

*Remarks for the
Early Childhood Press Conference
March 12, 2002*

Sometimes we spend so much time worrying about what our children will become tomorrow that we forget they are already somebody today.

It's time for us to focus on early childhood issues in Mississippi. We've already taken steps in that direction.

We have been developing recommendations to build a strong infrastructure for early childhood services, including a data system to support and guide policy decisions, child care, and resources for parents.

In January, a report released at our Leadership Summit on Higher Education discussed the importance of early childhood education and set the priority for all children to begin school ready to learn.

This report also recommended the improvement and expansion of pre-kindergarten programs for children in all areas of the state.

Other southern states are taking action in this area already. North Carolina's "More at Four" program extends pre-kindergarten programs to at-risk four-year-olds.

In South Carolina, the “First Steps” program has started new preschool programs, expanded existing programs and is developing partnerships between early childhood programs and other groups, such as health care providers.

And in Georgia, 70% of their four-year-olds are enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program.

The most up-to-date research regarding healthy brain development shows strong evidence that social and economic circumstances can affect future academic performance.

We have to address these circumstances and ensure our children are ready to begin school, succeed in school, and eventually gain economic independence and contribute to the growth of our state.

There are several initiatives in place today to address the needs of our youngest citizens.

The “Leaders in Literacy” project, a collaboration between the Barksdale Reading Institute and MSU’s Early Childhood Institute, centers on language development for preschool children.

Chevron Texaco, along with leading Mississippi early childcare experts, is developing a certification process where communities can be recognized for their efforts to benefit their youngest citizens.

The Mississippi Early Childhood Association offers complimentary copies of a video called “I’m Your Child,” funded by the Phil Harden Foundation and produced by Rob Reiner, to parents around the state.

Grants made through the Department of Human Services support ETV’s “Right from Birth” series, the Nurturing Homes Initiative, and the “Partnerships for Quality Child Care Project,” among others.

Mississippi Valley State University and the Department of Education have recently partnered on a grant proposal to the Department of Labor to create a career ladder certification process for child care workers.

The Department of Health's "First Steps Early Intervention" program helps children under the age of 3 with developmental delays, and offers resources to parents to help recognize and address potential problems.

There is much being done, but so much more to do.

We have these initiatives and more on a hand-out you will be receiving, but we have no concise plan or strategic goals to address the needs of early childhood, and that's where we need to focus.

I am ready to work with early childhood leaders on the national level and advocates here at home.

Working together, we can develop a system of early care and education to address the unique needs of our children, and help build a stronger Mississippi.

We have the ability, the potential and the resources to make this happen. The time to do it is now.