

*Remarks for the
MEC Annual Luncheon
May 21, 2003*

Talk is cheap.

Leadership is about action. Leadership is about turning obstacles into opportunities and closing the deal. Leadership is about fighting for what you believe in. It's about building bridges and forging coalitions that benefit our people.

This forum has always been a source of debate and ideas, and a catalyst for change. It was at the 1999 MEC meeting that Bob Pittman spoke of what it could mean to Mississippi if we provided greater access to technology for our students.

Today, because of our partnership with MEC and the business community, Mississippi is the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom.

That's more than 32,000 computers in more than 32,000 classrooms – and hundreds of thousands of students are using them to learn, explore and expand their horizons.

Our Computers in the Classroom Initiative was successful because of our shared vision. Two years ago, we literally passed the hat in this room and raised more than \$50,000 to buy computers.

The public-private partnership that drove the initiative has set a standard for other projects.

And who wins from this effort? Every Mississippian and every business in the state – because when we invest in education, we improve the quality of life for all of us. It's about building good schools, good jobs and good communities.

This year we set a new standard for other states to follow. We made history when we changed the way we invest in education forever. On January 9, I challenged the Legislature to invest in our schools first.

On January 31, before any other appropriations bills were passed, they adopted legislation investing 62 percent of our budget in education, for kindergartens through universities and community colleges.

We set a strong precedent for future generations in our state, a precedent that demonstrates our commitment to creating opportunities for all of our people. Our children shouldn't have to compete with convicted felons for their share of the budget – and I challenge the Legislature to continue this priority. Our people deserve no less.

We have also worked together to create more jobs for Mississippians. Many of you here in this room were actively involved in the effort to pass the Advantage Mississippi Initiative three years ago, and the results of that effort are clear.

Over the past three years, we've created more than 52,000 new jobs at over 2,200 new and expanded facilities around the state. Nearly \$15 billion in capital investments has been pumped into our economy. This is evidence of our strong partnership during a time of national recession.

I've said before that economic development is economic development, whether it's two people in a truck or 5,000 people building a truck.

Every new job makes a difference in someone's life.

Every job is important – and it's important that we continue working hard to create jobs for Mississippians. The Advantage Mississippi initiative has been a large part of that effort, and so will the Rural Economic Impact Authority. I proposed the creation of the Authority in January, and with your support, today \$10 million is available to assist with job creation in rural areas and worker training at our community colleges around the state.

The effect of the Authority has been almost immediate. A great example of that can be seen with Charles Holder of Bay Springs, who's here with us today. Charles, thank you for being here.

Charles is a known business leader, and has been active in workforce development for Mississippi. He and I talked earlier this year about how we could help his business, Hol-Mac, down in Bay Springs. We got him together with some of our mid-level bureaucrats at MDA, and soon his company will become one of the first to benefit from the Rural Economic Impact Authority.

We're bringing between 40 and 50 jobs into Bay Springs, but here's the exciting part. At a time when jobs have been leaving Mississippi because of NAFTA, we're helping Charles bring jobs back home from Mexico. That's good for Mississippi, but it's even better for Charles Holder and 50 people in Bay Springs.

This forum is a catalyst for debate and change. One year ago, at this same event, I called for changes to our state's civil justice system and said I would call a special session to address the issue.

As you know, there are certain issues and certain debates that require the governor to call a special session – issues like the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, teacher pay, and as I said a year ago today, civil justice reform.

After more than a decade of attempts, history had proven that civil justice reform could not be passed in a regular session. It demanded the full focus and attention of the Legislature – and that is what I gave the people of Mississippi last fall.

We've made progress because of a strong partnership. We've made progress because of action, and because of leadership. That's been good for business, and it's been good for Mississippi.

Now we have more to do – together. We have more deals to close, and more opportunities to create for our people. We've proven what our partnership can do. Let's prove the point again.