

*Remarks for the
Gulf Coast Community College Fund Raiser /
George County Alumni Association Membership Drive
August 23, 2002*

(recognize Rep. Pierce, Jim Yonge, Dr. Willis Lott, Mayor Whites)

It's great to be here in George County. There's so much I'd like to talk with you about, but tonight's event is about helping education and scholarship – and so I want to talk a few minutes about what we're doing for education in Mississippi.

Nearly 150 years ago, Charles Dickens wrote his classic novel "A Tale of Two Cities." The book opens with the well-known lines, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Those words were used to describe 17th-century France, but they could also describe the state of education in 21st century Mississippi. We're making great progress for our schools and our children, we're raising teacher pay, but there's still so much to do.

If we are to succeed in our efforts to recruit and retain business in Mississippi and provide good, quality jobs for our people, then we must ensure the strength of our educational system.

Creating jobs for the people of this state has become a trademark of my administration, but building a future for the children of this state through quality education is my personal passion.

Education is where we build our success, and this is how we're doing it.

Last year, we made a commitment to each of you here who stand at the front of our classrooms, helping to shape and enrich our children's lives.

Recognizing the role you play in the lives of our children is the first step in this commitment. I read once “teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools.”

I don’t want that to be the case in Mississippi.

To begin with, I don’t believe in “unattainable goals.” I believe in “unprecedented goals.” I want to see our state, and our region, set the bar high and not be satisfied with where we are.

Secondly, we are going to have the adequate tools to reach those unprecedented goals. No teacher should be expected to do the work necessary to meet our goals with the support they need – support in their methods, support in their classrooms, and support in their paychecks.

We passed a teacher pay raise plan last year that will raise our average teacher salary from 49th to 19th in the nation. This plan captured the attention of the rest of the country, because it showed that Mississippi was serious about changing its role in America and the world.

The New York Times, one of the oldest and most respected papers in the country, ran an editorial the day after we passed the teacher pay plan. “Why can’t New York put together a package like this?” it asked.

We must be able to keep the good teachers we already have. We must be able to recruit new teachers to work in Mississippi. Without competitive pay, it can’t be done. Now, we’re doing it.

Mississippi was also the first state in the nation to offer more pay for teachers who achieved National Board Certification. Today, we have over 1,000 teachers who have been certified, the sixth highest number in the nation.

The dedication of these teachers to their profession has been recognized by their peers and by their state. I am proud of the work they have done to achieve this level of excellence for themselves and their students.

We are committed to you. We are committed to giving you the tools you need and the pay you deserve. But the commitment can't end there.

We must make every effort to ensure our children also have the tools and the resources they need to succeed.

The economy of our region is changing rapidly. What has historically been an agricultural-based economy is moving toward more of a technology-based economy. In this new century, business will be borderless and wireless.

Our children need to be prepared to work in that economy. They need to be ready to compete at any level. And, they will. That is another part of our commitment.

We are going to make sure every child in Mississippi has the tools necessary for success. By the end of this, every public school classroom in the state will have an Internet-accessible computer. What does this mean?

It means a child in George County will have the same opportunity as a child in Hinds County to log on to the Internet and the world of information it provides.

It means our children will develop the skills for working with computers and technology at an early age.

It means these kids here tonight from Agricola Elementary School will compete and succeed in the economy of the 21st century.

It means Mississippi will continue to be competitive with other states and nations when it comes to recruiting and retaining industries and jobs.

The most exciting thing about our “Computers in the Classroom” initiative is the partners we have in making it happen. Over 100 of the most technologically advanced people in the state – our children – are building nearly 6,000 computers to go into the classrooms.

From one generation to the next, the commitment is strong – and the work is paying off.

Test scores in our elementary and secondary schools this year were up dramatically over last year. This is strong evidence that we've been doing something right, and our teachers and administrators should be thanked for their good work.

Those test scores are incredible, given where we've been; but I know we have always had a shared confidence in our children and the God-given talents within each of them.

A Princeton Review report ranking the states based on their testing programs for schools was released last month, and the report shows a new Mississippi.

Where were we in the national ranking? We weren't 50th. We weren't 49th. We weren't 40th, or 30th, or 20th. We weren't even ranked 10th.

Mississippi ranked 6th in the nation. Sixth.

All of the work we're doing in education lays the foundation for what we're doing to build our state, to create new jobs and expand industry.

Don't think that when a company looks at moving to Mississippi the only thing they care about is our investment in them. They're also looking at our investment in ourselves.

The moral of this story is simple. Quality education means quality jobs. We all win with a well-educated workforce.

Our commitment is focused, but its aim is broad. By investing in education today, we are looking for the dividends that will come in the form of jobs and business.

We're fortunate to have some great people working together toward a common goal. I want to thank Randy Pierce for the role he's playing in helping us make Mississippi a better place. Dedicated educators like Willis Lott are on the front lines every day, giving their all to improving education.

Simply, we are building our foundation as strong and secure as we can. We are all aware of the biblical proverb about building a house on sand. We are building ours on the most stable rock we can, and that rock is education.

It's exciting to think about what we can do with education as a priority. There is no limit to what can happen. Horizons are broadened, the sky is the limit. Our children have a future never dreamt of by past generations.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, "learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere."

What our children learn today – in the technology of a computer in the classroom, in the arts, in language, in the most rudimentary lessons – will stay with them forever.

In Mississippi, we've chosen a path covered with challenges and surrounded by opportunity. How we walk that path and use our resources will determine our success for generations to come.

Thank you.