

- 1. The 2003 legislative session proved to be a historical one for education in Mississippi, as education was established as a priority for our state. Will you work over the next four years to maintain public education at 62% of the general fund? If yes, how?**

During this year's State of the State address, I asked the Legislature to make the future of our state – the education of our children – our top priority. When I signed the historic education funding bills on February 5, 2003, we changed education funding in Mississippi forever. Under my leadership, we will continue to ensure that this investment is a promise kept to Mississippi's children, teachers, administrators and parents. As Governor, I will continue to call on the Legislature to make education our top priority by appropriating pre-kindergarten through higher education at 62% of the general fund and to fund it during the first month of each legislative session. I will also continue to visit schools and communities throughout our state to stress the importance of adequately funding our public schools.

- 2. Superintendents and other school district personnel face rising health care costs along with reductions in benefits under the State and School Employees Health Plan. Do you support funding for employee health insurance that adequately funds coverage?**

Adequately funding education includes competitive compensation for our personnel, including health insurance and other benefits. The average employee out-of-pocket health insurance cost has increased. That is why I proposed in 2001 improvements to the State and School Employees Health Insurance Plan that would have eliminated deductibles for doctor visits, reduced dependent costs and instituted a co-pay plan. The Legislature did not choose to fund this proposal. My Fiscal Year 2004 budget recommendation fully funded the State and School Employees Health Plan. In my second term, I will continue to fight for competitive benefits for our school employees, including the full funding of health insurance coverage.

- 3. Do you support the assessment and accountability of not only our students, but of our teachers and administrators?**

We must hold our students, our staff and our administrators accountable, not only to ensure effective use of state funds, but to ensure that every child is attaining the skills and resources necessary to compete in today's world. As Lt. Governor in 1999, I championed legislation creating our assessment system. I signed accompanying legislation that completed our system into law as Governor in 2000. Our accountability system provides

assistance to faculty, administrators and board members of Priority Schools in the development and evaluation of improvement plans for the school.

Mississippi's assessment and accountability program is considered one of the most comprehensive in the nation. In March 2003 of this year, Mississippi became the sixth state in the nation to receive approval of its accountability plan, in compliance with the federal, *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Mississippi was the first state in the Southeast to receive approval. Mississippi's accountability program is ranked twelfth in the nation, according the Princeton Review. The state received the maximum possible score in 16 of 22 categories.

4. Mississippi does not currently have mandatory kindergarten or a state-funded prekindergarten program. Do you support mandatory kindergarten or early childhood education?

I support compulsory kindergarten. Research has shown that we all learn from the moment we are born. We must take steps to close the achievement gap between our students, a gap that can be initiated in their early years. Standards for compulsory kindergarten will have to be established to ensure the utilization of approved curriculum in both public and private settings.

Early childhood education is critical and we must provide quality services to our children before they reach the age of 5. In October 2002, I announced a partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Barksdale Reading Institute to assess the needs of early childhood education in our state. This assessment will identify what is needed and the resources available to improve childcare in our state. I will use the recommendations of this assessment to create a plan to improve Mississippi's early childhood education during my second term.