

Governor's Column – 03/24/02

It's time to move beyond talk and into action.

We hear a great deal about how education is a priority among the legislators, but the problem is that so far, it's just talk. It's time for some action to back up the words.

In the current legislative session, appropriations bills are being put together and the litmus test for education as a priority is set to happen. The manner in which the funding for education at all levels is crafted will be a determining factor for the 2002 legislative session.

When the appropriations bills were vetoed during the 2001 session, it was done so with the message that our budget was “a blueprint for the success of our people,” and that it could not be drawn accurately if we failed to take into account the slowing of the economy, the shortfall in revenue collections, and the potential for growth in the coming year.

That message remains true today.

In the old Road Runner cartoons, Wile E. Coyote always had a complicated blueprint for a contraption that eventually forced him into a ditch with an anvil speeding toward his head. The “Acme blueprint” used by Wile E. Coyote always ended in disaster, and someone was always hurt.

We don't need an “Acme blueprint” for Mississippi's future. Rather, we need a blueprint that keeps us out of the ditch and keeps people from being hurt.

In January, I offered my executive budget recommendation for the 2003 fiscal year, which begins July 1. The recommendation fully funds the teacher pay raise; it funds the Adequate Education Program at its current level; and it ensures that teachers will not be forced to pay for classroom supplies out of their own pockets.

This recommendation will work for education in Mississippi. However, its success depends on a budget based on a realistic revenue estimate. It is a disservice to our children and our teachers to blame the current year shortfalls on the economic effects of September 11. We are in a national recession, and we have not met monthly revenue projections for more than a year. February collections, in the final analysis, were about even.

In an editorial column last week, one legislator wrote that the Legislature “acted quickly” to address the budget problems in education. If we set priorities in the budgeting process and base the budget on real and conservative numbers, then we won’t be forced to act quickly. We won’t be forced to make cuts to vital programs. We won’t have to ask our teachers to buy supplies with their own money. We won’t have to ask our children to settle for less than our best.

Some great work has been done to improve education in Mississippi, but it hasn’t been enough. We can do so much more, but we can’t do it with an Acme blueprint.

It’s time for us to work together on a blueprint that will move us forward and offer the next generation the tools they need for success. We have a legacy to leave to our children; the message of that legacy is for us to decide.