

## **Taking Mississippi's Students to the Top of the Class**

As 16 governors and myself gathered to share our thoughts with President Bush, I could not help but take a quick inventory of Mississippi's successes in education: our falling dropout rate, our increasing number of National Board Certified Teachers, our emphasis on accountability in the schools and our commitment to expanding technology as a tool for learning.

Mississippi knows what it takes to improve education, and we are getting it done. That was our message to the President. We are hopeful the President will be mindful of the importance of keeping decision making in the hands of the state and local leaders, educators and parents. Mississippi is making progress, but we do have more on which to improve.

We have stepped up to the challenge of paying educators as professionals, and we should not be telling teachers their pay raise depends on the rate of economic growth in our state. Mississippi should be making education a viable option for young men and women graduating from college and keeping qualified teachers in the classroom. Our teachers make an unmistakable impression on our future, because they teach, encourage and nurture our children. We have the resources; we need the determination. Priorities take life only when we act on them.

Every student in Mississippi should have the opportunity to receive a first rate education in a safe learning environment. Violence and tragedies can happen anytime in a school. The Crisis Response Box is an invaluable resource for school and emergency personnel to use if a critical incident ever arises in our schools.

We hope the School Crisis Box is one box our educators never have to open. But at a minimal expense, every school, every HeadStart Center and every day care center in the state can be ready in much the same way we prepare for disasters in our homes. The safety box gives educators and law enforcement officials suggestions and tools for managing a crisis. Our schools continue to be among the safest places for our children. We want to continue to make them safe havens for our children to learn.

Mississippi's laws require parents to attend parent-teacher conferences. Most parents and virtually every educator recognized the value of keeping parents informed and involved. Across Mississippi, business owners and managers have the discretion to offer administrative leave, rather than force employees to use sick or vacation leave, to meet with teachers and administrators.

Certainly, we encourage Mississippi businesses to get involved with area public schools and to allow employees time to get involved with their children's education, to visit the classroom and most importantly, visit with teachers about their children's progress. We must make it as easy as possible for parents to meet with teachers.

What does the future hold for Mississippi? The future looks bright and filled with promise and prosperity for our state. How do we ensure this will happen? Mississippi is not just hoping for this to happen; Mississippi is making it happen!