

Clarion Ledger Column - April 5, 2000

On January 11th of this year in my Inaugural Address I made the following statement: “I remember what teachers earned when Tate and Panola counties sent me to the State Senate. I think I still have a scar or two from the floor fights. Salaries for teachers – the ones to whom we trust our children – are higher, but they’re not high enough. The southeastern average is not too much for Mississippi teachers who see the future of our state shining in the eyes of Mississippi’s children. We will not be told it can’t be done. We will reach that goal and we will continue to strengthen Mississippi’s public schools in every city and county.”

I believed then, as I do now, that a pay raise for our teachers is the most critical issue facing our state. After months campaigning for Governor and now two and a half months into this administration, we have been working harder than ever to get a teacher pay raise bill passed in this legislative session. I, along with other recently elected statewide officials, campaigned on the teacher pay raise issue, and I am more determined than ever to see that the issue is addressed, and committed to, by the legislature during the current session.

I have spent the last few months meeting with members of the media across the state, meeting with state teacher organizations, talking with legislators and meeting with the leadership of the House and Senate to introduce and explain a multi-year teacher pay raise plan that will allow Mississippi teachers’ salaries exceed the southeastern average between the years 2004 and 2005. The pay plan that we have introduced does not require the need to cut any programs or raise taxes, and the plan was developed using the budget figures provided by the legislature.

This past week has been filled with developments in regard to efforts to raise teacher pay to the Southeastern average. On Monday, Lt. Governor Amy Tuck introduced a teacher pay raise plan that will take six years to reach. I congratulated Lt. Governor Tuck for getting on board to support the idea that we can raise teacher pay to the southeastern average. On Wednesday, a joint press conference was held with myself, the Mississippi Economic Council, the Lt. Governor and the Speaker of the House to announce that for the first time in history, the Mississippi Economic Council Board of Directors voted unanimously that their number one, most critical issue, is raising teacher pay in the State of Mississippi. We hear our business community loud and clear. They realize the importance of our efforts, and we will continue to work together to raise teacher pay to the southeaster average.

Fiscal responsibility begins and ends with priorities, and our priority must be education. Putting teacher pay raises in statute will ensure that teachers' salaries will be raised, and no other issue can take priority in years to come. Making education our priority brings better jobs to our state and expands opportunities for a better quality of life for the people of Mississippi.

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