

*Remarks for the
Accelerated Readers Program
November 8, 2002*

It is great to be here tonight, and to recognize these kids who are working so hard to get a good education.

We should all be proud of these young people and the effort they are making to live up to their promise and potential. I have no doubt they will succeed, and help lead Mississippi in the 21st century.

These kids are working hard, but they still need our help. We have an obligation to help them make the most of their talents and gifts, to help provide a foundation for their success in life.

I'm proud to say that foundation is strong, and getting stronger every day.

If we are to succeed in our efforts to recruit and retain business in Mississippi and provide good, quality jobs for our people, then we must ensure the strength of our educational system.

We've made a commitment to pay Mississippi's teachers like the professionals they are. We're going to lift the average teacher salary in this state from 49th to 19th in the nation over the next four years, and that's good for Mississippi.

We were the first state in the nation to offer more pay for teachers who achieved National Board Certification. Today, we have over 1,000 teachers who have been certified, the sixth highest number in the nation.

We also have to make sure our children have the tools and the resources they need to succeed. We're doing that, and the work is paying off.

Test scores are up dramatically.

More of our kids are going to college. The Southern Regional Education Board Fact Book shows that an average of 62 percent of our high school graduates are going on to college – a percentage that ranks us tenth in the nation.

We're being aggressive about improving our schools, and that aggressiveness is being recognized and appreciated through new programs.

In January, we were the first state selected to host a Leadership Summit on Higher Education. That summit presented six priorities for the future of education in Mississippi, from making sure our children start school ready to learn to increasing our investment in research and development at the university level.

In September, we were awarded a \$12.4 million GEAR UP grant through the United States Department of Education to ensure our disadvantaged middle and secondary school students are prepared to pursue and succeed in post-secondary education.

That same month, we were announced as one of six states to participate in a national pilot program – the “Following the Leaders” program – to implement the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind” Act. As one of two governors who led the effort for this act from the state level, I’m proud that 15 schools across the state are part of this program.

Last week, Water Valley High School was the first school *in the nation* to formally begin its work by raising the “Following the Leaders Flag.”

Listen to what was said about Mississippi when this announcement was made. They said we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students” and the “immediate capacity to use ‘Following the Leaders’ tools effectively.”

That enthusiasm, commitment and capacity is not going to go to waste.

By now, you’re familiar with the Computers in the Classroom initiative. This program was started two years ago with a very specific goal – to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state by the end of this year.

Thanks to the tremendous support of the Maddox Foundation and other supporters, we're going to make it. Another great part of this initiative is that we are working closely with Robin Costa and the Maddox Foundation to bring the computers together with the software to support the Accelerated Readers program.

Technology is helping build reading skills and improved reading skills will help work with technology. It's a cycle that feeds on itself and leads to a better future for these kids here tonight and every child in Mississippi.

Other states are watching what we're doing. Last week, my chief of staff was at a meeting in Knoxville and the subject of computers in schools came up.

One individual from Tennessee commented that all the schools in the state were wired for the Internet. Well, Bill was able to inform them that not only is every *classroom* in Mississippi wired for the Internet, but every classroom is going to have a *computer* to make use of that wiring.

There's a big difference between being wired and being connected – and Mississippi's children are connected.

We've talked about being the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every classroom, and a couple of weeks ago the National Governors Association confirmed it.

We are on our way, and we're riding high. To quote the policy analyst with the NGA, we're "at the head of the wave of technological innovation."

Another great aspect of this program is the fact that nearly 1,000 of the computers are being built from scratch by Mississippi students. With help from ExplorNet, we've got kids all over the state putting together computers for our classrooms.

All of this is great news, but what exactly does it mean for Mississippi?

It means a child in the most rural part of the state will have the same opportunity as a child in one of our cities to log on to the Internet and the world of information it provides. As a Mississippi teacher said last week, kids in Houlka deserve the same education as kids in Tupelo or Jackson – and they're getting it.

It means our children will develop the skills for working with computers and technology at an early age.

It also means Mississippi will continue to be competitive with other states and nations when it comes to recruiting and retaining industries and jobs.

The commitment to our children and our teachers is focused, but its aim is broad. By investing in education today, we are looking for the dividends that will come in the form of jobs and business.

There's a lot of focus on what we're doing here. Other states are looking at Mississippi and realizing that things are different, that things are changing, there's a new energy and emphasis on moving forward, that we are proving education is a priority.

We're not just sitting still. We're on the right track, and no one's going to run us over.