

For nearly two years now, our nation has been faced with a national recession. This recession has affected the budgets of every state, not to mention every household.

Here in Mississippi, we have weathered this recession better than many of our neighbors. We have kept critical state services operating for our people, in spite of the fact that our budget, and the budgeting process, are far from perfect.

I want to commend our state agencies, their directors and the state employees who have worked so hard to save money while continuing to provide desperately needed services during these difficult times.

We have remained disciplined. We have remained focused. However, we still have a lot of work to do.

With that in mind, we must continue to make difficult decisions and set priorities. Those decisions and priorities have taken shape in my budget recommendations for the 2004 fiscal year.

I have always had one main priority for the state of Mississippi, a priority that is the foundation for everything we do in economic development, health care, public safety. That priority is education, and my budget recommendation backs it up.

We started this budget process focusing on education, and we ended the process with a budget that puts "Schools First," with 62 percent of the budget going towards education.

We have made great progress in education. It's time to step up our commitment and continuing making a difference for the future of this state and for the future of our children.

My budget recommendation fully funds the third year of the teacher pay raise, it fully funds the Mississippi Adequate Education Program to support classrooms, teachers and supplies, and addresses the exodus of our talented professors and teachers from our universities and colleges.

It works toward fewer children in each classroom so teachers can focus on student needs, and for more counselors to help students with the decisions they face as they work toward graduation.

It works toward getting rid of portable classrooms and giving our teachers and children safe buildings. It's time for them to be able to focus on learning, not on the roof leaking above their head.

My budget recommendation makes the hard decisions, and it sets priorities for Mississippi during tough economic times. Every family in Mississippi has been forced to make some sacrifices; it's time for government to make some sacrifices, too.

That's why I am proposing a decrease of nearly 13 percent for administrative functions in state government. The most important task we have is to provide the necessary services for the people of this state – services like education, homeland security and economic development.

There are challenges ahead of us in the coming year, but that's nothing new. What is new is the manner in which I am proposing to take on those challenges and turn them into opportunities for our people.

The people of Mississippi want bold and decisive action. This plan fits the bill.