

Get to Know the National  
Assessment Governing Board

# Carey Wright

Chief State School Officer



Carey M. Wright joined the National Assessment Governing Board in 2019 and serves in the chief state school officer role. Dr. Wright was the state superintendent of education for Mississippi from 2013 until her retirement this June. Prior to that, she served as chief academic officer and the deputy chief for the Office of Teaching and Learning for the District of Columbia Public Schools and as a consultant to the Harvard Business School Public Education Leadership Project. Dr. Wright is past president of the board of directors for the Council of Chief State School Officers, a board member of Chiefs for Change, and a member of the Broad Academy. Dr. Wright has been recognized as an outstanding educator by the National Center for Culturally Responsive Systems, nominated twice for The Washington Post's Outstanding Principal Award, and awarded the Howard County Chamber of Commerce Outstanding Educator of the Year.

Below she answers a few questions for state chiefs considering nominating themselves or interested individuals to the Governing Board.

## 1. Why did you join the Governing Board?

I have always had a huge interest in assessment, and I was very intrigued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). For years I had followed it as the Nation's Report Card and, working as a state chief, I felt it would give me a good perspective to know nationally how the assessment is used. It also gave me the opportunity to work with like-minded people around national assessments, their purpose, and their use in determining student progress.



## 2. How has your role as the state chief informed your work on the board?

It's made me aware of our standards, particularly as the NAEP reading framework was just re-adopted, and we are now in the middle of redoing the NAEP science framework. I wanted to make sure that our standards in Mississippi were aligned with what was being expected nationally. I've been able to bring a lot of that information back to the state and even be an advocate for NAEP. Each year I've done a video for schools that are being assessed by NAEP with a "Congratulations! You've been selected" message to encourage input and participation. It's been a way to increase communication between NAGB and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the state.

## 3. How has Board service influenced how you think about education and assessment?

I once worked with a researcher who said, "There's no point in measuring if you don't intend to adjust." And I have taken that to heart. NAEP gives you an insight into how the children across your state are doing and is a great way to compare your state outcomes with other states. In 2019, when our results came back in Mississippi, we were ranked number one in the nation for gains in fourth grade reading and fourth grade math. Our state has the highest poverty rate in the nation, and our children in poverty outperformed all their counterparts, Black, Hispanic, or white. It was such a resounding message for the state. Our proficiency rates still need to be improved, no doubt, but we were seeing growth over time and that was significant. I think that sent a message to communities and parents across the state that Mississippi was on the right track, and we used that NAEP data to really help frame that message.

## 4. NAEP data shows a widening gap between higher and lower performers for over a decade before COVID. What do you think is needed to improve outcomes for students and how can NAEP play a role?

Well, you're also talking to one of the few state chiefs that can say this about our data: we were an outlier. When they looked at other states, those in the 75th and 90th percentiles kept going up and the ones in the bottom percentiles kept going down. Mississippi's data showed that there was growth all the way from the bottom up. We were unique in that respect. I think it surprised a few people because we have so many children that were, and still are, not where we need them to be. It all goes back to paying attention to the data. If you're looking at NAEP data and then looking at your state data, what are you seeing? How closely are those coming together? If that's a pretty good match, then, as a state chief I can say, "This is the professional development we need to be offering. These are the resources we need to put together. These are the interventions that we need to do." It's a way of triangulating information and then using that information to change what you're doing with educational reform inside your own state.



## 5. How can state and local leaders in particular best benefit from NAEP, especially given your use of the data in Mississippi?

You can't discount NAEP. NAEP has been around for so many years and it sends a very powerful message. It's the only assessment that every state takes, so it's the only way to see where we are compared to everybody else. When I first got to Mississippi, our state data was saying we had 65% to 70% of our kids proficient in reading, but NAEP's data said only 22% of our kids were proficient in reading. So, Mississippi quickly became the poster child for the honesty gap report. We redid our assessment and we upgraded our standards tremendously. These are the most rigorous standards these children have ever had. Now, when the national assessment results come out and our state assessment results come out, they very much mirror each other.

## 6. What leadership qualities do you think future board members should have?

Number one, you need to always be looking out for all children and not just some children. I think equity has to play a big role in your view. It's not about just some children excelling, it's about all children excelling. Behind every data point is a face. You've got to know who that face is. Is it a student with disabilities? Is it a student for whom English is not their first language? Is it a student who is still struggling in reading or is it a student that's excelling? You have to be conscious that what we do today with our students affects our future. Someday the children that we're working with are going to be sitting in our chairs. So, are you doing everything that you can to make sure that they're going to be successful when they get there?

This isn't just a job. If you're looking for a job, then look someplace else. If you're looking for a way to make a difference in the lives of your communities and your families and your state and ultimately the nation, then this is the work you want to be doing.



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