

Agenda for Opportunity: Making Mississippi Competitive

Over the past year, we have discovered a new state of mind. We have renewed a spirit of hope. We have found the determination to succeed. Together we have told the nation and the world we will not settle for second best. We will not be labeled or told we cannot, just because we are Mississippi. That confidence is contagious. I believe it breeds success.

Think again of the excitement in the air when Nissan selected Mississippi for their new site. Last year, we competed against our sister states and landed an economic project in the top 1% of all projects in the United States. Today we stand in the spotlight of the nation and the world. Why? Because we dared to imagine it. We dared to believe in this state and in ourselves. We would not give in and we did not give up.

A great line from A Field Of Dreams says, 'build it and they will come.' I say: invest in them and they will stay. That is the heart and soul of our agenda for opportunity. Invest in education. Invest in new industries and homegrown businesses. Invest in housing and health. Invest to make a difference.

During this critical legislative session, we cannot waste our time whining about why not. We need to stay focused on how we will. About half of the states are grappling with slowing growth just like we are. We continue to enjoy a higher level of prosperity than most of us can remember. We have the resources and we have the responsibility to do what we need to do. We will simply have to do things differently. How we've always done it isn't going to get it. Diligence, determination and discipline must be the hallmarks of the 2001 Legislative Session.

Educating our children must be our first priority. With the 2000 education accountability bill, our schools - their administrators, faculty and students - are measuring real progress, recognizing deficiencies and rewarding excellence. Encouraging progress from the classroom, we can expect great things for our schools and more importantly for our students.

The Computer Technology Task Force's diligence and determination matched with state and private dollars will make Mississippi one of the first states in the nation to bring the Internet to every classroom. Our children can be masters over technology, using it to learn and to explore our world, while many of us with slightly grayer hair still struggle with the VCR.

Mississippi's adequate education program ensures schools can open and operate in quality facilities with quality resources for learning.

Technology and textbooks aside, our children won't learn without qualified, inspired teachers in the classroom. Mississippi's teachers continue to outshine teachers in other

states. Our National Board Certification numbers are a resounding testament to their commitment to teaching.

The five percent condition on pay raises for teachers isn't a commitment; it's an excuse. The Legislature should remove the five percent condition. Mississippi's educational outlook grows brighter. Nothing less than a continued commitment to excellence will do. Nothing less than fully funding adequate education, the critical teacher shortage act, and our teacher pay plan will do. Nothing less.

Our resolve to educate Mississippians must translate into sound support of our community colleges and universities. We are asking them to take a greater role in economic development from recruiting industries, to research and development. Educating our children must be our first priority.