

## **Governor's Column – 03/24/02**

Education absolutely should be the first priority of the Legislature, but so far there has only been talk about education as a priority. It's time to move beyond talk and into action.

We can adequately fund education in Mississippi if we make it a priority. In a budget of more than \$3.5 billion, we should be able to provide the funding for the best possible educational system for our children.

The executive budget recommendation for Fiscal Year 2003, offered in January, does just that. It is based on a realistic revenue estimate of 2.65 percent and provides \$50 million more for education than the Legislative Budget Recommendation. It fully funds the teacher pay raise; it funds the Adequate Education Program at its current level; and it ensures teachers will not be forced to pay for classroom supplies out of their own pockets.

In addition to meeting the basic needs of our schools, we must also address the issue of workforce training as an integral part of our educational system. Now is not the time to be cutting funds in this area, not when Mississippi is doing so much to attract and expand business within its borders.

Funding state programs on a priority basis requires a budget built on realistic revenue estimates. This wasn't the case last year, and this was the reason appropriations bills were vetoed. As has been said before, our budget needs to be a blueprint for success. It needs to take into account the state of the economy, along with reasonable expectations for revenue collections and growth in the coming year. Responsible funding of education does not include the continuous use of "one-time" money from year to year; this is simply a band-aid approach to education, rather than a true commitment.

If we are to realize the views of the Legislature, then the first step must happen in the budget process.

In the old Road Runner cartoons, Wile E. Coyote always had a complicated blueprint for a contraption that eventually forced him into a ditch with an anvil speeding toward his head. The “Acme blueprint” used by Wile E. Coyote always ended in disaster, and someone was always hurt.

We don't need an Acme blueprint for Mississippi's future. Rather, we need a blueprint that keeps us out of the ditch and keeps people from being hurt.

When the budget for 2003 is crafted with a realistic view of the economy, without unfunded mandates for our schools and with a commitment to workforce training, then this statement will ring true.

Some great work has been done to improve education in Mississippi, but it hasn't been enough. We can do so much more, but we can't do it with an Acme blueprint.

It's time for us to work together on a blueprint that will move us forward and offer the next generation the tools they need for success. We have a legacy to leave to our children; the message of that legacy is for us to decide.