

*Remarks for the
Mt. Pleasant Revival (Gilmore's Restaurant)
March 20, 2002*

Reverend Walker, thank you for the invitation to join you here tonight. As governor I have the opportunity to travel all over the state, but I'm especially glad to be in Kossuth tonight.

(tell story of traveling to DC; lawyer on plane who didn't believe you were governor)

Whether it's one lawyer on a plane or one thousand people who read an article in The New York Times about what we're doing here, people are learning that Mississippi is changing.

They're learning that we're doing business in a different way.

They're learning that we're being recognized for our forward-thinking approaches to education.

We're doing great work for the state of Mississippi. Great things are happening in our state. We are capturing the attention of the world outside our borders because of the exciting things we've got going on, and I'm sure you will agree that it's good for Mississippi to be recognized for being on the cutting edge.

We're on the cutting edge in education.

We've got 405 teachers across this state who have earned National Board Certification.

This process recognizes the very best in teachers, as determined by their peers.

We now have over 1,100 teachers in Mississippi with this certification – the sixth highest number in the nation. Let me repeat that – the sixth highest in the nation. Not 50th, not 40th, not 10th – sixth highest.

Mississippi was also the first state in the nation to offer more pay to teachers with national board certification.

We are also on track to be the first state in the nation to place an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, a goal we'll meet by the end of next year.

We've put together a unique partnership between the public and private sectors, a partnership that has raised money and solicited used computers for the classrooms.

We are going to ensure that our children are ready to compete in the economy of the 21st century, an economy that will be global, borderless and wireless.

Now, combine this with our commitment to pay teachers like the professionals they are. In July, we made this commitment law and the rest of the nation stood up and took notice.

The day after the special session on teacher pay, the New York Times ran an editorial piece commenting that “Mississippi had been able to put together the kind of package that continued to elude New York.”

High praise for our work here, and I'm proud our commitment to our teachers has received such widespread notice. I want the world to know that we're serious about education in Mississippi, we're serious about building a better world for our people, we're serious about shaping a brighter future for our children.

We show that we're serious by making education a priority. We cannot force unfunded mandates on our schools. We cannot force our teachers to pay for supplies out of their own pockets.

I've offered a budget for next year that makes education a priority. It fully funds the teacher pay raise; it funds the Adequate Education Program at its current level; and it focuses on giving our children the tools they need to succeed.

I'm going to fight for that budget, and I know you'll join me in that fight.

You know and I know that education is the foundation for all of this work. We're building a strong foundation.

And on that foundation, we're going to build an economy like our state has never seen.

Last year, we landed the top economic development project in the nation, and we did it like no one else.

It's a process that normally takes 18 months. From our first contact with Nissan to the day we announced – 5 months.

We did it because we were ambitious, we were aggressive, and we wanted the project more than anyone else.

Right now, those of us who are sports fans are excited about “March madness” and the Final Four. Let me tell you, Mississippi’s already made it to the “final four.”

As one of four states in the final running for a \$1 billion Hyundai plant, Mississippi showed again that we can compete with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

That’s the way we’re handling economic development now. With the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, we are making great progress in recruiting new businesses and retaining existing ones.

A great deal of work has been done to put more Mississippians in good jobs. In the past two years, we've created more than 21,000 new jobs and attracted more than \$6 billion in new investments.

And while we have had successes during a recession, the current condition of the national economy has also caused some setbacks.

The bottom line is this – now is not the time to back off our investments and efforts to bring jobs to Mississippi.

Our potential stretches to every corner of Mississippi – from the Gulf Coast to Tishomingo County – and it stretches to every Mississippian. It cannot and will not be wasted.

Finally, to make the most of that potential, we must have a healthy Mississippi.

It's tough to do your best at work or in school if your health isn't good. We recognize that a healthy child goes to school ready to learn, and a healthy adult goes to a job ready to work.

That's why we have to ensure that programs like Medicaid are fully funded and managed in the proper way.

We've gone through a difficult year with Medicaid, but it didn't need to be that way.

The Legislature has put together an approach that has helped with this year's shortfall, but we're still a long way from fixing the basic problems of Medicaid.

The simplest step toward fixing Medicaid is to allow Rica Lewis-Payton and my office the flexibility to run the program. Right now, Rica cannot start up a program to offer breast or cervical cancer screening without getting legislative approval.

Mississippi has the most legislatively constrained Medicaid program in the country, and it just doesn't work that way.

We can make a difference in peoples' lives by acting now – a difference between life and death, a difference between continuing to work and earning disability.

Believing “I must do something” solves more problems than saying “something must be done.”

You won't hear us say, “something must be done.” We live in America's state of promise. It is a promise too long unkept. That has changed.

Mississippi is doing more and doing it better than ever before. The momentum is there, and it is growing.

I am excited about the goals we've set for ourselves. I know you share those goals with me, and I look forward to reaching them.

Thank you.

