

The Mississippi Council on Economic Education is helping the youth in the state to gain knowledge of finance.

How a Mississippi Nonprofit is Transforming Education

Building financial futures by teaching economic literacy

By LYNNE JETER

When three high school seniors from East Rankin Academy beat 542 teams statewide in the Spring 2025 Mississippi Stock Market Game, outperforming the S&P 500 by more than 23 percent, they proved something remarkable: young Mississippians can master complex financial concepts when given the right tools and teachers.

That victory represents exactly what the Mississippi Council on Economic Education (MCEE) has worked toward

since 2002—equipping students across the state with the economic and financial literacy skills they need to build prosperous futures.

"I see every day how it is a part of the puzzle to help Mississippians rise out of poverty, to help Mississippians better plan for their future, to help Mississippians become critical thinkers through economics education," said Selena Swartzfager, about buying cookies for board



Selena Swartzfager

who has led the Jackson-based nonprofit since 2010.

From Humble Beginnings to State Trailblazer

In 2002, a group of men discovered that Mississippi was one of few states without a council for economic education. Founding board member Paul Breazeale, still serving as an emeritus member, jokes

meetings out of his own pocket in those early days. "That was lunch," he joked.

MCEE has grown into one of the most successful councils in the national network. When Swartzfager joined the nonprofit, her predecessor Pam Smith and founding board chair Ted Alexander had already built crucial infrastructure: corporate support, State Department of Education relationships, and fundraising mechanisms.

Under her leadership, MCEE has dramatically expanded its reach. The

organization operates with a clear mission: increase economic and financial literacy throughout the Magnolia State by providing resources and training to K-12 educators, empowering students to create more prosperous futures for themselves and the state.

An Exceptional Partnership Model

One key to MCEE's success is its partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), which doesn't conduct its own teacher training in economics, personal finance, or entrepreneurship. They rely entirely on MCEE.

"They endorse the work we do," said Swartzfager. "In fact, within the Department of Education, they don't have to do teacher training on economics or personal finance or entrepreneurship because we do that."

This partnership extends beyond just delegating training. MDE provides endorsements for MCEE's master teacher programs, awards continuing education units, and promotes MCEE workshops.

MCEE also works through Centers for Economic Education at universities across Mississippi, including Delta State, Jackson State, Millsaps College, Mississippi State, Ole Miss, and Southern Miss. These partnerships extend MCEE's reach into communities while connecting K-12 education with higher education resources.

The organization's board of directors reflects its bridge between business and education, with representatives from major financial institutions including Wells Fargo, Citizens National Bank, Cadence Bank, Trustmark Bank, BankPlus, and Regions Bank, alongside state education leaders.

Programs That Work

MCEE's programming reaches Mississippi students through several signature initiatives, all offered at no cost to teachers or schools.

The Mississippi Stock Market Game allows students in grades 4-12 to invest a hypothetical \$100,000 in stocks over a 13-week period. Last year saw a 94 percent increase in student participation, with 6,746 students taking part.

"The simulation is one of the most effective learning tools available about the free enterprise system for (those) students," said Swartzfager.

Strategic funding and smart incentives have driven dramatic growth. MCEE received support from the FINRA Investor Education



Swartzfager with teachers at a recent MCEE conference

Foundation, specifically to target Title I schools with majority student-of-color populations, students who historically haven't received this type of education.

But the breakthrough came when MCEE's board approved teacher participation incentives of \$10 per team. Last year, the organization paid out approximately \$30,000 in teacher incentives.

"It's an economic principle that people respond predictably to incentives," said Swartzfager.

The Mississippi Personal Finance and Economics Challenge similarly recognizes students who demonstrate high personal finance and economics skills, while also rewarding teachers for effective instruction. Open to all middle and high school teachers with no registration fees, the programs remove barriers to participation.

Master Teachers' Guidance

Perhaps MCEE's most significant impact comes through its Master Teacher programs, where Mississippi teachers can earn endorsements on their teaching licenses in four areas: Economics (endorsement 915), Personal Finance (endorsement 941),

Entrepreneurship, and College and Career Readiness (endorsement 942).

The numbers tell a compelling story: 67 teachers were trained in fiscal year 2025, bringing the program total to nearly 1,000 teachers trained to date. Most striking is the 100 percent increase in preparedness to teach economics among program participants.

These intensive programs require 75 content hours and cost MCEE between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per participant to deliver. Teachers must have their principal's endorsement and commit to implementing what they learn. Upon completion, participants receive stipends ranging from \$250 to \$1,000.

The Personal Finance program is offered in partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Memphis Branch and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, New Orleans Branch. College professors or expert educators teach programs, and all curriculum comes from established, nonpartisan sources.

Technology Transforms Reach

The COVID-19 pandemic proved transformative for MCEE in

unexpected ways. A \$500,000 GEER (Governor's Education Emergency Response) grant allowed the organization to fully digitize all master teacher programs in Canvas with high-quality resources and professional appearance.

"It totally changed our trajectory with the way we were able to reach teachers with technology (tools)," said Swartzfager.

That technology integration earned Swartzfager a national technology award in March and allowed MCEE to reach teachers across the state without requiring travel to Jackson for training.

The shift proved timely for another reason. "With technology the way it is now, it's almost even more dangerous to live in this world and not have a basic understanding of economics and personal finance," said Swartzfager.

