

From job creation to computers in the classrooms, 2002 was a busy year.

In the past twelve months, we've sent members of the Mississippi National Guard – our citizen soldiers – overseas on missions in the war on terror. We've begun restructuring our Medicaid program and expanded the Nissan facility. We passed medical malpractice and civil justice reforms, and fought the West Nile Virus.

We also became the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every one of the more than 32,000 public school classrooms in Mississippi. This effort has won national attention and will help us develop the well-skilled workforce needed to attract additional jobs.

Much as been done in the past twelve months, and the months to come will keep us busy as well.

As we head into the 2003 legislative session, the budget continues to demand our attention. We are still below the revenue estimate set by the Legislature for the 2003 fiscal year, and more cuts will have to be made as a result. The budget can't continue to be put together like this; doing the same thing over and over while hoping for a different result does nothing to help the situation.

The executive budget recommendation I presented to the Legislature in November is centered on education. It puts our schools first with a commitment of 62 percent of the budget. It seeks to recruit and retain the best minds at our universities and community and junior colleges through a 10-year, \$200 million commitment to Mississippi's "brain trust."

Our investment in education echoes through our work in economic development. A well-skilled workforce is key to attracting new industries and new jobs, especially the high-tech industries that demand a higher level of abilities from their employees.

A recent survey released by Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi found that most Mississippians believe there is a clear and strong link between higher education and economic development.

The survey is further evidence of the importance of investing now, and investing strongly, in education.

Companies are looking for states with a skilled workforce. More and more, industries are requiring employees to have more technological skills, and Mississippi's workers are meeting their demands. We have made training available through the Workforce Investment Network Job Centers around the state.

Our commitment to education and economic development will continue, stronger than ever, in 2003. People are taking notice of our quality education, quality jobs and quality of life. That's good news for Mississippi, and it's good news we're going to continue making this year.