

*Remarks to the  
Southern Regional Education Board  
June 25, 2002*

Good morning. Governor Barnes, I want to start by thanking you for the leadership you have shown during your tenure as chairman of the Southern Regional Education Board. You have been a strong advocate for the good work being done by the southern states, and I appreciate the passion you have for the education of our children.

That's what brings us here together as the Southern Regional Education Board – the education of our children and the emergence of the south as the leading region for America.

It is common knowledge that education is the foundation for everything else we do – from economic development to health care. Our work is to take an uncommon approach to strengthening that foundation, to think outside the box and be creative in how we shape our growth through the education of all our people, young and old.

We're facing some different challenges today, but the basic questions behind those challenges are the same questions we've been dealing with for generations.

How do we prepare our children for the workplace? What can we do to help them shape their skills to be competitive in an economy that is constantly growing and changing? Where do we need to target our resources today to be successful tomorrow?

The answers begin at an early age. It is our responsibility to ensure that, by the time our children first walk through the schoolhouse door, they are ready to learn. When they enter that new world, confronted with all the questions and fears that come with the first day of school, they need to feel a confidence that they are – above all else – ready to learn.

I grew up in what could honestly be called a small town – population, 42 – and I was the first person in my family to get a college education. My mother dropped out of school in the tenth grade, my father in the eighth – and only a handful of people in my town graduated from high school.

One of the great influences in my life was my first grade teacher. She was one of those rare teachers who helped us realize there would be bumps in the road ahead of us in life, and she would teach us to differentiate between the stumbling blocks and the stepping stones.

Isn't that exactly what our work is about? Don't we have an obligation to our children, to give them the skills to negotiate the bumps in the road? We all know the answer is an emphatic "yes" – and that's why we're here.

The new board report, "Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead," provides an outline for meeting our obligations in education. As chairman, my focus will be to lead us to the completion of those goals and the firm establishment of the southern states as leaders in educational innovation and growth.

One of the most important goals I've already alluded to – that all children are ready for the first grade. The achievement of this goal depends on different factors, from the role of parents to health care to the quality of pre-school and kindergarten programs.

The greatest learning occurs during the earliest years. The minds of our children are blank canvases; the images we put on those canvases will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

I'm not saying it's the job of the state to decide what goes on the canvas, but we do have a responsibility as a society to help influence the image in a positive way. To do less is a disservice to the promise and potential of our region.

Our investments in education, in health care, in economic development – these investments all affect the images on the canvas. By setting priorities in these areas and crafting our budgets around them, we can realize true progress in meeting the goal of preparing our children for the first grade.

Another goal in the report calls for high school graduates to have a “solid academic preparation” and be “ready for postsecondary education and a career.” Again, another opportunity to influence the image on the canvas.

The stakes in today’s world are higher than they’ve ever been. A poorly prepared individual simply isn’t going to have a decent chance to be competitive in the job market, and if one of our children is allowed to enter that market without the proper skills, then we’ve failed that child.



In an economy that is becoming increasingly borderless, wireless, and global, we are called to focus on the technology that is driving that economy and prepare our students for working in it.

A public-private initiative known as “Computers in the Classroom” is underway in Mississippi, and through this program we are going to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state.

We are on target to meet this goal by the end of the year, and it is already making a tremendous difference for our children. Children in the most rural areas of the state have access to the entire world through the simple click of a mouse.

From Hickory to Hot Coffee, previously unimagined doors are being opened for a generation of Mississippi's children. They're going to step through those doors – just as they stepped through the schoolhouse door before – and gain new skills for a new economy.

With our investment in such programs, we must also be prepared to make the commitment to our schools and hold them accountable for the results of their work.

The recent “No Child Left Behind” legislation passed out of Washington offers a framework for this goal, but I believe we can take it even further. The issues of accountability and assessment must be at the core of our work, and I’m proud that strict accountability measures – stricter than those found in the federal legislation – were already in place in Mississippi.

Building on the goal of preparing high school graduates for the next step in life, the SREB Goals for Education next call for helping adults who have not graduated from high school to “participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.”

For us to focus solely on the children, from first grade to post-secondary education, completely ignores a segment of our society that demands our attention. Each of our states is struggling for jobs and economic development, and we all know our success in those areas depends on the readiness of our workforce.

I believe it's never too late to teach, and I believe we have an obligation to teach – regardless of the age of the student.

With the recent expansion of the Nissan automotive plant in Mississippi and the growth of other businesses throughout the state, the demand for a qualified and skilled workforce is greater than ever. As a result, we are investing more than ever in workforce training.

A recent study found there are more 68,000 under-employed workers in central Mississippi alone. With funding from the Workforce Investment Act, we have put a network of job centers in place throughout the state. These centers offer adult workers a resource for skills training and job placement in the changing economy.

There is one other goal I want to touch on from the SREB report – the call for every student to be taught by qualified teachers. What kind of image will end up on the canvas I mentioned earlier if the brush isn't guided by a trained hand?

Again, this goal calls for setting priorities with our budgets and making the right investments demanded by our times. We've made that commitment in Mississippi, a commitment to raise teacher pay above the southeastern average for the first time in our history.

When the teacher pay plan we passed last year is fully implemented, we will have lifted the average salary in Mississippi from 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation to 19<sup>th</sup> in the nation. This plan garnered national attention and focused on what a southern state is capable of doing.

In fact, a New York Times editorial published the day after I signed the plan into law commented that “for many years Mississippi has lagged far behind other states in teacher pay, even in the southeast, making it difficult to hire and keep teachers.”

The editorial went on to say that Mississippi, with its smaller resources, had put together the kind of package that continued to elude New York.

High praise, and a vivid description of the changes happening in the South.



I was proud to chair a summit on “Advancing Mississippi through Higher Education” in January. Mississippi was the first state to host this summit, facilitated by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

We outlined six priorities at that summit, three of which are specifically in line with the goals of the SREB report. The priorities include preparing our children to learn by the time they begin school; boosting the quality of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools; and dramatically expanding adult lifelong learning, worker training and professional development.

As we work at the state level to establish priorities for the education of our children and adults, I hope we will maintain a shared vision for what we can do both individually and corporately.

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats (*Yates*) once wrote, “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” I would dare to say our job is not only to help light the fire, but to stoke it and keep it burning strong.

As individual states, we are doing great things in education. As a region, we're poised to do greater things. I look forward to working with you to take on the challenges before us and shape the south for the new millennium.