

Despite difficult times, Mississippi's star continues to shine.

Our nation, and every state in it, has been forced to make difficult decisions in light of a sluggish national economy. We have weathered the storm well, because we prepared for the worst and hoped for the best. Unlike 29 other states around the country, we have not been forced to raise taxes or slash major services to our people.

We are continuing to make a mark as a leader in education. On the heels of a historic teacher pay package that will lift our average teacher salary from 49<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> in the nation, Mississippi is setting the standard in other areas of education.

We will be the first state in the nation with an Internet-accessible computer in every classroom, a fact verified by the National Governors Association along with their comment that Mississippi is "at the head of the wave of technological innovation."

Our test scores are up, and the Princeton Review ranked our testing system as the sixth best in the nation. Approximately 62 percent of our high school graduates, the tenth highest number in the country, are going to college. And, Mississippi is holding on to its national ranking of sixth in the number of nationally board certified teachers.

The focus on education must continue with a budget that fully funds the programs necessary to ensure a strong foundation for our future.

Mississippi's work in economic development has also continued without ceasing. Before the Nissan plant is even completed, the company announced an expansion of the facility to boost the total investment to nearly \$1.5 billion and more than 5,000 jobs. This is a great sign of confidence in the work we are doing.

And, at the other end of the spectrum, Mississippi was also listed as one of the top ten states for small business survival in the nation.

Reforms to the civil justice and medical malpractices systems are further evidence that Mississippi is, and always has been, open for business.

Key to any effort to better education and better jobs is better health care. Our children cannot learn if they are sick, our adults cannot work if they don't have access to quality health care.

We are continuing to make our Medicaid program the most effective and efficient program in the nation. We are aggressive in our efforts to end the debilitating effects of diabetes and heart disease in our people, and work toward a healthier Mississippi.

There is so much promise and potential for our people, for our state. It cannot go untapped. Our work is to make the most of it, and the work is being done.