

*Remarks to the
MS Assn. Of School Superintendents
July 20, 2001*

Thank you, Dale, and thank you for the invitation to be here today. I have to say, it's nice to be in a room with this many people and share a common passion.

That passion is about education in Mississippi.

You've heard this before, but it's a saying that is timeless – “if you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

Isn't it about time we gave our children the best education possible?

Isn't it about time we gave our teachers the respect they deserve?

For years, improving education has been a major issue in Mississippi, but it has been difficult to achieve true and lasting results.

It wasn't that long ago that teachers' salaries averaged less than \$20,000 per year and they were buying their own school supplies for the classroom. We have put money into education, but it is time for us to plan for our future and realistically invest in education.

We've been putting money into the tangible items, such as tech-prep centers and new and renovated school buildings.

We're halfway to our goal of becoming the first state in the nation to have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, thanks to a unique and innovative partnership with the private sector that is making the most of public dollars.

We've invested in products. Now, it's time to invest in people.

I have said this again and again – raising teacher pay to the southeastern average is the most critical issue facing the people of Mississippi.

And now, we are closer than ever before to reaching this goal.

Monday morning at 10am, we will go into a special session to remove the last real hurdle to making history. As you well know, the session will remove the five percent provision on teacher pay.

This provision, as you know, stated that teacher pay raises would not be automatic if state revenues did not grow by at least five percent.

In fact, our economy grew by only .8 percent last year; I had predicted growth of 1 percent during the 2001 session.

The growth of 2.6 percent that you've been hearing about was revenue growth that included one-time, non-recurring monies.

There is a big difference between the two.

I opposed the five percent provision last year when I signed the bill. During the 2001 session, no action was taken in the legislature to remove the provision.

In the weeks since the session ended, I have traveled around the state once again calling for its removal. Now, we have the opportunity to do it.

This vote will make a difference in the future of Mississippi. With it, we will begin to realize the potential for our state, as we recruit and retain the best teachers in the country for our classrooms.

It all comes down to setting priorities for what's important for Mississippi. I will always believe that education is our highest priority, and we need to make the commitment to our children, our teachers and our administrators.

That commitment was kept earlier this month when I unreserved \$10 million and returned it to the school districts to address the \$14 million shortfall.

That commitment was kept when I fought for education over prisons. You know, Victor Hugo once wrote that whoever “opens a school door, closes a prison.”

The PEER Committee report released this past week seems to back up Mr. Hugo. The report showed that too much money was appropriated for prisons, money that could have gone to education.

That mistake won't be made again.

Education always has been, and always will be, a priority for my administration.

I thank you for the support you have shown for our efforts to improve education in Mississippi. You are the ones on the front lines. You are the ones who know best what needs to be done.

Monday, we'll make history in Mississippi. Tuesday, we'll start work on the next step in making Mississippi's schools the very best they can be.

Thank you.