

*Remarks for the
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
December 9, 2001*

Thank you, Leonard. I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you today.

(Tennessee story – 10,000 ways to wear orange, 10,000 ways to do business)

If we are to succeed in our efforts to recruit and retain business in Mississippi and provide good, quality jobs for our people, then we must ensure the strength of our educational system.

This is where we build our success, and this is how we're doing it.

This past July, we made a commitment to those who stand at the front of our classrooms, helping to shape and enrich our children's lives.

Recognizing the role of the teacher in the lives of our children is the first step in this commitment. I read once “teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools.”

That's not the case in Mississippi.

To begin with, I don't believe in "unattainable goals." I believe in "unprecedented goals." I want to see our state, and our region, set the bar high and not be satisfied with where we are.

Secondly, we are going to have the adequate tools to reach those unprecedented goals. No teacher should be expected to do the work necessary to meet our goals with the support they need – support in their methods, support in their classrooms, and support in their paychecks.

With the help of legislators like Leonard Morris, we passed a teacher pay raise plan that will raise our average teacher salary from 49th to 19th in the nation.

This plan captured the attention of the rest of the country, because it showed that Mississippi was serious about changing its role in America and the world.

The New York Times, one of the oldest and most respected papers in the country, ran an editorial the day after we passed the teacher pay plan. “Why can’t New York put together a package like this?” it asked.

We must be able to keep the good teachers we already have. We must be able to recruit new teachers to work in Mississippi.

Without competitive pay, it can't be done.
Now, we're doing it.

Mississippi was also the first state in the nation to offer more pay for teachers who achieved National Board Certification.

Today, we have over 1,000 teachers who have been certified, the sixth highest number in the nation.

The dedication of these teachers to their profession has been recognized by their peers and by their state. I am proud of the work they have done to achieve this level of excellence for themselves and their students.

We are committed to our teachers. We are committed to giving them the tools they need and the pay they deserve. But our commitment cannot end with them.

We must make every effort to ensure our children also have the tools and the resources they need to succeed.

The economy of our region is changing rapidly. What has historically been an agricultural-based economy is moving toward more of a technology-based economy. In this new century, business will be borderless and wireless.

Our children need to be prepared to work in that economy. They need to be ready to compete at any level. And, they will. That is another part of our commitment.

We are going to make sure every child in Mississippi has the tools necessary for success.

By the end of 2002, every public school classroom in the state will have an internet-accessible computer. What does this mean?

It means a child in the most rural part of the state will have the same opportunity as a child in one of our cities to log on to the internet and the world of information it provides.

It means our children will develop the skills for working with computers and technology at an early age.

It means Mississippi will continue to be competitive with other states and nations when it comes to recruiting and retaining industries and jobs.

Our commitment to our children and our teachers is focused, but its aim is broad. By investing in education today, we are looking for the dividends that will come in the form of jobs and business.

Simply, we are building our foundation as strong and secure as we can. We are all aware of the biblical proverb about building a house on sand. We are building ours on the most stable rock we can, and that rock is education.

It's exciting to think about what we can do with education as a priority. There is no limit to what can happen. Horizons are broadened, the sky is the limit. Our children have a future never dreamt of by past generations.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.”

What our children learn today – in the technology of a computer in the classroom, in the arts, in language, in the most rudimentary lessons – will stay with them forever.

And the teachers who lead them in this process will stay with them as well. (*you may want to talk about the influence of your favorite teachers*)

The teachers are the ones who help light the path ahead for our children, who help point out the stumbling blocks and the stepping stones.

In Mississippi, we've chosen a path covered with challenges and surrounded by opportunity. How we walk that path and use our resources will determine our success for generations to come.

I feel good about what the children of those generations will say about our work.

Thank you.

