

Clarion-Ledger column for 7-8-01

Mississippi schools can get back to focusing on children

This past week, Mississippi's students, teachers and administrators were able to breathe a little sigh of relief.

Through conservative financial forecasting and early action, we were able to reduce their deficit of more than \$14 million last week to just over \$3 million. This happened because we took a long-term approach earlier in the year on the outlook for the economy and made adjustments based on that outlook.

In February, I placed funds in reserve in anticipation of a slowdown in the economy. Although some cuts were made in October and February, the reservation of funds in February was done as a protective measure. When we looked at revenue collections for the state through June 27, I decided to "unreserve" those funds so I could return them to be used for education.

June 29 was the last business day of the fiscal year and the last day I could return these funds. Over \$13 million was given back, with \$10 million going directly to the school districts.

On April 1 of this year, the school districts were facing a fiscal year shortfall of more than \$14.3 million. They were faced with a situation that forced them to consider increasing local millage or other means of building revenue. They were forced to deal with a situation that should have been handled during the legislative session.

Many of our citizens deal with similar situations on a daily basis, just with different numbers. What I did in February was no different than a family sitting down to budget their income for the next month, and deciding to put some money aside for the time being – and then going out for a night at the movies and pizza to celebrate when they realize they can afford to spend that set-aside cash.

There were a lot of projections and discussions this year about the growth of the economy in Mississippi. During the session, I argued the economy would slow down, a position agreed on by national economists.

I made my point on this issue and stood my ground not because I wanted to have a “doom and gloom” outlook, but because the people of Mississippi expect me to be honest and truthful with them about our economic situation. The people who are struggling to make ends meet don’t need me to make them feel better with false hopes and false information; they need me to be straightforward, let them know what’s happening and tell them how I plan to deal with it.

I am excited we were able to restore money to the school districts last week. I’m proud of the work we did that made this possible, and I will continue to keep education as a priority in the new fiscal year. Like thousands of Mississippi families, we will not inflate our budget figures, we will not spend more than we have and we will set priorities. The people of Mississippi deserve our best efforts and nothing less will do.

