

This week, we have seen another historic first for Mississippi. During a time when almost every state in the nation is making dramatic cuts to education, we are taking action that demonstrates true leadership and commitment to our children. During my State of the State, I asked the legislature to fully fund education and to do it now. With the recent action by the Senate and House, I look forward to signing that bill next week. What a historic time for Mississippi - our students deserve nothing less.

With a national recession that continues to affect our state, we must continue to fight for Mississippi's future. By putting our schools first and funding education at a level that will meet the needs of every community, not just those that are prosperous, we will guarantee the success of our children and our grandchildren.

When we crafted the Mississippi Adequate Education Program in 1995, we saw a future for every community. Local communities bear the brunt of mandated programs that are not funded. Each community in the state has been faced with the possibility of a local millage rate increase to pay for required education. By our actions this week, we are proving to the people of Mississippi that we are truly committed to our schools.

The bills also restore funding, as I requested, to our community and junior colleges as well as to our four-year universities. These institutions have been forced to raise tuition in order to offset cuts made in recent years. The recent legislative action will provide stability to campus operations and enhance our ability to retain faculty members.

Our investment in education is paying off. Princeton Review recently ranked Mississippi's testing program in the top ten in the nation. Our test scores are up, more of our high school students are going to college, and we are now paying our teachers as the professionals that they are.

Our well-thought out plan is placing our state into national prominence. Mississippi is part of a global marketplace and we are competing with anyone in the world for the best jobs. Mississippi produces some of the finest products and those products are being shipped worldwide.

We can meet that goal by following through on our comprehensive plan for education. The successes that we have had speak volumes for what's happening here in Mississippi. We are earning a national reputation as a state that makes the necessary investment, even when the going gets tough.

We all know that learning is a lifelong endeavor. By providing learning opportunities to every Mississippian, beginning with early childhood and continuing into adulthood, we will make a difference in our state. When the national recession causes loss of jobs, we must make sure we provide retraining programs that will help workers return to the workforce.

Following my State of the State, many asked what was significant about fully funding education. Putting our schools first means putting our communities first. Ask yourself, can we afford not to?