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Subject: 9-14 at-risk; is this too late?

As long as most of us can remember, Mississippi has struggled to break the cycle of poverty that has shackled too many of our state's people for far too long. And most of the people in this room believe strongly that the best hope for reducing poverty in our state and improving the lives of its citizens is strong public schools.

Mississippi is making great strides in our economy as well as in public education, but we have a lot of catching up to do. Mississippi still has more of its children living in poverty than any other state - almost 1 in 3. Mississippi's median household income is still only 68% of the national average.

Ninety percent of Mississippi children attend public schools; 2/3 of Mississippi school children are eligible for free or reduced price lunch and are therefore classified as at-risk. This is the fundamental reason why it has been so difficult to bring down the drop-out rate and bring up student test scores across the state. The good news is that schools and districts across the state are improving student achievement in spite of high numbers of at-risk children, in spite of uneven state funding, in spite of low community tax bases, and even in spite of Katrina.

Policy makers - and in that I include legislators foremost - need to make it easier for districts to learn from their successes, learn from one another, and find resources to help schools and students be successful. This takes funding: funding for professional development and teacher training (because you have to start with the teachers you have), for leadership training for principals in education methodology that is research-based and proven to work in the classroom, and for updated classroom materials that will enable teachers to put what they learn into practice. Teachers need time to talk together about problems and successes in reaching students, and they need small enough classrooms that they can pay attention to the academic progress of every student. Teachers need to present material in a variety of approaches to meet the variety of learning styles in their classrooms; this will help not only the at-risk child or the learning disabled child, it will make the classroom more stimulating for all students.

And parents need to be involved, because all parents want the best education possible for their children and they have a sense of urgency that schools must assume as well. If my child is only going to be in the 7th grade for one year, I want 7th grade "fixed" before my child gets there. If my child is in the 7th grade now, I want any problems fixed now - neither my child nor I have the luxury of a year to wait. And the good news about parent involvement is it doesn't take every parent - although every parent must be invited and welcome. It takes only an essential mass of committed parents to transform a school.

Mississippi is now 47th in per pupil spending, and spends about 24% less than the national average. We are not overspending. We must choose to spend wisely but to spend enough - and we are not doing that yet.