

*Remarks for the
Education Press Conference
August 27, 2001*

Good morning. Today, we are continuing our efforts to improve education in Mississippi – only our comments are directed at the halls of Congress, not the Mississippi Legislature.

At the recent National Governors Association conference in Rhode Island, I was named by NGA Chairman John Engler, Governor of Michigan, as the lead governor on education.

It is a position I take very seriously, and I am committed to making a difference here in Mississippi.

When we talk about education, we're talking about the strength of our collective future, and the strength of our childrens' futures.

Ninety percent of school-aged children in the country attend public schools. If our children are to succeed, their schools must succeed.

To begin with, our children need a good environment in which to learn. Mississippi has 1,007 public schools; 82 percent of them have reported the need to upgrade or repair their buildings to good condition.

Last year, we received over \$15 million in federal aid for school renovation. Under the budget plan currently offered by the administration in Washington, we would receive no federal support for renovating our schools.

Another program on the table in Washington deals with special funding. This issue has cost the states millions over the past 25 years.

In the mid-1970's, Congress passed legislation to help fund special education programs at the state level, and the law committed the federal government to funding 40 percent of the cost.

To this day, Washington has never funded more than 15 percent of our special education needs. It's time for that to change.

Last year, Mississippi received over \$64 million in federal aid to help cover the costs for over 62,000 special education students. That's an average of just over \$1,000 from the federal government for each of these young Mississippians.

President Bush has said he wants to fully fund the federal government's share of special education, but his proposal falls short of the funding called for by law.

Early this month, I was in Washington and met with 11 senators on this issue. I spoke with them about the effect this lack of funding has had on Mississippi over the years, and urged them to do everything in their power to fix this problem.

At the recent NGA conference, my fellow governors and I overwhelmingly approved a policy position calling on the Congress and the administration to fund special education as required.

This is not about political parties; this is about states getting the support that was promised to them years ago. It is about children with special needs getting the same opportunities for an education as all other children.

We are looking at the smallest increase for education in five years. School renovation projects will stall; Title I funding will be insufficient for the needs across the country; special education programs are going to suffer; efforts to reduce class size are going to be hindered.

The bottom line is that Mississippi cannot afford to have any more unfounded mandates from the federal government.

We have made so much progress here on our own – new testing standards are in place, ahead of the suggestions of the federal government; teacher pay has been settled, and we will see our pay rise from 49th in the nation to 19th over the next several years.

It is incumbent on the states to remind Congress and the administration of the promises that have been made. It is our job to help see those promises fulfilled.

If we don't do that, we fail our children. We damage the potential for their future. We cannot allow that to happen.

Thank you.