

Governor's Column – 02/24/02

One definition of “priority” is “the right to take precedence in obtaining certain supplies, services, or facilities, especially during a shortage.”

If we apply this definition of “priority” to education in Mississippi, great things can happen. Unfortunately, this hasn't taken place and the result is devastating.

Because priorities haven't been set, the current fiscal year budget has been cut for a second time. By state law, the protection enjoyed by public education has ceased to exist and our schools have been forced to reduce their budgets by nearly \$63 million.

What will be the result? Classes will become more crowded than they already were, and some programs may be discontinued entirely. Supplies for the classrooms will go lacking, unless teachers are willing to pay for them out of their own pockets.

Educators are frustrated by the repetitive, year-in and year-out cycle of cuts to their programs. Parents are upset because schools are not being given the resources to prepare their children for the workforce. Students question the process by which the state helps to provide for their future.

It didn't have to happen this way.

We have the opportunity to prevent this from happening again. As the budget for Fiscal Year 2003 is crafted, we must keep in mind what, and who, we are working for. The message in this work is the same; education has to be a priority.

A Greek philosopher wrote in the 4th century B.C. that “the foundation of our state is found in the education of our youth.” Over two thousand years later, we need to remember these words as we prepare for the next fiscal year. To do any less is a disservice to the people of Mississippi.

In the past week, I've traveled from the Gulf Coast to Tupelo, and from Tupelo to Greenville. Those trips have offered the opportunity to meet with educators, parents and students to discuss the recent budget reductions that have had such a negative impact on schools across the state.

The response has been the same statewide. Mississippians are tired of being sold a bill of goods each year when the education budget is shaped, only to have those goods recalled later in the year.

An editorial in last week's *Clarion-Ledger* said it well: "...it's the lack of spending priorities that is so destructive."

Now is the time to send that message to the Legislature. The budget for the next fiscal year must be built on realistic revenue projections, a commitment to excellence in education and simple common sense.

When families across our state budget their monthly income, they don't add extra money to their checking account in hopes that the money will be there. Instead, they establish priorities – things like food, clothing and shelter. The concept is not difficult to understand, but it does require discipline to make it work.

Making education work in Mississippi demands discipline, and it also demands cooperation. Our work is like rowing upstream; if we don't advance, we fall back. If we row together, imagine what kind of progress we can make.

