

*Remarks to the
Northeast Mississippi Leadership &
Emerging Technologies Symposium
July 27, 2001*

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to join you today. This marks my second trip to the great city of Tupelo this week, and I'm glad to be back.

My first visit, this past Tuesday, has much in common with the theme of this symposium. I was here at the Tupelo Middle School to talk about the historic teacher pay raise passed in Monday's special session.

On that day, we sent a loud and clear message that Mississippi is doing what it takes to succeed by ensuring we will have the best and brightest teachers for our children.

We have done what has been talked about for years – we have put into place a teacher pay raise that will lift us to the southeastern average.

I've said it before, and you'll hear me say it again, that we have to set priorities, and there is no greater priority than education.

By removing the five percent provision in the special session, we have laid the foundation on which we will build our success and fulfill the promise of our potential.

That is great news for all of us. But, we can't sit back and expect all good things to come to us. We have to keep going. We have to continue to address the needs of a constantly changing economy and marketplace that no longer has borders.

Today's marketplace is borderless, wireless and global. Our challenge is to find ways to compete in that economy, to be a player in that marketplace.

Northeast Mississippi is in a good position to play a major role in this effort.

Mississippi is working now with the states of Tennessee and Arkansas to work on ways to build this region of our country, with all its promise and potential.

This is an example of the borders coming down and cooperation being put in their place.

Last Monday's action was a major step in the right direction. By paying our teachers like the professionals they are, we are ensuring our ability to recruit and retain the best teachers in the country for Mississippi's classrooms.

Our children must be able to compete. We know they have the talent and the potential, but we must give them the tools to do the job.

In addition to addressing the needs of our teachers, we are also making great headway in the area of technology.

Here's a great example of what I'm talking about. I want to take a minute to say something about some incredible students from just south of here, in Houston, Mississippi.

Two days ago, a group of students from the Houston Vocational Center beat out seven other teams to win the Winston Solar Challenge.

You may have seen the picture of the car in the paper yesterday morning, driving into Columbus, Indiana, to win the race. What a great testament to the intellect, the ingenuity and the technological skill of Mississippi's students.

I have set a goal for Mississippi's schools. I want us to have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, K-12, in this state by the end of next year. And, we're halfway there.

Through a unique partnership between the state and the private business community, we are raising the money to make this happen.

Yesterday at the Neshoba County Fair, I talked about how we create our own opportunities. As an example, I talked about the Nissan plant currently under construction in Canton.

The process of landing an economic development project of this magnitude is usually five to eighteen months. From the time we first spoke with Nissan to the day we announced the plant was a total of only five months.

How did we do it? We created our own opportunity. We thought outside the box. That's what we're doing with the Computers in the Classroom program, and the children will be the beneficiaries.

Not only will they have the world at their fingertips through the internet, they will be learning and developing valuable skills that will play a major part in the wireless, borderless economy I mentioned earlier.

As part of the Phase I allocations under this program, Lee County alone will have 90 computers installed in 18 schools.

The children in those 90 classrooms will enter the workforce with a background we would never have dreamed possible just a few short years ago.

The world is changing, and Mississippi is changing with it. Just look at what has been happening in the past year – we landed one of the top ten economic development projects in the country, and with it an investment of nearly \$1 billion and 4,000 new jobs.

We are taking our average teacher salary from 49th to 19th in the nation.

We are giving every child in our public schools an equal opportunity to learn the technology they will need to succeed in a world far different from the ones their parents grew up in.

I refuse to believe that we are not capable of doing great things.

I refuse to listen to those who say, “it can’t be done.”

Mississippi can and will compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere. It is up to us to create the opportunities to make this possible, and we are doing just that.

To do less would serve only to diminish the promise and hope of our people and our state.