

The national recession is hitting the states hard. While many are being forced to take drastic measures to balance their budgets, here in Mississippi we're holding our own. The key is that the national recession will end, and we have to be prepared for that day.

The first step in that preparation is making sure our schools are our top priority. Our investment in education affects every Mississippian, not just teachers or students. Good schools help attract good jobs; good jobs help build good communities; good communities support good schools.

Good schools, good jobs, good communities.

I came into office with a comprehensive plan for education, and we've had success with that plan. Teacher pay is up. Test scores are up. More of our high school graduates – 62 percent – are going on to college. We're the first state in the nation to place an Internet-accessible computer in every one of our 32,354 public school classrooms.

We know that investing in education works. The opportunities that lie ahead call us to keep that investment strong.

We can do that through new initiatives and expansion of existing ones. It's time to take our kindergarten programs one step further. The Summer Start program will do this, with qualified teachers providing our children with the opportunity to enter the school house door better prepared than ever before.

The learning experience shouldn't end when the school bell rings at the end of the day. Thousands of students around the state return to an empty house each day. It's time to expand the successful "Support Our Schools" program from the 30 sites operating around the state to more than 400 sites.

Mississippi's universities and colleges play a critical role in both education and economic development. They are centers of learning, research, development and workforce training. Our investment in them must remain strong.

The best investment we can make is in the \$200 million "brain trust" proposed in my executive budget recommendation. We have to be able to recruit and retain the best minds for the students at our institutions of higher learning.

I'm going to continue fighting to increase our funding for education. If we shortchange our investment in education, we shortchange our future. That's not an acceptable alternative.

The Legislature has been challenge to produce one comprehensive appropriations bill for education, funded at the 62 percent level called for in the executive budget recommendation. It's time to prove that we care about our schools. It's time to prove that when it comes to education, we mean business.

Remember, good schools help attract good jobs; good jobs help build good communities; good communities support good schools. Everyone benefits.

We've made progress on the comprehensive plan presented three years ago. We've done it because we dared to say "we can." It's time to dare again.