

*Clarion-Ledger column 7/22/01*

### **Mississippi's Making it Around the Mountain**

There's an old adage that says that no one trips over mountains, but over the small rocks. If you can get past the rocks, you'll find that you've crossed the mountain.

Tomorrow we'll step over the last rock in our path on the way to a new standard for education in Mississippi.

At 10am tomorrow morning, the Mississippi Legislature will convene for a historic vote, one that will remove the five percent provision included in the teacher pay legislation passed in the 2000 session. This provision states that pay raises will not be provided automatically unless the state's economy grows by at least five percent.

For years, improving education has been a major issue in Mississippi, but it has been difficult to achieve true and lasting results. It wasn't that long ago that teachers' salaries averaged less than \$20,000 per year and they were buying their own school supplies for the classroom. We have put money into education, but it is time for us to plan for our future and realistically invest in education.

We've been putting money into the tangible items, such as tech-prep centers and new and renovated school buildings. We're halfway to our goal of becoming the first state in the nation to have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, thanks to a unique and innovative partnership with the private sector that is making the most of public dollars.

We've invested in products. Now, it's time to invest in people.

Just as the foundation being laid for the Nissan plant will soon make a difference in the lives of those who will find employment there, so the foundation we lay tomorrow will make a difference in the lives of our children. By this action, we build a solid base on

which they can stand and realize the success that has too often eluded them. We owe our children every possible opportunity to be the very best they can be.

If we want our children to have the advantages of a good education, we need to place and keep the best teachers available at the front of the classroom. If we want the best teachers available, we need to put the best pay package possible on the table. We simply must have the ability to recruit and retain good teachers. Other states have been courting and winning over our teachers with the promise of higher salaries for years. Tomorrow, we can stop the “brain drain” with one simple vote.

Last week I explained why this special session needed to happen as quickly as possible, as well as why this issue will not be combined with congressional redistricting. We must do it now, before legislative budget meetings begin to shape the budget for the 2002 session. Raising teacher pay is the greatest investment we can make, and we have to consider that investment as we budget for coming years. We still do not know when we will be ready for congressional redistricting or how long it will take.

Last year, I called three special sessions. They dealt with the legislative retirement perk, the Advantage Mississippi initiative, and the Nissan plant. Each of those were single-issue sessions, and were met with little outcry as to the need or cost. Why? Because it was important to get those issues handled quickly, and the public and the members of the Legislature recognized that fact.

The special session scheduled for tomorrow is no different. There are those who still say we can wait, but at a time when school districts around the state are scrambling to fill teaching positions, we need to provide them with greater incentives to bring teachers to the classrooms and to show our teachers our commitment.

We are showing the world that Mississippi is changing. We have attracted one of the top economic development projects in the country with the Nissan plant, and the residual

investments from suppliers will boost this project over the \$1 billion mark. We are proving that we can compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Tomorrow, we have the opportunity to step over the last rock and finish crossing the mountain – and what a great day that will be for Mississippi.