

**Governor's Column****11/10/02**

Just as we have to learn how to walk before we run, our children's success in school depends on how well we prepare them for that first step through the schoolhouse door.

Last January, as the first state selected to host a Leadership Summit on Higher Education by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, we focused on the work we must do to meet this goal. The summit recognized the priority of early childhood education and the importance of every child beginning school ready to learn.

In March, we reaffirmed our commitment to early childhood education and to making sure our children were ready to succeed in school and contribute to the growth of our state.

Joining us in that reaffirmation were other organizations dedicated to addressing the needs of our youngest citizens. Chevron Texaco, the Mississippi Early Childhood Association, ETV, Mississippi Valley State University, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State, and the Barksdale Reading Institute are all working on initiatives in this area.

With all our work to date, however, there has still been no comprehensive plan for the funding and implementation of a universal early childhood education system. We're going to change that, and develop a system of early care and education to address the unique needs of our children and help build a stronger Mississippi.

The plan is going to be developed through a partnership between the Barksdale Reading Institute and the Department of Human Services. The Barksdale Reading Institute and DHS are investing in this project, and together, will enlist the services of Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan of Yale University to conduct an 18-month study to evaluate the status of child care in Mississippi.

She has conducted similar studies in Ohio, and is currently working with Illinois and South Carolina.

Dr. Kagan is a senior research analyst at Yale University, and one of the nation's leading authorities on early childhood development. Dr. Kagan's partner in this project will be Richard Brandon of the University of Washington's Human Services Policy Center.

Dr. Cathy Grace, coordinator of Mississippi State University's Early Childhood Institute, and her staff will provide support services for the project.

The focus of the study is clear. Dr. Kagan will assess what child care services currently exist in Mississippi; what funds, from both federal and state sources, could be available to support an enhanced child care system; and what the public is looking for in child care.

When her work is finished, she will provide us with a listing of options for what we can do to improve early childhood care, the cost of each option, and possible funding sources for each option.

The hallmark of our vision is to give each and every one of our young people an opportunity – an opportunity to live up to their potential and promise. To meet that hallmark will demand our very best, and require us to examine our priorities and focus on the steps we must take in the months and years to come.