

A Vision for the Future of Mississippi

June 5, 2001 DRAFT

The Steering Committee foresees a future where Mississippians and their fellow Americans share a view of Mississippi as the state of promise and opportunity rather than the state of problems. We envisage a Mississippi that markets and makes the most of its marvelous assets of strategic location, social civility, quality of life, climate, and a willing workforce.

Working together, the state's leaders and rank-and-file citizens can attract new industries and grow existing businesses. In turn, the state can retain the best and brightest of its college graduates and young professionals, and draw talented entrepreneurs and professionals from other states.

Fast-paced global competition represents a blurred, moving target for America's businesses and the states and communities of which they are a part. And this fast-forward economy demands rapid, responsive economic and educational investment decisions by both the private sector and public policymakers.

The steering committee's intention is to provide a shared framework within which Mississippians can meet these challenges through timely, informed decisions.

This draft vision statement from the May 31, 2001, meeting of the Steering Committee of the Mississippi Leadership Summit on Higher Education was prepared by the staff of the AGB Center for Public Higher Education Trusteeship and Governance for discussion and revision by the Steering Committee at its June 15, 2001, meeting.

Mississippi: A State of Promise and Opportunity

The hallmark of our vision for Mississippi's future is that every citizen will have access to opportunity—educational, economic, and social. Business, education, government, the non-profit sector, and individuals in their communities will actively collaborate in support of that vision.

Education will be at the center of the state's strategic economic development, creating a better life for all Mississippians. Mississippi will lead the nation in fostering harmony among diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Persons of all ages, from pre-Kindergarten to adult, will have lifelong educational opportunities. An efficient, productive, and competitive system of public and private institutions will deliver educational services at all levels.

The K-12 public education system will be effective in all regions of the state. All citizens, including youth and adults, will have access to the tools required to attain high levels of prose and quantitative literacy and workforce readiness.

Citizens seeking educational opportunities throughout their lives and careers will create a new level of demand for educational services. The educational system will welcome the challenge to serve non-traditional students and adult learners seeking degrees, certificates, and continuing education. The system will provide students and employers with on-site delivery and education and training tailored to their needs.

More students and adult learners will complete their programs of study, resulting in a rising level of diplomas and certificates awarded, and professional degrees attained.

The system will reward high-performing teachers and administrators with adequate salaries, safe and productive work environments, and the general support necessary to do their jobs effectively. Well-educated Mississippians will have access to good jobs, spurring their desire to remain in the state and contribute to the state's growing success.

Mississippi's homegrown technology industry—and the state's historic strengths in manufacturing, agriculture, and the growing services sector—will provide the foundation for developing new value-added business opportunities for the state's workforce. In addition, a growing number of national and international companies will discover fertile ground for locating new business operations in Mississippi. The state will be competitive in the new economy, and its citizens will not be left behind in the information age. The results: higher standards of living, continued growth in per capita income, and stronger communities.

The people of Mississippi will have a positive, realistic self-image. They will welcome challenges and embrace success. The state will rise in national comparisons of health, social, educational, and economic indicators—and other states will emulate specific success stories. Single parenthood and teenage pregnancy rates will drop significantly. The state will value and reward cultural differences and diversity—and will be recognized as a model of racial harmony.

Committing to Shared Goals

By working together to raise expectations at each educational level, Mississippians can contribute to a new generation of good citizens engaged in a strong, competitive economy.

Creating Higher Expectations at All Levels

Mississippians must work together to break the “failure cycle.” Creating higher expectations at each educational level—including challenging aspirations among all citizens for a high standard of living and personal achievement—will raise performance by students, teachers, and educational institutions. Meeting this challenge will require such efforts as:

- **Supporting high quality pre-Kindergarten and early education programs**, which are essential for students to come to school ready to learn.
- **Improving teacher education and compensation**, which will improve student performance—and ensure that the best educators continue to serve Mississippi’s needs.
- **Fostering within students the desire to work hard and achieve at their highest individual levels.** Challenging students to achieve high standards—and providing them with the support they need—will help reduce social promotions that are a disservice to the students themselves.
- **Aggressively marketing college opportunities** and financial aid programs.

Strengthening Education, Training, Incomes, and the Economy Through Cross-Sector Partnerships

Business, education, government, the non-profit sector, and individuals in their communities will strengthen existing partnerships in pursuit of explicit, shared educational, economic, and workforce goals and measurable outcomes. These efforts—and new collaborations—will include:

- **Creating a quality workforce** to strengthen current businesses and put Mississippi on the radar screen of firms making relocation or new plant-siting decisions.
- **Addressing the education and training needs of traditional as well as non-traditional students.** The result: enabling each Mississippian to find meaningful employment at a good wage within the state, creating higher incomes.
- **Developing an economic development cluster strategy in each region.** These initiatives will include supporting existing companies with growth potential, building on the recent successes in attracting new, high profile businesses, and boosting efforts to diversify the state economy. The result: Mississippi will capture growth opportunities in rising business cycles, and achieve broader stability during economic downturns.
- **Building on successes in linking university research to economic and public service needs,** as well as graduating students in high-demand fields.
- **Ensuring that professionals trained in Mississippi stay in Mississippi.** Teachers, health care workers, and information technology workers will contribute to the education, health care, and information business needs of the state—as well as to the state economy as a whole.
- **Reducing competition between regions,** as well as turf battles among the education sectors. The state’s regional diversity is an important asset—and the education systems’ sectors can collaborate to focus resources on specific needs.
- **Quantifying through clear and consistent comparative data** where Mississippi’s performance stands today, and developing benchmarks to measure progress over time.

Leveraging Assets—and Tackling Challenges

Mississippi is a state with many unique and enduring assets. A successful effort to forge a shared public agenda will leverage the state's many strengths—effective leaders and citizens, the state's businesses and educational institutions, as well as an improving quality of life—and realistically address the state's barriers.

Mississippi's Assets Can Help Achieve the Vision . . .

The state's strongest assets are its people—and their civility, industry, community spirit, and spiritual values. Taken together, these characteristics suggest great potential for positive change and growth and development within the state and among its people.

- The state also benefits from broad-based leaders who recognize where problems exist and care deeply about the good of the state.
- There is an ever-increasing awareness among the business community of the value of education, not only for their employees, but also for the state as a whole.
- The state's infrastructure is an asset, including the programs and research capacity of its colleges and universities.
- Technology is enhancing business opportunities—and life in general.
- There is an eager and willing workforce that can rise to the demands of a new economy and to the recent successes in attracting new industries.
- The state has made important strides in standards-based education reform upon which new initiatives in other sectors can build.
- The state's climate, history and culture, natural resources, and its location in the mid-South and on the Gulf of Mexico are increasingly and broadly recognized as assets.

. . . But Some Barriers and Challenges Could Hinder Achievement of the Vision

Unfortunately, not all people feel connected in the state. Too many are poor, ill-housed, underemployed or unemployed. A large segment of the population lives on the margins, with little or no community or family support.

- There is a need for better understanding among groups and races. A place-bound mentality can hinder personal and public policy choices—and statewide progress.
- Too often a fear of change, lack of aspirations and motivation for education or a better job hinders individuals' progress. To change will require transformational thinking and doing some things differently.
- The state sometimes suffers from feelings of inferiority, fueled in some instances by a lack of adequate and consistent resources.
- Education too often operates in separate silos, each with their own entrenched bureaucracy.