

Clarion-Ledger column for 7-15-01

Special Session on Teacher Pay Needed Now

A lot of ink has been used in the newspapers in the past week discussing why we should or shouldn't have a special session on the teacher pay issue. I'm going to use a little ink here to explain why this session needs to be held and why we need to do it now.

The issue at the center of recent discussions is the five percent provision placed in the teacher pay raise legislation during the 2000 session. This economic "trigger," as it has become known, basically stated that unless the state's economy grew by at least five percent, the teacher pay raise would not automatically happen. Any raise would have to be voted on separately.

On the day I signed the pay raise legislation, I stated my opposition to the five percent provision. Speaker Tim Ford publicly opposed the trigger in the 2000 session. For the past 18 months, I have been calling for the removal of the provision. On July 6, Lt. Governor Amy Tuck, with Speaker Ford at her side, joined me in this call. They publicly stated their support for removing the provision, and asked that it be done in a special session on congressional redistricting.

I'm pleased to accommodate their desires to remove the provision. But, I do not believe we should wait any longer than necessary to do so. We have teachers who are debating their futures and whether or not their future will be in Mississippi. By acting now, we can help them reach a decision and welcome them back to our classrooms in the fall.

Addressing the issue in a session along with congressional redistricting is not an option. First and foremost, I do not want the focus to be lost on the issue at hand. The debate on redistricting has the potential to be divisive and we cannot risk having the progress made in education slowed because it gets lost in another argument.

When I agreed with the Lieutenant Governor and Speaker and called for the special session, there was some concern about the date. I moved the date to make it easier for the members of the Legislature to be present for this historic vote.

There has been some concern about the cost of the special session. I have offered to personally raise the funds to reimburse the state for the cost because this issue is important enough to merit our immediate attention. While there has been some talk about this offer, I don't believe anyone in the treasurer's office would refuse such a payment to the state.

As I said earlier in the week, five years from now people won't be talking about the cost of a one-day special session. They'll be talking about the fact that their children have the finest teachers in the country.

The bottom line is this: July 23 won't be a great day for any one person. It will be a great day for the people of Mississippi, and that's what matters.

For years we have talked about our commitment to education and the teachers. Last year we made some progress, but we have been held back by the five percent provision.

Now, we have the opportunity to fulfill that commitment. It's not a question of whether or not the provision will be removed; legislators have been quoted all over the state saying that the provision is as good as gone. So, let's make good on our statements.

It's time for the issues to focus on the classrooms and not on politics. Let's not let this opportunity slip away; to do so would be a tragedy.