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## **Mississippi Media Luncheon**

**September 18, 2001**

### **Leslie Graitcer's Comments**

Good afternoon. It is wonderful to be here with you in Jackson today. For many reasons:

First, because I was able to get on a plane again and land safely, and without too much inconvenience... and I hope to get back again that way tonight!

Second, it is gratifying to be with you today because, in the aftermath of last week's tragic, horrific events, I feel a kind of heightened sense of community among us and a realization of how valuable each individual is – those we know and love and also those whom we may not know personally

but with whom we share a common history, a common regional culture and a common national purpose. And I feel that way about you.

And thirdly, I'm glad to be here because of the reason that brings us together today: the future of Mississippi and this country as it is embodied in the children in our public schools.

One of the big lessons of this past week, to me, has been the amazing strength of the American people.

- Buildings may fall.
- Machines may fail or be turned into weapons of destruction.
- And some individuals may be lost, tragically.

But the resilience and courage of the American people as a whole has shown itself to be indomitable. Our capacity to pick ourselves up with determination and hope, to rebuild and keep going with resolve, is awesome.

This capacity comes from the values at the heart of our nation; it comes from our spirit as a people; and it comes from a kind of confidence in ourselves and each other because we know we have the skills and intelligence to do the tasks before us, as well as the will.

And that is what we are here about today: Making sure that this country will continue to have the spirit, the confidence and the skills we will

need not just tomorrow, but 50 years from tomorrow, if or when, heaven forbid, the next crisis may threaten our nation. Our children today are the foundation for our nation's future. We must equip them with the values and the self-confidence that comes from knowing they have the tools and skills to meet the future challenges of our country.

As Dr. Thompson told you, my name is Leslie Graitcer and I am the executive director of the BellSouth Foundation. I have the great privilege to lead a foundation that is the philanthropic arm of a great corporation, BellSouth, whose business is to keep this nation running through communications. BellSouth also understands that its purpose and responsibility is not only to be the best telecommunications provider anywhere but also to be an exemplary corporate citizen dedicated to the health and vitality of the communities where we live and work and learn. And that is why the BellSouth Foundation is singularly dedicated to the education of our children. Indeed, the BellSouth Corporation created the Foundation in 1986 with the sole purpose of improving the quality of education in the Southeast.

At the BellSouth Foundation, we work with grantees and a variety of other local, state and national organizations to accomplish our mission. I am

pleased to be here today as part of a statewide effort we sponsored through the Education Excellence Partnership to develop strong, broad-based support for standards-based education reform in three states: Mississippi, Virginia and Illinois.

EEP selected Mississippi for this distinction in a competitive bid process. Criteria for the selection included an understanding of the value and need for really good communications, a willingness to share what we learn with other states and a strong commitment to the cause. Mississippi has embraced all three and has proved to be a valuable partner in this effort.

Originally, EEP was going to be able to work with only two states but, because Mississippi's case was so strong and because there was compelling evidence of local commitment and an ability to harness all the necessary players, EEP really wanted to include a third state – and so BellSouth agreed to provide the funding to make this possible. We are glad we did, and the evidence is here today that it was a good decision.

Before I go any further, I'd like to pick apart that phrase I used a minute ago – “standards-based education reform” – to be sure that we all know what we are talking about here and that we are all on the same page.

“Standards-based education reform.” The middle word of that phrase is “education.” In fact, the centerpiece and core of what we are talking about is learning – pure and simple, nothing more but nothing less. We use the word “education” here rather than “learning” to suggest that we are talking about the learning of ALL children, not some. That we mean learning in ALL classrooms, not some, and in ALL schools, not some. And that we are talking about places where learning is facilitated by ALL teachers having the skills and qualities to teach all children well, not just some of the teachers. And that we mean a public education system where ALL principals and superintendents have the leadership attributes to guide teachers and schools in the changes needed to bring about learning for all children, not just some principals and superintendents. So “education” – meaning learning for all children in all locations – is the heart of “standards-based education reform.”

The next word, “reform,” means change – but not a bit of change, a lot of change. It is an acknowledgement that the status quo is not good

enough. Our schools are better today than ever – they really are – but they still are not good enough for tomorrow’s needs. Some children are doing very, very well in our schools. Some are doing very, very poorly. And a whole lot of children are doing just so-so: these are the ones we don’t hear so much about because they are neither the great achievers nor the worrisome under-achievers. However, even so-so is not good enough anymore. So-so will not build the strong nation we need if we are to continue to meet the new kinds of challenges before us.

