

*Remarks to the
Mississippi Association of School Superintendents
July 17, 2002*

Thank you, Dr. Sargent. I want to take a moment to thank you for your great service to the Jackson Public School District, the State Board of Education and most importantly, the students who have benefited from your leadership.

You have made a tremendous impact on this state and we will always be grateful.

I also want to recognize Kenny Bush, chairman of our state board, and to officially welcome our new state superintendent of education, Henry Johnson. Dr. Johnson, we're proud to have you and your family here, and we look forward to working closely with you.

There was an editorial in a Louisiana newspaper last year that referred to Mississippi as the "new North Carolina of the South." As you all know, Dr. Johnson is coming here from North Carolina, so he should feel quite at home here.

One thing you'll find out, Dr. Johnson, as you become acclimated to your new position, is that I am very focused on education. It was the issue I ran on in my first campaign for state senate in the late 1980's, and it has been very important to me since then.

I'm proud of what we're doing with education here in Mississippi.

It is common knowledge that education is the foundation for everything else we do – from economic development to health care.

Our work is to take an uncommon approach to strengthening that foundation, to think outside the box and be creative in how we shape our growth through the education of all our people, young and old.

We're facing some different challenges today, but the basic questions behind those challenges are the same questions we've been dealing with for generations.

How do we prepare our children for the workplace? What can we do to help them shape their skills to be competitive in an economy that is constantly growing and changing? Where do we need to target our resources today to be successful tomorrow?

The answers begin at an early age. It is our responsibility to ensure that, by the time our children first walk through the schoolhouse door, they are ready to learn. When they enter that new world, confronted with all the questions and fears that come with the first day of school, they need to feel a confidence that they are – above all else – ready to learn.

I grew up in what could honestly be called a small town – population, 42 – and I was the first person in my family to get a college education. My mother dropped out of school in the tenth grade, my father in the eighth – and only a handful of people in my town graduated from high school.

One of the great influences in my life was my first grade teacher. She was one of those rare teachers who helped us realize there would be bumps in the road ahead of us in life, and she would teach us to differentiate between the stumbling blocks and the stepping stones.

When I spoke to you last year, the big issue was about raising teacher pay to the southeastern average. Three days after that speech, the final stumbling block was replaced with a stepping stone – and the message went out that education mattered in Mississippi.

The New York Times even wrote in an editorial that we had “managed to put together the kind of package that continues to elude New York.”

With the commitment made to paying our teachers like the professionals they are, it was time to make the commitment to funding the package. You've all heard me talk before about the need to set priorities in our budgeting.

As a cornerstone for building Mississippi, education is most certainly a priority. Funding for our schools simply cannot be allowed to lag behind our funding for private prisons. It was Victor Hugo who once wrote, "he who opens a school door, closes a prison." Wise words – and words for us to follow.

Our commitment to funding education in Mississippi must be strong. Back during the legislative session, I used the analogy of the Wile E. Coyote character from the old Road Runner cartoons to illustrate my point.

That coyote always had a complicated blueprint for some type of contraption, one that would eventually put him at the bottom of a canyon with an anvil speeding toward his head. The “Acme blueprint” used by Wile E. Coyote always ended in disaster, and someone always got hurt.

We don't need an Acme blueprint for education in Mississippi. Our obligation is to put together a blueprint for the future that takes into account the needs of our children and the districts, and doesn't leave them with old textbooks and unfunded mandates.

This past fiscal year was a difficult one. The budget was built on overly optimistic revenue estimates, and the pain of that budget was felt by each of you. I restored almost \$13 million to minimum education before the end of the fiscal year, and the effects of the budget cuts made during the year were eased somewhat.

This next year will have challenges as well.

With the budget built on a revenue estimate I believe is still far too optimistic, we are going to have to be extremely vigilant in the application of our resources.

One of the best uses of resources in the past two years has been through the “Computers in the Classroom” program. Through this unique public-private partnership, we are placing an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state.

Working with Robin Costa of the Maddox Foundation and Blake Wilson of the Mississippi Economic Council's Public Education Forum, we are on target to meet this goal by the end of the year, and it is already making a tremendous difference for our children. Children in the most rural areas of the state have access to the entire world through the simple click of a mouse.

From Hickory to Hot Coffee, previously unimagined doors are being opened for a generation of Mississippi's children. They're going to step through those doors – just as they stepped through the schoolhouse door before – and gain new skills for a new economy.

I'm excited about this program and the potential it holds for our children, especially when they're helping make it a reality.

Back in March at the state capitol, students from around Mississippi gathered to build 100 computers – computers that would eventually find their way to classrooms as part of the “Computers in the Classroom” program.

It was an amazing sight, watching these young people build computers that would help teach the next generation. Their excitement was contagious, their skills impressive.

ExplorNet helps these students in this work through its Computer Training Project. With us today from ExplorNet are Andrew Smith, state director for Mississippi; Chris O'Shields, vice president for operations; and instructor Ann Davis and some of her students from Moss Point High School. I'd like to ask them to stand and be recognized.

One of Ann's students, Ahn Nguyen (*On Winn*) has a great perspective on the work he's doing. On several of the computers he's built, he's put a note that reads "please take care of this computer, it was built with love for your education."

It's good they're here with us today, because I want all of you to share in some good news.

Through a \$4 million grant from the Mississippi Development Authority, more than 100 Mississippi students are going to build nearly 6,000 computers for our classrooms.

Talk about investing in the future – our own students using their skills to provide the technology for the generations coming behind them. We're into a new century and a new economy – an economy that's wireless, borderless, and global. To compete – to win – in that economy, our students must have technological skills.

We're going to see they get them.

With the placement of Internet-accessible computers in our classrooms, students are going to have a whole new world opened to them. As they venture into that new world, ready to explore, we must keep them rooted and focused on the reason for that exploration – the education and growth of the mind.

To that end, I'm happy to say there's more good news to share with you today. We have built a strong relationship with the world's leading interactive service – America Online – and that relationship grows stronger today.

I'm proud to announce a new statewide initiative to provide schools around the state with [AOL@SCHOOL](#), a new service that uses the power of the Internet in an educational aspect. AOL has developed this service that offers six different learning portals with age-appropriate educational content.

Through this service, students will have a safe and effective means of harnessing the power of the Internet while widening the scope of their learning.

You will be receiving more information about [AOL@SCHOOL](#) in the coming weeks, but the best bit of information about it is this – AOL is offering this service free of charge.

We're fortunate to have representatives of AOL with us here today, and I hope you will take a moment to speak with them about this fantastic service. Let me recognize Paul Russinoff (*ROOS-en-off*), Director of External Relations, and Kalonji (*kuh-LON-jee*) Martin, manager of [AOL@SCHOOL](#). Paul, Kalonji, please stand so we can thank you for your great work.

We are working hard with entities like ExplorNet and AOL to build Mississippi, and I appreciate the tremendous difference they are making for our children.

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats once wrote, “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” I would dare to say our job is not only to help light the fire, but to stoke it and keep it burning.

Thank you for the work you do to keep that fire going strong in Mississippi, and thank you for the opportunity to join you today.