

*Remarks for the
Education Reform Act Press Conference
December 19, 2002*

Good morning. Governor Winter, Dr. Johnson, Dr. McHenry, Dr. Stonecypher – thank you all for joining us here this morning.

Twenty years ago, the Education Reform Act became a milestone for education in Mississippi. It was a visionary plan – one that captured the attention of our people and brought much-needed change to our education system.

This plan completely altered the way we looked at education, and the methods by which we managed our schools. It has made a difference for Mississippi.

The foundation laid by the Education Reform Act in 1982 is still strong, and we are building on that foundation to lift Mississippi to the next level. The priorities we have today are a reflection of the work done twenty years ago.

Today, we are determined to establish more milestones for education in Mississippi. We are moving rapidly away from the positions of 48th, 49th, and 50th – and into the top ten among the states.

The average teacher pay in Mississippi is moving from 49th to 19th in the nation. Our test scores are up, and the Princeton Review says we have the sixth best testing system in the country.

In 2001, Mississippi was the first state in the nation to hold a Higher Education Summit. Business, government and educational leaders worked together to develop a plan of action.

This plan will advance the competitiveness of our state and improve the quality of life of our people. The Summit recommended the expansion of early childhood education. We have taken the first step of implementation by forming a public-private partnership with the Barksdale Reading Institute to fund a needs assessment of our state's early childhood system. Dr. Lynn Kagan of Yale University is conducting this assessment. Children must enter school ready to learn.

This month, we are becoming the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, from K-12. The National Governors Association has said that Mississippi is “at the head of the wave of technological innovation.”

Yesterday’s New York Times ran a story about the students who have been building computers from scratch to distribute to the classrooms. The article related how the involvement of the students in creating technology has changed their perspectives and career plans.

One student from Port Gibson said he has teachers asking him questions about how to fix computers. “It makes me feel good,” he said. It should make us all feel good – because that’s a sign of progress.

We are going to keep focusing on education as a priority, and we are doing it with a budget that puts Schools First, with 62 percent of spending on education. This budget fully funds the teacher pay raise, and it restores the Mississippi Adequate Education Program to the 2004 fiscal year funding level.

It also provides for a \$200 million brain trust to keep our best and brightest minds working and teaching at Mississippi universities and colleges.

This is an opportunity for us to build our intellectual capacity and our research capabilities. It's a way to cultivate a new generation of professors and spur economic development.

We've invested hundreds of millions of dollars in buildings over the years. It's time to invest in our people.

In the end, it's all very simple. If we shortchange education, we shortchange our future – and that's not an acceptable alternative.

We've been surprising a lot of people lately. Like Governor Winter did 20 years ago, we're setting a new standard for education and refusing to settle for the status quo.

Governor, thank you for helping build a strong foundation for education in Mississippi. You've made a difference in the lives of our people through your work, and we thank you.

(turn the podium over to Governor Winter for his remarks, then return to the podium to read the proclamation and present it to Dr. Johnson)

We'll be glad to take a few questions, and then I want to spend a few minutes with these bright kids and share a story with them. Thank you.