

*Remarks to the  
USM Brown Bag Lunch  
November 7, 2002*

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, and we’re moving. 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.

*(Jordan and the 15-point buck here)*

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.

That approach depends on one major factor for success – leadership. We can’t just stand around hoping for things to turn out; we can’t just wait for things to happen.

We've got to make them happen. We have to take a proactive stance and commit ourselves to doing the necessary work to help the South emerge as a leader for the nation.

To reach that pinnacle we have to take risks, and at every level, the constantly changing dynamics of the economy demand creative thinking and innovative planning. But, the rewards of meeting these demands can be great.

The success of the work you're doing in higher education depends on a strong foundation, one that begins at the youngest age. I'm committed to helping make foundation as strong as possible, and you also have a role to play in that effort.

I want to speak for a moment to how we are building that foundation, because it's exciting work.

Teacher pay is on the rise in Mississippi. We have made a commitment to those who stand at the front of the classroom to prepare the students you will lead through the years of higher education.

We are also giving our children the tools they need to succeed.

The economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – in Mississippi and around the world – will be wireless, borderless and seamless. For us to compete in that economy – for our young people to live up to their potential in that economy – the technological background must be in place.

That's why we're putting an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in this state. Children from every corner of the state – from the most rural districts to the most urban – will have the same opportunities to learn, to research, to make the most of the information superhighway.

Some of those computers are being built here at Southern this morning by Mississippi students – a tremendous gift to those coming up in the grades below them.

Last week, my chief of staff, Bill Renick, 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.

And, last month we were selected as one of six states to participate in the first phase of the “Following the Leaders” project of the U.S. Department of Education.

This project will provide the technology resources and guidance to help us implement the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation recently enacted by Congress.

Focusing on the connection between parents, classrooms, school districts and state education departments, this project presents a challenge for us – and it’s a challenge we’re ready to take on and turn into opportunity.

I know we can do it. In the first place, we have already put accountability standards in place that are tougher than those mandated at the federal level. And secondly, the comments of the U.S. Department of Education in choosing Mississippi offered further proof of our ability.

In choosing Mississippi, it was said we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students,” as well as the “immediate capacity to use the ‘Following the Leaders’ tools effectively.”

Back in January of this year, we were the first state selected by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges to host a summit on higher education.

We brought together leaders from government, business and education to provide a cooperative framework for education, economic and social progress.

The report we issued at that summit introduced a shared vision for our future, outlining six major priorities to help advance our ability to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

Those priorities included initiatives that you, as educators, can take on in partnership with the public and private sectors.

The six priorities included raising the educational aspirations of all Mississippians; preparing our children to learn by the time they begin school; boosting the quality of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools; increasing college and university graduation rates; expanding lifelong learning;

and increasing the level of activity in university research and development.

The hallmark of our vision at that summit was to give each and every one of our young people an opportunity – an opportunity to live up to their potential and promise.

Meeting that hallmark will demand our very best. It will require us to examine our priorities and focus in on the steps we must take in the months and years to come.

The work's already begun. We must work together to improve the alignment of policies and practices across educational sectors, and strengthen accountability in meeting this aggressive agenda.

Yet, while the work is underway, there's so much more to do – and that work must begin with the financial support this state is willing to put behind its efforts.

As we begin the legislative budget process, I will continue to call for the adequate resources necessary to achieve success in education – at all levels. We must establish education as a priority – as the priority – for Mississippi.

To accomplish this will demand tough decisions – and the first decision that must be made as the revenue estimate for Fiscal Year 2004 is debated. For two years running, I have called for an estimate that reflects the reality of our state and national economies – economies that have remained sluggish.

I met with the Legislative Budget Committee this past Monday, and their estimate of three percent is still, I believe, overly optimistic.

We cannot afford to base our budget on the simple hope that our economy will turn around. We have to use realistic numbers, not the numbers we would all prefer.

When we craft the budget, a budget that must – first and foremost – provide for the education of all our people, we must make tough decisions about where the funds for that budget will come from.

In my budget for the current fiscal year, I called for a pay raise for those working in higher education. I stand by that call. We have to make an investment in our people – in you – so that the dividends we reap in the future are that much larger.

I spoke earlier about setting priorities, and I talked about education as a priority. In the budget I plan to submit next week, more than 60 percent of the budget is targeted toward improving education.

We have to keep working for our schools. We have to stop the exodus of the brain trust of good, hard-working professors out of this state, and instead focus on recruiting and retaining the best minds to teach in our schools.

Creating jobs for the people of this state has become a trademark of my administration, but building a future for this state through quality education is my personal passion.

Our commitment is focused, but our aim is broad. Education is where we build our success, and we're going to do it.

We have the tools to get this work done. We have the people and the talent and the resources to get this work done.

I appreciate the good work you are doing here to help grow – and teach – Mississippi.

Thank you.