

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

With those words, Charles Dickens opened his classic novel, "A Tale of Two Cities." Those same words can be used today to describe the state of education in Mississippi.

Our children return to their classrooms next week, but our work to improve the learning in those classrooms isn't slowing down. There are still challenges to face and overcome.

The national recession is affecting every state in the nation, and having a profound impact on their ability to invest in education. The issue of crafting a budget built on real numbers and real priorities is still with us. We cannot hope to fully meet the needs and the expectations of Mississippi's children until this issue is resolved.

But, in many ways, these are the "best of times" for education in Mississippi, and here's why:

We've passed historic legislation to raise teacher pay, legislation that when fully implemented will lift the average salary in our state from 49th to 19th in the nation. We are going to pay our teachers as the professionals they are.

The "Computers in the Classroom" initiative is going full steam ahead. By the end of this year, we will have an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state. Through our partnership with the Maddox Foundation and the Public Education Forum of the Mississippi Economic Council, students across the state will have equal access to the research and learning opportunities of the Internet.

Another strong partner in the effort to place the computers is ExplorNet, and they are helping us access the technological skills and talents of our own young people. This year, more than 100 students across the state are building almost 6,000 computers for our classrooms.

The commitment of these students to the generations to come is admirable, and demonstrates a unique understanding of the needs of education in the 21st century.

Test scores in our elementary and secondary schools this year were up dramatically over last year. This is strong evidence we've been doing something right, and our teachers and administrators should be thanked for their good work.

The test scores were remarkable, given where we've been; but I know we have always had a shared confidence in our children and the God-given talents within each of them.

A Princeton Review report ranking the states based on their testing programs for schools was released in June, and the report shows a new Mississippi. We ranked sixth in the nation for the quality of our testing programs. The top ten ranking is a far cry from where we've been and a strong indicator of the potential for where we can go.

We've chosen a path in education that's covered with challenges and surrounded by opportunities. How we walk that path and use our resources will determine our success for generations to come.

But, in these "best of times, worst of times," our work is paying off.