

*Remarks to the
Mississippi Association of Colleges
October 21, 2002*

Thank you, Chancellor Khayat. It is a pleasure to be here at Ole Miss again, and to speak to you today on an issue that has stayed at the forefront of my public life.

We operate in interesting times.

Nearly 150 years ago, Charles Dickens wrote his classic novel "A Tale of Two Cities." The book opens with the well-known lines, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Those words were used to describe the political situations in 18th century England and France – but can just as easily be used to illustrate the environment in which higher education operates in 21st century Mississippi.

Many of the challenges we face today in Mississippi and in the South have been with us for generations – but we are taking a new approach to those challenges, an approach which calls us to turn them into opportunities for our states and for our region.

That approach depends on one major factor for success – leadership. We cannot stand idly by and simply hope for things to turn out all right in the South; 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 do in higher education depends on a strong foundation, one that begins at the youngest age. I am committed to helping that foundation be as strong as possible, and you also 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. Great things are happening – things that reflect the best of times.

Teacher pay is on the rise in Mississippi. We have made a commitment to those who stand at the front of the classroom to prepare the students you will lead through the years of higher education.

When we passed that legislation last year, the New York Times commented in an editorial that we had put together the type of package that continued to elude New York. That's high praise for what we're doing here, and we should be proud of it.

We are also giving our children 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 is why we are 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.

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 that we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students,” as well as the “immediate capacity to use the ‘Following the Leaders’ tools effectively.”

The leadership of our state was reflected as well in January of this year, when we were the first state selected by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges' Center for Public Higher Education Trusteeship and Governance 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.

Those priorities included initiatives that you, as educators, can take on in partnership with the public and private sectors.

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.

To meet 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.

The work has already begun. We must work together to improve the alignment of policies and practices across educational sectors, and strengthen accountability in meeting this aggressive agenda.

Yet, while the work is underway, there's so much more to do – and that work must begin with the financial support this state is willing to put behind its efforts.

As we begin the legislative budget process, I will continue to call for the adequate resources necessary to achieve success in education – at all levels. We must establish education as a priority – as the priority – for Mississippi.

To accomplish this will demand tough decisions – and the first decision that must be made as the revenue estimate for Fiscal Year 2004 is debated. For two years running, I have called for an estimate that reflects the reality of our state and national economies – economies that have remained sluggish.

We cannot afford to base our budget on the simple hope that our economy will turn around. We have to use realistic numbers, not the numbers we would all prefer.

If the creation of a state budget that supports all levels of education depended solely on what we wished would happen with the economy, we would have no problem.

But that's not the case. When we craft the budget, a budget that must – first and foremost – provide for the education of all our people, we must make tough decisions about where the funds for that budget will come from.

In my budget for the current fiscal year, I called for a pay raise for those working in higher education. I stand by that call. We have to make an investment in our people – in you – so that the dividends we reap in the future are that much larger.

Simply, we are building our foundation as strong and secure as we can. We are all aware of the biblical proverb about building a house on sand. We are building ours on the most stable rock we can, and that rock is education.

It's exciting to think about what we can do with education as a priority. There is no limit to what can happen. Horizons are broadened, the sky is the limit. Mississippians have the chance to build a future never dreamt of by past generations.

We've chosen a path covered with challenges and surrounded by opportunity. How we walk that path and use our resources will determine our success for generations to come.

Creating jobs for the people of this state has become a trademark of my administration, but building a future for the young people of 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.

There's an old saying that the challenges of hard work affect people in different ways – some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don't turn up at all.

None of us here today is afraid of turning up our sleeves. We know there's no other option to consider.

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

Thank you.