

*Remarks to the
Mississippi Association of Community Action Agencies
Annual Conference
June 20, 2001*

Thank you, Helen, and thank you all for the invitation to be here with you today.

I'm glad for the opportunity to visit with you about the work you do, the work we share, and the common vision we have for the people of our great state.

The work you do is not just work; it is almost more like a calling. You are on the front lines of our communities, helping people achieve their goals of self-sufficiency and independence.

It's been said that where there's no sense of caring, there's no sense of community.

Every day, all over Mississippi, you are building community – because you believe in the people of this state, because you know they can achieve their goals, because you care.

I share your sense of caring for our community – that is why I ran for governor. And now, I want to work with you to make a brighter future for all Mississippians.

I want that future to be built on our efforts in education, in economic development, in health care. And, we've made a good start.

You've heard me say that if we're going to succeed, we need to set priorities – and our first priority should be education. Investing in the future of our state – in our children – is vital to our success.

We're making strong progress. We are on track to be the first state in the nation to have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the country.

By the time school starts this fall, we will be more than halfway to that goal – and more of the nearly five hundred thousand public school students in Mississippi will have the world at their fingertips.

We are working hard to provide our teachers with competitive salaries. This is what we have to do if we are to recruit and retain the best teachers in the state and country for our classrooms.

We've made headway in this area; since taking office last year, we've raised the average teacher salary from 49th to 19th in the nation. But, we've got more work to do.

It is important for the Legislature to realize that the five percent provision placed on teacher pay legislation this year must be removed.

It needs to be taken out so we can send a clear message to our teachers – a message that says we value their work, we value their commitment, and we value the impact their efforts have on the future of this state.

Our commitment to education reflects our commitment to the people of Mississippi.

We're making headway in the area of economic development, in working to provide more and better jobs to those Mississippians you help everyday.

Last year, we developed the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, one of the most forward-thinking economic development plans in the country.

And with it, we landed one of the top economic development projects in the country.

The Nissan project brings with it an investment of more than \$900 million and the promise of at least 4,000 new jobs.

Along with that project, we'll see suppliers coming here to work with Nissan – and another estimated 20,000 jobs.

We are changing the way companies look at Mississippi. We are letting them know we are eager to do business, and we have a labor force that is ready and eager to work.

Our commitment to economic development reflects our commitment to the people of Mississippi.

For years, access to quality health care has been a serious problem for too many Mississippians. We are making progress.

This past April, we announced the establishment of the Rural Health Care Loan Fund. Through this fund, we are able to help finance community health centers, rural clinics, and physicians in medically underserved areas of the state.

This fund means more Mississippians will have better access to good health care options and receive the medical attention they need and deserve.

Earlier I spoke about our commitment to educating our children. Hand in hand with that commitment comes our dedication to keeping them healthy.

Through the Children's Health Insurance Program under Mississippi Health Benefits, we're doing just that.

Today, more than 43,000 children are getting the medical attention they need.

Healthy children. Good schools. Good jobs. That is a combination that simply can't be beat.

We've put that combination together over the last year and a half, and people are taking notice.

I was in New York a couple of weeks ago and had the opportunity to meet with some of the leading media outlets – New York Times, Business Week, Barron’s, Fox News Network.

I also met with some of the leading site selection consultants for businesses from around the world.

As I told them about what is happening in Mississippi, the response I kept hearing was, “I didn’t know that... I didn’t know that.”

Well, now they know, and the rest of the world will know as well. Mississippi – and the people of Mississippi – can do compete with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

That's our message. That's the work you are doing everyday, helping the good people of this state compete.

It was once written that if you treat a person as they are, they will remain as they are. If you *treat them as they can be*, they will *become what they can be*.

Let's continue to work together, to make the people of Mississippi – to make the great State of Mississippi – what they can be.

Thank you.