The first word in the phrase is “standards-based.” This refers to what you aim for, knowing where you want to go. What does “good enough” look like? What does “excellent” look like? That is what standards answer for us. A standard is the goal to reach for, and the benchmark to measure progress by. So to be “standards-based” also means having a way to measure your progress toward the standard.

In “standards-based education reform,” make no mistake, there are measures. Measures are there not to punish, but to diagnose. Let me make an analogy with a doctor. A doctor knows what the norm or the standard is for healthy body temperature, or blood pressure. He then takes your temperature or checks your blood pressure to see how close you are to the standard, as a gauge to help you get better.

Measures are used not to embarrass, but rather to protect – to assure that no child can be forgotten or left behind or hidden. Before we had good measures and a good set of standards to measure against, far too many children were indeed left behind.

Let me make another analogy, this time to business. No business anywhere, to stay in business, would put in place a set of operations designed to produce a product, without also having a quality control process to diagnose if the products are meeting the company's standards. And if even one product doesn't, then we work on it some more until it does – no product can be allowed to leave the plant until it is right, with no defects.

Standards-based reform is this quality-control process for education. The product here is learning, learning to high standards – all children learning, all children learning more than ever before because our standards now must be higher than they ever were – our country and our future depend on it.

Let me return now to the effort underway in Mississippi. The EEP work has yielded interesting and positive findings in Mississippi and reason for optimism. For example, in a poll we conducted last year, the Mississippi

findings mirrored what we are hearing nationally. When asked, “Do you think students should or should not have to demonstrate their learning by passing statewide tests before they graduate from high school, *even if* they have passing grades in their classes?” **73 percent** said they should. And when asked, “Do you think students should or should not have to pass statewide tests in reading and math before they can be promoted, even if they have passing grades in their classes?” **78 percent** said they should. The average person knows that higher standards are important and that we need a way to know how we are making progress in reaching them. This is a way to help students, not harm them.

To probe beyond the findings of this poll, we also conducted focus groups.

The focus groups in your state revealed great optimism among teachers and parents for improving education. In fact, that spirit was unmatched in any of the focus groups we conducted throughout the country. The people of Mississippi not only recognize the merit of what’s needed, they are clearly willing to do the work to achieve it. Thomas Edison said that:

“Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” You have not missed the opportunity, you have embraced



it and other people in other states should know of your spirit and your success.

Your willingness to work is impressive, but so is the process you have adopted to achieve real reform. Many other states made serious mistakes during their reform process. While no effort of this magnitude is perfect, here in Mississippi there was a touch of genius in your implementation. For example, you involved teachers in rewriting the curriculum. You involved them in formatting tests and other instruments to be used as diagnostic tools. You involved them before you began implementation. You gave them a stake in the process and in the results. It was the right approach.

Here in Mississippi you are at the forefront of some very important changes in how you measure student achievement. We at BellSouth want to encourage you to stay the course and don't give up. As business leaders, legislators and other government officials, educators, parents and students, we must pull together to make this work and set an example for the rest of the country.

Finally, let me point once again and never enough, to the obvious. In the end, this is for the children – for the children represent your state's and the country's future. Anytime we get bogged down in details or 'politics,' we need to ask ourselves the critical question that defines our success and guides our actions: What is best for the children? What will make our state and our country strong and assure our children's future?

BellSouth has made this commitment to education and to standards-based education reform in every one of our states, because we know how critical education is to the economic future and security of Mississippi and the South and the nation. But we also know that education provides the fusion that holds communities together and improves the quality of life in so many other ways. We at BellSouth are also parents, driven by the desire to make the lives of our children better than ours and give the tools and the opportunity to do the same for the sons and daughters of Mississippi.

Quality education of those children is up to us. Quality education has to be a working, willing partnership that draws on the commitment, concern and will power of all of us--parents, professionals, politicians, educators and administrators. It is our obligation. It is our opportunity. It is our mission.

That is why I am pleased to represent the BellSouth Foundation and to be here today. I am pleased to extend a helping hand, and very pleased to pay tribute to you for what you have accomplished so far and will continue to accomplish in the days and years ahead. Thank you for inviting me to be here today. I wish you continued energy and commitment in this most important effort. We are counting on you!