

STATE OF THE STATE

Lieutenant Governor Tuck, Speaker Ford, President Pro Tem Little, Speaker Pro Tem Clark.

Elected officials and distinguished guests, my fellow Mississippians.

We meet in troubled economic times. Like every other state in the nation, we are suffering from a national recession that is draining our resources. We must understand the economic realities of the day, and be realistic about our responsibilities.

Every day we see more evidence of the magnitude of this problem. The stock market has lost \$7 trillion, and more than a million Americans have lost their jobs.

The persistent national recession is causing major budget shortfalls in almost every state. Drastic measures are being taken. Schools in eight states, including Arkansas and Louisiana, are cutting back to a four-day week.

Kentucky and others are releasing prisoners from their penitentiaries. Other states are resorting to mass lay-offs of state employees. Fortunately, that has not been the case here in Mississippi.

Our state employees are doing their jobs and doing them well, despite heavy workloads - and our commitment to our state employees remains strong.

There are some things we can control here in Mississippi, and some things we can't. Obviously, the president has the responsibility for dealing with the management of the national economy.

Our responsibility is to deal with the impact of the national recession here in Mississippi through sensible policies that protect our citizens in the short term and prepare them for the long term.

We're holding up better than most other states. We know this national recession will end one day. We're preparing for that day with an aggressive plan to improve our schools, create quality jobs and fight for the jobs we have.

The first order of business is to put our schools first, because we know that communities with good public schools attract good jobs. Everybody benefits from good schools.

My first priority is protecting education and Mississippi's future. I presented a comprehensive plan for education in Mississippi, a plan that has seen success and still sees opportunity.

Teacher pay is rising. Our students' test scores are up, and 62 percent of our high school graduates are going to college. Better teachers, better scores - we know that investing in education works.

Mississippi is the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every kindergarten through 12th grade public school classroom. More than 32,000 classrooms across Mississippi are now wired and connected to the world wide web.

Our students - regardless of their location or economic status - have access to the greatest information resource in the history of the world.

These initiatives have been successful, and have brought positive national attention to Mississippi.

We will continue to transform our plan into realities for the people of Mississippi. We should not end this work until it is complete. We know what's been successful; let's talk about the plan for the opportunities ahead of us.

In 1982, kindergarten became a cornerstone of the Education Reform Act. In 2003, I want to take it to the next step.

The Summer Start program would bring the kids to the classroom two months before, and continuing two months after, their kindergarten year. Taught by qualified kindergarten teachers, this program would give our kids a running start for the schoolhouse door.

Summer Start will reduce drop-out rates, increase the skills of our future workforce, and ultimately save the state millions. Giving our children the opportunity to succeed - giving them a good education - still remains the best hope for lifting us to greater heights.

Education is not only the concern of the parents and grandparents. It's a community concern. People want to live in a good community. Good schools attract good jobs, which build good communities.

Our children need every opportunity to learn, and that opportunity extends beyond the bell at the end of the day. Thousands of students around our state return to empty houses after school.

In 1995, we enacted the successful Support Our Students program to help meet this need. Children are learning through this initiative. In 2003, it's time to expand it from 19 sites to more than 250 sites around the state.

The demands on our children in the 21st century require more than we've been doing. It's not an easy time to be a kid - and we have a responsibility to our children to make sure they have the tools to succeed in demanding times.

Our universities and community colleges are strong resources for high school graduates and adult learners alike. They offer our people the skills and the learning they need to get a job and our industries the talent to get the job done. Higher education has a critical role to play in bringing jobs to Mississippi.

That's why I've called for the creation of a \$200 million "Brain Trust" for our universities and community and junior colleges. Under this plan, bonds would be issued - \$20 million a year for 10 years - to recruit and retain the very best minds for research, development, and workforce training. We know this is the type of investment that creates more high-paying jobs for our people.

My budget invests 62 percent of the general fund in education. This enhances our future; anything less shortchanges it. I'm fighting to increase funding for education, and the people of Mississippi need you to join the fight with me. The beaten path is not always the best. The status quo is simply not good enough.

I am calling on you to appropriate pre-kindergarten through higher education in one comprehensive bill, and at 62 percent of the general fund. Pass it, put it on my desk and I'll sign it - and I don't mean the last week of March, I mean the third week of January.

Let's prove to the people of Mississippi we care about our schools. Let's prove to them that when it comes to education, we mean business - and business means jobs.

Late last month, I was with a kindergarten class at Casey Elementary School, a National Blue Ribbon school here in Jackson. The children in the class gave me a book containing letters they had written.

One letter from a young girl reminded me again of the reason why we work so hard for their future. Her simple message was "thank you for helping us learn."

For her and for all young people across our state, we must make the necessary investments. If we shortchange our investment in education, we shortchange her future - our future - and that's not an alternative I'm willing to accept.

We're creating quality jobs in this state, and we're doing it in new and innovative ways. Our economic development plan continues to stand out as one of the most aggressive in the nation. We now compete at a level never before thought possible.

Since January 2000, more than 49,000 new jobs have been created in Mississippi. More than 23,000 of those jobs were created through the expansion of existing industries. Over \$13.5 billion has been invested in new and expanded businesses.

Two years ago, we landed the Nissan plant. Six months ago, it was announced the plant would be expanded. Today, the total investment stands at \$1.5 billion and more than 5,000 new direct jobs.

But, we must create opportunities across the board. Economic development is economic development, whether it's two people using a truck or 5,000 people building the truck. Rural areas of this state have been hit hard by NAFTA. In fact, they've been hit the hardest. We must be smart and aggressive in creating jobs.

I am proposing the Mississippi Rural Economic Impact Authority. \$20 million in bonds will be used to provide assistance to new and existing businesses, and training for people who have lost their jobs in rural Mississippi.

The stores, the restaurants, the independent contractor - these and so many others are the backbone of business in this state. Through our aggressive plan, Mississippi is now one of the top ten states for small business survival. Bold ideas got us there. Bold ideas will take us to the next level.

A year ago, we were facing two significant problems in health care. Medicaid was in crisis with its funding and lack of flexibility, but we were able to work together to reach a solution and have made strong progress.

I want to recognize Attorney General Mike Moore for his help on that issue; we couldn't have done it without you.

We were willing to be bold with Medicaid. The flexibility to manage Medicaid is saving Mississippi millions of dollars. We can do the same in other agencies. Let's start with Human Services and Corrections.

Our doctors were also in crisis, but we had a comprehensive plan. Decisive action made a difference not only for Mississippi's doctors, but also for our people who depend on them - and it spared us the crisis situations facing other states such as West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

During the special session on medical malpractice, I called for the creation of a compensation fund to provide relief for rural Mississippi. Today, I again urge its adoption as part of the overall plan to ensure quality health care for our people.

On behalf of the people of Mississippi, I want to take a moment to recognize Speaker Tim Ford, and to commend him for the unselfish work he has done for this state over the past 23 years. He has served this body, and the people of Mississippi, with a dedication and commitment to a better future. For that, Mr. Speaker, we are grateful.

Mr. Speaker, Lieutenant Governor, members of the Legislature -- I want us to work to make dreams become realities for our people. We determine the legacy of

our work. We shouldn't be afraid to try new and bold things. We shouldn't be afraid to say, "we can."

Three years ago, I made a pledge to the people of Mississippi - unprecedented goals, unparalleled progress. We will plan; we will achieve. We've forged solutions because we dared to say "we can." Let's be willing to dare again.

I look forward to our work. God bless you, God bless Mississippi, and God bless the United States of America.