MCEE has adapted its curriculum to address modern challenges, including scams proliferating through email, TikTok, and Instagram, and complex new financial instruments like cryptocurrency. The organization partnered with the Federal Trade Commission earlier this year for webinars helping educators teach students to recognize and avoid scams.

Building Global Understanding

MCEE also helps Mississippi educators understand the global economy's local impact. In June, approximately 30 teachers attended "Bringing Asia into the Classroom: Trade, Culture, and Global Connections" at Yokohama Tire Manufacturing in West Point.

The workshop, developed with the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia, helped teachers understand why Asian auto manufacturers choose the South and how to incorporate these real-world economic connections into their curricula—particularly relevant in a state home to Nissan in Canton, Toyota in Blue Springs, and Yokohama in West Point.

Small Staff, Immense Impact

MCEE operates with just 3.5 permanent employees, plus 10-15 contracted educators hired as needed for training. The core team includes Swartzfager as president, a vice president handling marketing and accounting, a program coordinator, and a part-time educator outreach specialist who joined in June.

"We're so passionate about this work, and we take our jobs really seriously and we make sure that we are good stewards of all support that we receive for this mission," said Swartzfager.



MCEE executive committee consists of noted financial leaders from a variety of financial fields.

The organization's effectiveness has earned recognition both statewide and nationally, including the *Mississippi Business Journal's* "Mississippi's Nonprofit Award" five times between 2018 and 2023, "Outstanding State Council of the Year" from the Council for Economic Education in 2017, and the "Governor's Partnership Award" in 2016.

The Funding Challenge

Despite its success, funding remains MCEE's primary challenge. The organization recently lost an \$80,000 annual grant from the Woodnext Foundation (founded by Roku television's creator) when the foundation revised its strategic plan.

MCEE's annual Forum on American Enterprise, held October 23 at the Jackson Convention Complex,

had a fundraising goal of \$100,000. The organization is also launching its first-ever end-of-year campaign with a \$100,000 goal.

A Bright Outlook

Plans include launching "Invest in Girls," a program for high school girls focused on financial literacy, mentorship, and exposing participants to finance careers. MCEE is also

applying for funding to develop a potential competition where students act as economic developers for their counties, using Mississippi Secretary of State resources.

"I've never met someone that said, I don't think it's a good idea to teach teachers and students about economics and personal finance," said Swartzfager. "In fact, most of the time people say, oh my gosh, that's so needed. I wish that had been in place when I was in school."

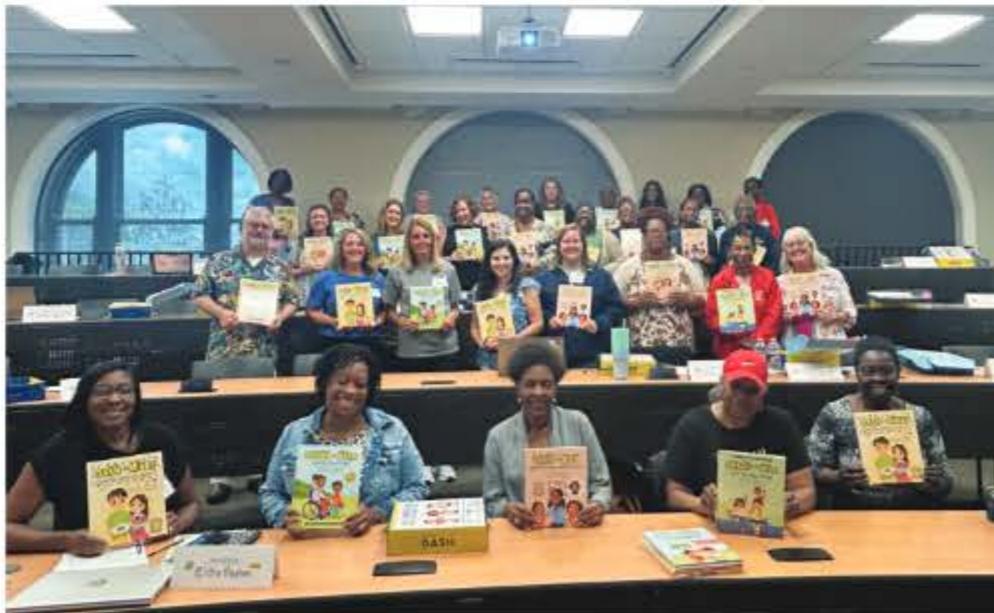
For Swartzfager, whose career path took her from human resource management and an MBA to high school teaching and finally to MCEE leadership, the work carries deep personal meaning.

Her vision remains focused: every Mississippi student gaining a solid understanding of basic economic and personal finance principles, enabling them to succeed as workers, citizens, and consumers.

"Students in all Mississippi schools should have the opportunity to learn about investing for their future," said Swartzfager. "All it takes is a willing teacher to implement the program."

The Mississippi Council on Economic Education operates from 1701 North State Street in Jackson. Teachers and schools interested in MCEE programs may learn more at mscee.org or contact the organization at 601.974.1325 or mscee@millsaps.edu.

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Elementary school teachers in Mississippi learning how to use the book *Owning the Dash* written by Anthony DeLauney in their classrooms.

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