

*Remarks for the
DHS / Barksdale Reading Institute Press Conference
October 31, 2002*

Good morning. On March 12, we announced a new focus on early childhood education in Mississippi.

Many of the people with us here today were there that day because of the initiatives they have in place to help our children, initiatives led by organizations like the Barksdale Reading Institute, Chevron Texaco, the Mississippi Early Childhood Association, the Department of Human Services, Mississippi Educational Television, the Health Department and the Department of Education.

I want to thank them for their continued commitment, and I want to thank the legislators who have joined us as well for their dedication to Mississippi's children.

Last January, our Leadership Summit on Higher Education recognized the priority of early childhood education and the importance of every child beginning school ready to learn.

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.

Today, we're here to announce a new partnership – one that will result in a needs assessment to serve as a blueprint for implementing and funding early childhood education.

The Department of Human Services is providing \$375,000 in child care development funds to the Barksdale Reading Institute, to enlist the services of Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan. Dr. Kagan will conduct an 18-month study to evaluate the status of child care, the costs involved with upgrading child care in Mississippi, and potential funding sources.

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. She is the principal author of a report issued in 2001 which offered potential long-term solutions for improving the quality of early childhood care and education.

On February 28 of this year, I wrote to Dr. Kagan, inviting her to work with us in establishing universal funding for an early childhood care and education system.

Dr. Kagan's partner in this project will be Richard Brandon of the University of Washington's Human Services Policy Center. Mississippi State University's Early Childhood Institute 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 she will also gauge through focus groups 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.

Three years ago, the Barksdale Reading Institute was created through a \$100 million commitment from the Barksdale family – and I want to thank Jim and Sally Barksdale for being here with us today.

They are now expanding their focus to include the impact of early care on children being prepared to start kindergarten and first grade ready to learn.

I want to also thank Claiborne Barksdale with the Reading Institute, and Dr. Cathy Grace of the Early Childhood Institute for their work on this initiative. Thanks also go to the Mississippi Early Childhood Association for providing funding to offset local costs.

Today's announcement exemplifies the partnerships that are working to improve Mississippi and the future for our children.

I'd like to present Claiborne with this check representing our commitment to this effort, and recognize him for a few remarks. Claiborne?