

*Remarks to the
Students/Faculty at Delta State University
November 19, 2002*

(recognize Dr. Caston)

(story of Jordan / 15-point buck / priorities)

I have priorities for Mississippi. I discussed them in my State of the State address at the beginning of this year – jobs, security, health care and education. The absolute top priority, though, and you've heard me say this before, is education.

This is where I am focusing my efforts, because education is the foundation for everything else we do for this state.

It's nothing new to hear people talk about having education as a priority, but the question that needs to be asked is this: How many of them can prove it's a priority?

When I entered public office fifteen years ago, I was determined to make a difference in the educational system of this state – from the earliest stages through higher education. And, that's happening.

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.

That approach depends on one major factor for success – leadership. We can't just stand around hoping for things to turn out; we can't just wait for things to happen.

We've got to make them happen. We have to take a proactive stance and commit ourselves to doing the necessary work to help the South emerge as a leader for the nation.

To reach that pinnacle we have to take risks, and at every level, the constantly changing dynamics of the economy demand creative thinking and innovative planning. But, the rewards of meeting these demands can be great.

The success of the work you're doing in higher education depends on a strong foundation, one that begins at the youngest age. I'm committed to helping make foundation as strong as possible, and each you here today – students and faculty alike – have a role to play in that effort.

I want to speak for a moment to how we are building that foundation, because it's exciting work. And I know that some of you here today are education majors, and I want you to hear about what's being done to make your career path as exciting and rewarding as it can be.

Teacher pay is on the rise in Mississippi. We have made a commitment to those who stand at the front of the classroom, and we're going to raise the average teacher salary in the state from 49th to 19th in the nation.

We are also giving students the tools they need to succeed.

The economy of the 21st century – in Mississippi and around the world – will be wireless, borderless and seamless. For us to compete in that economy – for our young people to live up to their potential in that economy – the technological background must be in place.

That's why we're putting an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in this state. Children from every corner of the state – from the most rural districts to the most urban – will have the same opportunities to learn, to research, to make the most of the information superhighway.

Some of those computers are being built here at Southern this morning by Mississippi students – a tremendous gift to those coming up in the grades below them.

Last week, my chief of staff, Bill Renick, 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.

And, last month we were selected as one of six states to participate in the first phase of the “Following the Leaders” project of the U.S. Department of Education.

This project will provide the technology resources and guidance to help us implement the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation recently enacted by Congress.

Focusing on the connection between parents, classrooms, school districts and state education departments, this project presents a challenge for us – and it’s a challenge we’re ready to take on and turn into opportunity.

I know we can do it. In the first place, we have already put accountability standards in place that are tougher than those mandated at the federal level. And secondly, the comments of the U.S. Department of Education in choosing Mississippi offered further proof of our ability.

In choosing Mississippi, it was said we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students,” as well as the “immediate capacity to use the ‘Following the Leaders’ tools effectively.”

Back in January of this year, we were the first state selected by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges to host a summit on higher education.

We brought together leaders from government, business and education to provide a cooperative framework for education, economic and social progress.

The report we issued at that summit introduced a shared vision for our future, outlining six major priorities to help advance our ability to compete in the 21st century economy.

The six priorities included raising the educational aspirations of all Mississippians; preparing our children to learn by the time they begin school; boosting the quality of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools; increasing college and university graduation rates; expanding lifelong learning; and increasing the level of activity in university research and development.

The hallmark of our vision at that summit was to give each and every one of our young people an opportunity – an opportunity to live up to their potential and promise.

Meeting that hallmark will demand our very best. It will require us to examine our priorities and focus in on the steps we must take in the months and years to come.

Last week, I presented my priorities – in the form of my budget recommendations – for the next fiscal year. It's a budget that I'm proud to say puts Schools First, with 62 percent of the total budget going toward education.

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

One area of my budget focuses directly on higher education, and is focused on stopping the flow of talented professors and researchers like you have here at Delta State. I want to establish a “brain trust,” if you will, to keep our best professors here and bring more in to work with them.

Under this initiative, the state would issue \$20 million a year over the next 10 years – a total of \$200 million – in general obligation bonds.

Those funds would be used to recruit and retain the best minds for Mississippi.

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

Creating jobs for the people of this state has become a trademark of my administration, but building a future for this state through quality education is my personal passion.

Our commitment is focused, but our aim is broad. Education is where we build our success, and we're going to do it.

We have the tools to get this work done. We have the people and the talent and the resources to get this work done.

I appreciate the good work you are doing here to help grow – and teach – Mississippi.

Thank you.