

*Remarks for
Brooks Elementary School “Making a Difference” Program
November 18, 2002*

(recognize Superintendent Smith / Principal
Martin)

It is great to be here at Brooks Elementary, and today’s theme of “Making a Difference” is very timely. Each of us here – as parents, as teachers, as business leaders, as community members, and as elected officials – has a responsibility to the children of this school and every child in Mississippi.

We have a responsibility to make a difference – a positive difference – in their lives. The work we do today will have an impact on our state tomorrow, and I believe our best work is done in education.

Since the day I entered public office as a state senator, I have focused on education. As governor, it has continued to be the primary focus of my work, and with the cooperation of people around the state, we are seeing clear results.

Look at what's been done – we've passed a historic teacher pay package that will lift the average teacher salary from 49th to 19th in the nation.

By the end of this year, every public school classroom in the state will have an Internet-accessible computer in place and being used by students. Mississippi will be the first state in the nation to do this – a fact verified by the National Governors Association.

Test scores are up. The Princeton Review ranked Mississippi's testing system as the sixth best in the nation.

More than 1,000 teachers in the state are nationally-board certified, the sixth highest number in the nation. 62 percent of high school graduates, according to the Southern Regional Education Board, are going on to college – the tenth highest number in the nation.

We were the first state in the nation to host a Leadership Summit on Higher Education, a meeting that presented six major priorities for the future of education in Mississippi, from sending kids to school ready to learn to research and development at our universities and colleges.

We are also one of six states in the nation to participate in a pilot program for implementing the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation recently passed by Congress. In choosing Mississippi, it was said we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students.”

We have made great progress in education. It’s time to step up our commitment and continue to make a difference for the future of this state, and for the future of our children.

Last week, I announced how I want to go about making that difference when I released my budget for the 2004 fiscal year. We started the budget process with a focus on education – and finished with a budget that puts “Schools First,” with 62 percent of the budget used for education.

My budget recommendation fully funds the teacher pay raise, it restores the Mississippi Adequate Education Program to the 2004 fiscal year funding level, and replaces one time money put into adequate education.

It works toward fewer children in each classroom so teachers can focus on student needs, and for more counselors to help students with the decisions they face as they work toward graduation.

It works toward getting rid of portable classrooms, the “temporary buildings” that have become permanent in too many schools, and giving our teachers and children safe buildings. It’s time for them to be able to focus on learning, and not on the roof leaking above their head.

We’ve invested hundreds of millions of dollars in buildings. It’s time to invest in our people.

I've set priorities for this budget – and education is priority number one.

Meeting a priority like this isn't always easy, especially during a national recession that has affected every state, not to mention every household. But, we can do it – with discipline and focus, we can do it.

There are challenges ahead of us, but that's nothing new. What's new is the way I want to take on those challenge and turn them into opportunities.

That's how we make a better life for our communities. That's how we make a better life for our children. That's how we make a difference.

Thank you.