

### **“Operation About Face” Prepares Youth for Challenges Ahead**

A challenge, as defined by one source, is a “call or summons to engage in any contest, as of skill, strength, etc.”

We face challenges every day, and the manner in which we respond to those challenges can determine our success or failure. Likewise, the manner in which we prepare our young people to respond to the challenges ahead of them will shape our collective future. That's where “Operation About Face” comes into play.

We want to help them answer that “call or summons,” and the work is being done in many different ways.

By establishing education as a priority for our state, we are going to build a strong foundation for their future. The “Computers in the Classroom” initiative is bringing the world to every public school classroom in the state through the Internet, and our students will develop technological skills that will be well-used in the economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We have committed to paying our teachers as the professionals they are. With their position at the front of the classroom, they are some of the most influential people in our children's lives. Our children deserve the very best in that position.

Now, with the “Operation About Face” program, we're working now to give them the tools and the confidence to take on any challenge that comes their way.

Focusing on economically disadvantaged and at-risk youth between the ages of 13 and 17, the program combines the skills of Mississippi National Guard personnel with the resources of the Mississippi Development Authority to provide a unique learning experience.

It gives them a first-hand understanding of how important reading and math skills are in dealing with situations they'll encounter in life, everything from balancing a checkbook to creating a budget for their home. More importantly, it gives them the confidence they'll need to make their dreams come true.

The first class of students in Mississippi's "Operation About Face" program graduated in June in Hattiesburg. There was a tangible sense of accomplishment among those young men and women, a sense that they had already taken on a challenge and won a contest of skills.

Certain goals were set for the students in that first class, including a 72 percent completion rate and an increase of math and reading skills in 72 percent of the students. Both goals were not only met, but exceeded. With a completion rate of 96 percent, nearly 100 percent of the students demonstrated improvements in their math and reading skills.

When we introduced this program in May, one of our goals was making it available to students across the state. This past week, we moved closer to overcoming that challenge with the announcement that we are establishing "Operation About Face" programs in Greenwood, Aberdeen and Pascagoula.

Our children are going to face challenges, and we want them to do so with the knowledge they can overcome them. We want them, to paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, to go confidently in the direction of their dreams and live the life they imagine. When that happens, Mississippi will be a better state.