

*Remarks for the
“Following the Leaders” Informational Meeting
August 20, 2002*

Good morning.

I believe the best view of our future is from the classroom, and let me tell you this – the view is getting clearer every day. Mississippi is doing what needs to be done to move ahead in education, to build a foundation for our children and to give you the tools you need to make that foundation as strong as it can be.

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

Education is where we build our success, and this is how we're doing it.

Recognizing the role you play in the lives of our children is the first step in this commitment. I read once "teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools."

I don't want that to be the case in Mississippi.

To begin with, I don't believe in "unattainable goals." I believe in "unprecedented goals." I want to see our state, and our region, set the bar high and not be satisfied with where we are.

We've made a commitment to our teachers.

We're going to pay them like the professionals they are, and the average teacher salary in Mississippi is going to climb from 49th in the nation to 19th in the nation.

Even the New York Times has asked, why can't New York put together the kind of education package that Mississippi has?

Don't think the rest of the nation hasn't seen what we're doing.

We're putting an Internet-accessible computer in every one of your classrooms, from Hernando to Hattiesburg. Nearly 6,000 of those computers are being built by Mississippi students with help from ExplorNet.

These computers are a tangible reminder that our own children recognize the value of education and technology – and want the very best of that value for the students coming up behind them.

Don't think the rest of the nation doesn't know about this effort.

Test scores are up dramatically in our schools, and I want to thank you for your hard work in helping to make this happen. Those test scores are incredible, given where we've been; but I know we have always had a shared confidence in our children and the God-given talents within each of them.

A Princeton Review report ranking the states based on their testing programs for schools was released last month, and the report shows a new Mississippi.

Where were we in the national ranking? We weren't 50th. We weren't 49th. We weren't 40th, or 30th, or 20th. We weren't even ranked 10th.

Mississippi ranked 6th in the nation. Sixth.

Don't believe for a minute that the rest of the country isn't aware of this.

And now, we're taking our work a step farther. Mississippi has been named as one of six states in the nation to lead the first phase of the "Following the Leaders" project. This initiative will help provide technology and guidance toward the mandated changes in the "No Child Left Behind" legislation.

We were already thinking ahead of this legislation in areas such as accountability. Our measures are more stringent than those called for from Washington, because we realize the importance of what we're trying to accomplish here.

This announcement is a major victory – for our state, for our children, for the future. We’re going to be able to introduce new resources and new tools in the crusade for better education in Mississippi.

In the announcement of this project, it was said we had an “infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students.” It was said we had the “immediate capacity to use Following the Leaders tools effectively.”

These things were said because of all the work we've been doing here – work that hasn't gone unnoticed.

Our schools, our teachers, our children – they're all moving ahead together because we share a strong commitment to being the best. That commitment, that dedication to a common goal will continue to shape the work we do in education for years to come.

Thank you for the great work you've been doing, and for the work to come. We're building Mississippi – and the rest of the nation is taking notice. Thank you.