

*Remarks for the
Adult Career Development e-Town Meeting
October 23, 2001*

It's great to be here to talk with you tonight about the role continuing education plays in our economic progress. Clearly, we are in a period of change right now, due to the events of September 11.

However, we have been undergoing another major change for some time now – a change to an economy based on technology, to an economy that is borderless, wireless and global.

That is the economy of the 21st century, and that's the economy that we're going to have to be competitive in. To do that, Mississippi's workforce needs to be ready for the changes and respond to them quickly.

Mississippi has approximately 1.8 million working age citizens, but only about 1.3 million of them are actually in the workforce. How do we get more of them into good, quality jobs? A major part of that answer lies in education.

People can earn more by knowing more. In many cases, there is a gap between the skill levels of the job seekers and the available jobs. Our role is to help improve those skills through job training and continuing education.

We are building the foundation for future generations right now – first, through our commitment to paying our teachers as the professionals they are.

The teacher pay raise package passed in July will, when fully implemented, raise our average teacher salary from 49th in the nation to 19th in the nation.

Another program, the “Computers in the Classroom” initiative, is addressing the issue of technology in the classroom. By the end of next year, we will have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state.

Mississippi will be the first state in the nation to do this, and it reflects part of our commitment to the new economy of the 21st century. But, we must make that same commitment to those currently in the workforce.

Mississippians have the work ethic to compete in the new economy, but we have to give them the proper tools. We are working hard to bring in new, quality, high-paying jobs, and we achieve those efforts by having a workforce ready to fill those jobs.

Our education and training providers are offering many ways for you to get new skills and training, and technology is the main vehicle for providing that training. As mentioned before, I have made access to educational technology a priority through the “Computers in the Classroom” initiative.

Our “Fast Forward Mississippi” initiative uses the internet to provide workplace and education information to students.

And the Global Educational Mobile, or GEM, is another technology tool that travels the state offering state-of-the-art software applications in remote sensing and business.

These examples are just the beginning.

The state agencies and entities that provide workforce skills training and education are forming stronger partnerships within government and with private business and industry.

Each agency has a role in training the workforce, but there must be cooperation and coordination regarding those programs and activities.

Community colleges and universities will carry a greater load in workforce education and training. People entering the workforce today will hold eight or ten different jobs over their lifetime. This is part of a trend around the country, and one that will require individuals to adapt to new jobs and new situations.

Our higher education leaders are doing their part as well. The Mississippi e-Campus and the Mississippi Virtual Community College are two adult-friendly higher education strategies that will make a difference.

I am proud of the work we are doing in Mississippi to show that we can compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere. We are doing the right things, and we will benefit from our efforts.

Thank you.