward-looking asset.

## Be a Voice for The W!

The W’s strength is in its people — and that means you. The Key Person Network is a tool to make sure our alumni are heard at the Capitol and in home districts.

You can serve in one of two vital roles:

- **Key Person** – identified as having a personal or professional relationship with a legislator and takes responsibility to deliver specific messages and updates to that legislator through the Network.
- **Advocate** – ready to mobilize quickly with emails, letters, or phone calls to committees and legislators when alerted by the Network.

Your voice matters. Help us protect and promote The W’s future. To get involved, contact us at [developmentandalumni@muw.edu](mailto:developmentandalumni@muw.edu).