

Governor's Column – 02/17/02

Fifteen years ago, I began riding the dusty, hot roads of Tate and Panola Counties as part of my campaign for the Mississippi Senate. The focus of that campaign was education and a commitment to raising teacher pay to the southeastern average. It took a few years, but with persistence and a shared vision with others, it finally happened.

Last July, the foundation for our future was completed with a commitment to raising teacher pay. When fully implemented, this program will lift our average teacher salary from 49th in the nation to 19th. We're going to recognize our teachers for their work in the classrooms, work that shapes the future of our state and our nation.

Mississippi is gaining national attention for the forward-thinking initiatives being applied to education. From the teacher pay raise to the Computers in the Classroom program, other states are looking at us as an example of innovative planning. It's a great reputation to have, and one we can't afford to tarnish.

We have to keep education at the top of our priority list; it is the basis of everything else we do for jobs, health care and safer communities. To do this, we must commit ourselves, and all of our energies, to crafting a budget that reflects our priorities.

This effort begins now. Work is currently underway on the budget for Fiscal Year 2003, and the shaping of this budget must be done in such a way as to provide for the needs of our children and their teachers.

And, as has been said before, the budget must be built on a foundation of realistic revenue projections and with our fiscal responsibility to the people of Mississippi foremost in our minds.

The current year situation is a reflection of what happens when a budget is based on overly optimistic revenue estimates during a national recession. Our collections are far below the projected estimates, and as a result, budget cuts are being made across the board in state government. There was no choice this past week but to make these cuts, and their impact on education is devastating.

It didn't have to happen this way.

As the budget for next year is put together, we must keep these factors in mind. First and foremost, the budget needs to be based on conservative revenue projections. We are currently growing at a negative rate, and there's a good bit of ground that needs to be gained to get back on track.

The executive budget recommendation presented last month fully funds the teacher pay raise, it funds the Adequate Education Program at its current level, and it provides school supplies for our teachers. We have to give our schools and our teachers the tools for success, not unfunded mandates. This year's allocation for school supplies will barely purchase a pencil for each of our students. This is unacceptable, and we must do better.

We simply cannot afford to continue building budgets on false hopes instead of real numbers. False hopes don't fund education in Mississippi, but they make cuts to programs statewide painful and unnecessary.

A Greek philosopher wrote in the 4th century B.C. that "the foundation of our state is found in the education of our youth." Over two thousand years later, we need to remember these words as we prepare for the next fiscal year. To do any less is a disservice to the people of Mississippi.

The work on the budget is being done now. As this work continues, I urge students, parents, educators, and people across the state to contact their representatives in the Legislature and call on them to craft a budget based on real numbers and a real commitment to education.

Our work is like rowing upstream; if we don't advance, we fall back. If we row together, imagine what kind of progress we can make.