

*Remarks for the
Mississippi Counselors Association Convention
November 6, 2002*

I want to take a moment to thank you for allowing the men and women of the Mississippi Army and Air National Guard into your schools. I believe they serve as tremendous role models for our children, and I'm proud of the way in which our young people are responding to the Guard.

Over the past two years, they have helped grow the strength of the Guard to all-time highs – and they are serving their state and their nation in the process.

Will Rogers once said, “even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

Mississippi’s on the right track. We’re doing what needs to be done to move this state ahead. We’re making a difference in this state, but there’s still work to be done.

(story about Jordan and the 15-point buck)

I have priorities for Mississippi. I discussed them in my State of the State address at the beginning of this year – jobs, security, health care and education. The absolute top priority, though, and you’ve heard me say this before, is education.

This is where I am focusing my efforts, because education is the foundation for everything else we do for this state.

It’s nothing new to hear people talk about having education as a priority, but the question that needs to be asked is this: How many of them can prove it’s a priority?

When I entered public office fifteen years ago, I was determined to make a difference in the educational system of this state – from the earliest stages through higher education. And, that’s happening.

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.

We’ve made a commitment to pay Mississippi’s teachers like the professionals they are. We’re going to lift the average teacher salary in this state from 49th to 19th in the nation over the next four years, and that’s good for Mississippi.

We were 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.

We also have to make sure our children have the tools and the resources they need to succeed.

We're doing that, and the work is paying off.

Test scores are up dramatically.

More of our kids are going to college. The Southern Regional Education Board Fact Book shows that an average of 62 percent of our high school graduates are going on to college – a percentage that ranks us tenth in the nation.

We're being aggressive about improving our schools, and that aggressiveness is being recognized and appreciated through new programs.

In January, we were the first state selected to host a Leadership Summit on Higher Education. That summit presented six priorities for the future of education in Mississippi, from making sure our children start school ready to learn to increasing our investment in research and development at the university level.

In September, we were awarded a \$12.4 million GEAR UP grant through the United States Department of Education to ensure our disadvantaged middle and secondary school students are prepared to pursue and succeed in post-secondary education.

That same month, we were announced as one of six states to participate in a national pilot program – the “Following the Leaders” program – to implement the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind” Act. As one of two governors who led the effort for this act from the state level, I’m proud that 15 schools across the state are part of this program.

Last week, Water Valley High School was the first school *in the nation* to formally begin its work by raising the “Following the Leaders Flag.”

Listen to what was said about Mississippi when this announcement was made. They said we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students” and the “immediate capacity to use ‘Following the Leaders’ tools effectively.”

That enthusiasm, commitment and capacity is not going to go to waste.

By now, you're familiar with the Computers in the Classroom initiative. I introduced this program two years ago with a very specific goal – to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state by the end of this year.

We're going to make it, and other states are watching what we're doing. Last week, my chief of staff was at a meeting in Knoxville and the subject of computers in schools came up.

One individual from Tennessee commented that all the schools in the state were wired for the Internet. Well, Bill was able to inform them that not only is every *classroom* in Mississippi wired for the Internet, but every classroom is going to have a *computer* to make use of that wiring.

There's a big difference between being wired and being connected – and Mississippi's children are connected.

We've talked about being the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every classroom, and a couple of weeks ago the National Governors Association confirmed it.

We are on our way, and we're riding high. To quote the policy analyst with the NGA, we're "at the head of the wave of technological innovation."

Another great aspect of this program is the fact that nearly 1,000 of the computers are being built from scratch by Mississippi students. With help from ExplorNet, we've got kids all over the state putting together computers for our classrooms.

The technical skills being developed through this program will stay with these kids, and they are excited about the potential of using them in their careers. One young man in DeSoto County last week told me, building computers meant more to him than anything else – except football.

As an extension of what's happening in our schools, I want to take a minute to thank you for your support of the Mississippi National Guard's "About Face" program, which focuses on teaching kids basic life skills.

Nine states are hosting “About Face” programs, but none are bigger than ours, none has a higher completion rate than ours, and we’re only in our first year. 98 percent of the students who signed up for the “About Face” program completed it.

All of this is great news, but what exactly does it mean for Mississippi?

It means a child in the most rural part of the state will have the same opportunity as a child in one of our cities to log on to the Internet and the world of information it provides. As a Mississippi teacher said last week, kids in Houlka deserve the same education as kids in Tupelo or Jackson – and they’re getting it.

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

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

The commitment to our children and our teachers 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.

Those dividends are already coming in. The latest numbers from the Mississippi Development Authority show more than 47,000 new jobs created over the past two years, with more than 21,000 of them from the expansion of existing businesses. Nearly \$13 billion has been invested during that same time frame.

I met with a group of high school students recently, and asked them about what they thought a governor ought to do. The answers were about what I expected – promote education, improve jobs and roads, make the state attractive to those outside our borders.

I'm going to tell you what I told them. It's my job to be a leader and take charge of situations. It's my job to have a plan of action. I have a plan of action that's going to build on the work we've been doing in education and jobs.

That plan of action includes introducing a budget with more than 60 percent targeted toward education.

I'm proud of the work we've done so far; we've brought in good jobs and built this state. But my personal passion has been, and always will be, the education of the children of Mississippi. I know you share that passion with me – and I appreciate the work you do.

There's a lot of focus on what we're doing here. Other states are looking at Mississippi and realizing that things are different, that things are changing, there's a new energy and emphasis on moving forward, that we are proving education is a priority.

We're not just sitting still. We're on the right track, and no one's going to run us over.