

The impact of technology on our world today cannot be denied. We live in a world of pagers, cell phones, palm pilots, and computers. There's no telling what would happen if they all stopped working.

With the increasing use of technology in everyday work and an economy that is becoming dependent on it, the best way to compete in the working world is with technical skills.

Mississippi's children are going to have those skills.

Through the "Computers in the Classroom" program, we are going to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state by the end of this year. This program is a unique public-private partnership, and we are working closely with the Public Education Forum, operated by the Mississippi Economic Council, and the Maddox Foundation to meet our goal.

With the help of some more of our partners, we've taken another major step forward.

ExplorNet has been working with Mississippi students for months now, helping them hone their technical skills by building computers from scratch as well as refurbishing them. Last March at the State Capitol, students in the ExplorNet program built 100 computers in one day.

These computers were distributed to schools around the state as part of the "Computers in the Classroom" program.

The work of these students didn't stop on that day in March. It continues now, stronger than ever, supported by a grant from the Mississippi Development Authority, and the sights of the students are set higher.

By the end of the year, they will build nearly 6,000 new computers to be installed in classrooms around the state. Think of it: Mississippi's children building computers for the generations to follow.

One student from Moss Point understands the importance of the work he's doing. In some of the computers he's built, computers destined for rural areas of the state, he's placed notes reading "please take care of this computer, it was built with love for your education."

Those words send a powerful message about the commitment and dedication of our young people to the future.

In addition to the work of ExplorNet and the students they oversee, we have another great partner in America Online. This past week, they demonstrated their commitment to education in Mississippi through the introduction of the [AOL@SCHOOL](#) program.

This on-line service uses the power of the Internet to provide six different "portals" with age-appropriate, educational content. Students will be able to enjoy the almost limitless resources of the Internet while remaining focused on the educational goals of their work.

The [AOL@SCHOOL](#) software will be distributed to public schools statewide and I have encouraged superintendents to take advantage of this offer, especially since it's being provided free of charge.

[AOL@SCHOOL](#) will provide safe, age-appropriate learning portals for parents concerned about the safety of the Internet. Educational experts have selected the education material. The service offers controls to protect kids from inappropriate content.

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats once wrote, “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” I would dare to say our job is not only to help light the fire, but to stoke it and keep it burning.

Through the work we’re doing to put computers in the classroom, the fire is burning strong.

By combining the Computers in the Classroom program, with the major assistance of ExplorNet, and the new [AOL@SCHOOL](#) initiative, Mississippi’s children will have the educational and technical skills demanded by the 21st century workplace.