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Chairman, Southern Regional Education Board

Can SREB states lead the nation in educational progress, as called for in SREB's *Goals for Education*. Absolutely. In fact, the South *already* leads in several indicators of quality, and I'm proud that my own state of Mississippi is part of this leadership.

- The just-announced 2003 National Teacher of the Year is Alabama, and half of the National Teachers of the Year in the past two decades have been from the South. SREB states have one-third of the nation's population, but half of the last 20 winners of the National Teacher of the Year award. More than half of the 16 SREB states have produced winning teachers. This demanding competition, with its rigorous selection process, proves that the South has some of America's most outstanding teachers.
- The South leads the nation in teachers certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. More than 70 percent of the newly certified teachers are from SREB states; seven of the top 10 states in National Board certified teachers are SREB states, and Mississippi is ranked sixth. North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina are ranked first, second and third. Georgia, Oklahoma and Kentucky are also in the top 10. Two-thirds of the almost 24,000 National Board certified teachers are in SREB states. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has a rigorous application process, with very high standards for what teachers should know and be able to do. Receiving this certification requires hard work by the teachers. Mississippi was the first state to encourage teachers by providing salary stipends to teachers earning certification, and now many Southern states support certification efforts as well by underwriting expenses and salary stipends.
- The South had America's first state education budget in 2003, and that budget put "education first." Passing the education budget was the first order of business in Mississippi's 2003 legislative session. It was an unprecedented and historic action for our state, and perhaps for the nation. Mississippi was also the first state to increase its investment in education in 2003, to 62 percent of our General Fund budget. In 2003 we clearly have put "education first" in America's first education budget.
- The South may have the nation's largest teacher pay raise in 2003 and that, I'm proud to say, is in Mississippi. Despite tough economic times, the Legislature has come through with a 6 percent pay raise, which is the largest announced so far in the nation.

We are not alone in our dedication to teachers: Several other SREB states have also set goals to raise teacher salaries in recent years, including Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia.

Other efforts are directed at providing quality training for new teachers to be better prepared to help raise student achievement. Scholarship programs exclusively for teachers are more common now in Southern states.

Mississippi has a program designed to attract and keep quality teachers in the Delta region — a challenging area in which it is difficult to place teachers. The state now offers a housing allowance inducement so teachers can relocate, buy homes and establish roots in the community in which they teach. The program has been a success, and these teachers are making a difference.

It is this kind of sacrifice and determination that will pay off for all 16 SREB states. The result will be seen in the improved economic development and quality of life in the future by educating our children well. Investing in our schools and teachers at the state, local and federal levels is the right thing to do. If we are to create opportunities out of obstacles, our first priority should be our investment in education.

In Mississippi, we've put *education first*. That's not just a slogan, for the state or the region. As the South leads in indicators of teacher quality, it can and will lead in educational progress.

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Ronnie Musgrove is Governor of Mississippi and Chairman of the Southern Regional Education Board, America's first interstate compact for education. Headquartered in Atlanta, the SREB has 16 member states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. "Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead" is on the SREB Web site at www.sreb.org.