

*Remarks to the
Mississippi Association of Secondary School Principals
June 27, 2001*

Thank you, Janice, for that introduction, and thanks for the invitation to be here with you this morning.

I'm glad to have the chance to talk with you because you are on the front lines every day, fighting the battles for our children.

You're fighting for them in the halls of the schools and in the halls of government, and I want to thank you for your efforts. The children of Mississippi benefit from the work you do.

The great French author Victor Hugo once wrote that whoever "opens a school door, closes a prison."

I don't believe Hugo was talking about the physical, tangible prisons that hold those who commit crimes.

Rather, he was referring to the walls that close in our minds, our thoughts, our ideas.

Every day that you open up a school, you are removing those prison walls in the minds of our children.

You are encouraging them to think, to broaden their horizons, to embrace and understand the world beyond the everyday norms.

I want to be sure that you, as principals, have every available means to keep those doors open for our children.

You need the resources to recruit and retain the best teachers possible for your classrooms.

That's why I have worked hard since taking office to raise teacher pay. We have already passed the legislation to raise teacher pay from 49th to 19th in the nation over the next five years.

There has been some disagreement about how we are going to make this happen – but, I assure you that we will make it happen.

I have asked the Legislature to remove the five percent provision attached to the recent teacher pay legislation, which essentially restricts pay increases unless our revenues grow by at least five percent.

Our focus needs to be on setting priorities, on investing in the most pressing needs of our citizens – and what greater priority is there than education?

Education is the foundation of everything we achieve in Mississippi. And this isn't just a Mississippi issue – every state realizes that their success as a state is built on their success in the classrooms.

When we properly fund education, the result is improved economic development.

When we properly fund education, the result is a stronger work force and higher revenue for the state.

By focusing on our children, we are focusing on a better future for everyone. We're making progress in other areas of education beyond the teacher pay issue.

By the end of 2002, every public school classroom in the state will have an internet-accessible computer.

The “Computers in the Classroom” initiative is a wonderful partnership between the public and private sectors – and because of this partnership, we will be halfway to our goal by the time school starts this fall.

We have a great success story in our national board certified teachers. Right now, Mississippi is ranked fifth in the nation in the number of nationally certified teachers.

Fifth – not fiftieth. There are 45 other states with fewer nationally certified teachers than Mississippi.

That is a tremendous thing for Mississippi – and I know you share my pride for what these teachers are doing.

I've said this time and time again, and I'll say it again now – education is the priority of my administration.

The people of Mississippi expect us to be disciplined and reasonable in how we spend their tax dollars.

They want us to ensure that we're adequately funding education, from kindergarten through college – because they know education is our foundation..

We will be starting the budget process in the coming weeks, and I assure you we will address the issue with education at the top of our list.

It will be a difficult process, because revenues are not where we had hoped. Like most states across the nation, we are feeling the economic stagnation in our revenue growth.

This will most surely be a major point of debate in the process, but I am confident we can craft a budget that focuses on our schools and adequately supports other areas as well.

We will go into the budget process with a sense of commitment to you, to the teachers, and to the children.

We will go into the process with a
commitment to everyone who opens a
school door – and closes a prison.

Imagine what our children can – and will –
do without any restraints on their minds.

Imagine what they can – and will – do with
the support of their teachers and principals.

I imagine what that future will be like, and it is marvelous. Let's give our children and our schools the tools they need, and make that future happen.

We are not going to turn back the clocks and slow our progress – not now, not ever.

Thank you for the work you do each day and for your commitment to the future.