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Governor Ronnie Musgrove

[64 words; 69 for Barnes] Ronnie Musgrove, Mississippi's 62nd governor, is chairman of the Southern Regional Education Board and believes passionately in education. As a two-term state senator in Mississippi, he chaired the Education Committee. As Lieutenant Governor, he was chairman of the National Conference of Lieutenant Governors in 1998. In addition to chairing SREB, he heads the Southern States Energy Board and the Southern Growth Policies Board.

[555 words; 586 last year]

Education first. Put education first, and SREB states can lead the nation in educational progress.

That our states can lead the nation is more than the opening statement from SREB's *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead*. It is a realistic target.

Look at our recent experience in Mississippi. We began the year with a feature article in The New York Times about our success in placing an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in Mississippi. We were the first state in the nation to reach this goal. In the process, we achieved another first, I believe, because students in schools across the state literally built hundreds of these computers.

Like other states, Mississippi is experiencing budget problems as a result of the national recession. In my State of the State address in January, I challenged our legislators to invest in education first. As a result, we passed our education budget as our first order of business, the first state in America to do so. When I signed the historic bills in February, I commented that "while other states were cutting education, we had taken the bold step to put our children and our future first. We know that good schools attract good jobs, which build good communities."

This is true for all 16 of our SREB states. But putting education first is not easy now — and has not been easy when our states have led in poverty rates and trailed in jobs and income. We are tackling generation-sized problems.

With prodding by SREB and hard work at home, we can see and feel the progress even while we face nagging problems. More than 40 years ago, the first SREB goals commission challenged Southern leaders to "cast away forever the traditional double standard" that caused the South to set lower expectations for itself. The South, SREB said then, must be "measured against the same criteria of excellence which are applied everywhere."

In 1988, SREB adopted tough goals to point the way to the national education goals. The SREB Benchmarks report on progress toward the SREB goals pointed the way to “closing the gaps” in today’s “No Child Left Behind” Act. Last year, SREB updated the 1988 goals and challenged the region to lead the nation.

Lead the nation we will. SREB’s goals are broad — extending from before grade school to after college. They are demanding. SREB states cannot lead the nation simply by wishing. Educational progress takes work.

SREB will continue to report and celebrate our successes. It will also continue to point out when our states fall short.

SREB will do more than measure and comment. It will continue to pioneer new technology, to offer demonstration programs such as *High Schools That Work*, and to help our states multiply resources while dividing costs with proven programs such as the Academic Common Market. It will continue to offer unbiased information about our states. It will always be someone to ask for help when our states have problems, and will be available when states want to talk about such common issues as closing achievement gaps.

Education is the foundation for everything else we do — from economic development to health care. We’re facing some different challenges today, but the basic questions behind those challenges are the same questions we’ve been dealing with for generations.

Education first. That is the key. As individual states, we are doing great things in education. As a region, we’re poised to do greater things.