MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Angela Towers

I count it a blessing to be your President for the 2015-2016 year. My long relationship with the Mississippi Professional Educators began as a college student at Delta State University in 2000, where I met former Past-President and current board member, Phileen Allen. She was gracious enough to allow me and my son grace the cover of the MPE Journal along with other children and educators from the Delta Area. Soon my hero, father, and former Past-President, Dennis Silas, began to serve on the board.

Being a novice teacher, he discussed the importance of joining a professional organization. I also read his quarterly MPE Journals and began to learn about current educational issues. I eventually began to develop my own opinions about those issues. I developed an understanding of the importance of the Mississippi Professional Educators and the impact MPE has on education in Mississippi. I observed my father and other board members develop professional relationships and lifetime friendships. I admired the hours and days they dedicated for the betterment of the organization and our profession as a whole. The opportunity to serve on the board came when I was nominated by former Past-President Sonya Swafford. I was thrilled and excited to be able to serve the organization that I had grown to love and respect so much. The number of MPE members and MPE staff members who have positively impacted my life is astounding.

With this being said, I encourage members to take time to discuss the importance of MPE to aspiring and novice educators. Share the MPE Journal and initiate discussions about current issues. These actions will not only grow our organization, but will strengthen our profession. Only 15 years ago, I was one of those aspiring educators.

With this legacy of dedication and hard work, I would like to move into this year with the motto of “Vision and Voice.” As educators, I would like MPE to be the trusted voice in the state in which senators and representatives are able to gain information of the current state of education and to also gain vision on how education will be 25 to 50 years in the future. We should make a conscious effect in making the voices of our 12,600 members heard by contacting our state and local representatives.

One of the greatest world leaders, the late Nelson Mandela stated “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” I charge our membership to use this “weapon” to educate all stakeholders on current issues of education, but most of all, provide a world class education for the students of Mississippi.

Wow! I cannot believe how my year as President of Mississippi Professional Educators has flown by! It seems like only yesterday I was writing my first Journal article, challenging educators to brag about the good things going on in education. Have you been bragging? Let’s review some “braggable” aspects of MPE’s year…

MPE has grown to 12,672 members! More and more inexperienced, experienced, and retired educators are recognizing the need to be part of a professional organization like MPE, in order to promote the art of teaching while staying abreast of research, trends, and events in our areas of expertise. They are seeing the opportunities we provide for professional development and further education through scholarships, too.

MPE has provided sixteen regional trainings again this past year, and due to the popularity of our SPED trainings, we are providing three additional ones this summer! Our undergraduate and graduate scholarship programs are helping many educators, and MPE has even begun to provide scholarships for those pursuing National Board Recertification!

A couple of my goals for this past year were not as measurable in terms of data, but I feel are vital to the ongoing role of educators. They incorporated the promotion of professionalism among educators, and respect for educators. While not as ‘concrete’ to measure, I feel MPE is continuing to set an example in these areas. School administrators, teachers, the public, and legislators on many levels respect Mississippi Professional Educators as an organization more than ever before. They see us as a capable, dependable, and knowledgeable ally, working productively for the students in our state. In addition, we have achieved this level of respect while remaining true to our by-laws, which state that we do not support any candidate or party. Acting with professionalism and treating others with respect once again win – but not just for MPE. Hopefully, the perception of educators is improved!

It has been my ultimate pleasure to serve as President of MPE this year. I have been honored and humbled by the opportunity. Mrs. Angela Towers has now taken the reins as President, and what an exciting year it will be under her very capable leadership. She will lead MPE to new goals and heights!

MISSISSIPPI PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS’ CLASSROOM GRANT PROGRAM

MPE invites its members to apply for our classroom grant program to try out a new idea or buy the “extras” for an already great lesson plan or project. Up to 16 $500 grants will be awarded to teachers or instructors to enhance their instructional program.

The deadline to apply is August 28, 2015. For more information, please visit our website at www.mpe.org
How many bridges did your students cross this year? Did all of your students successfully cross your bridge(s)? Each bridge we cross allows us to pursue another challenge or adventure. I hope your bridge collapsed joyfully for far more often than it collapsed from sheer exhaustion or frustration!

I am confident that many of our MPE members, while enjoying some time off this summer, will use a great deal of this time to prepare for next year, whether through formal professional development/workshops or personal planning. Speaking of professional development, MPE was honored to have Dr. Eric Jensen deliver our keynote at this past April’s Best Practices Symposium. Pages 12-13 provide a glimpse of this dynamic day of professional development and networking. Plans are already underway for our 2016 Best Practices Symposium when Dr. Harry Wong will be our keynote. Mark your calendar for April 9, 2016, and save the date!

A highlight of our annual symposium is the election of our officers and new directors for the coming year. Angela Towers, principal of Cypress Park Elementary in Cleveland, will take us to new heights as she leads our association this year! We are honored to welcome Timeka Pugh, Spence Andrews, Stephanie Bovill, and Devin Walsh to the board. Visit page 11 to learn more about our new board members. I’d like to thank Eric Armstrong, Deedre’ Coll, Becky Hayes and Dr. Barry Morris for their many hours of service to MPE, as they rotated off of the board.

Angela spotlights her motto of “Vision and Voice” for the upcoming year in her article on page 4. She wants MPE’s members to make their voices heard. You will find a recap of the 2015 Legislative Session on page 15. Legislators are now home, with many of them busy on the campaign trail! MPE does not endorse candidates and we do not contribute to campaigns, but we do encourage our members to vote! As individuals, educators should be involved in the political process. Hold your legislators accountable for their education votes these past four years. Attend candidates’ forums and rallies. Ask candidates where they stand on critical issues such as MAEP funding, accountability standards, charters and vouchers.

As always, this spring issue of our MPE Journal celebrates the hard work of so many educators throughout the state. We recognize our undergraduate and graduate scholarship recipients. We also honor those members selected as their district’s Teacher of the Year or Administrators of the Year. Our regular “Member Spotlight” section celebrates the accomplishments of several of our members. It is all too often so easy for the media to share the negative stories about education in our state. MPE enjoys celebrating the incredible work occurring in classrooms throughout Mississippi, especially in light of such challenging times and constant unrest.

Have a wonderful summer. Take some time just for you, but also reflect on what worked in your classroom or school this past year, as well as what did not work. What are your strategies for accomplishing your goals for next year? Where will your bridge(s) take your students next year? Have fun working on those bridge designs as you also enjoy your summer!
Congratulations to the following recipients of MPE’s 2015 Graduate Scholarship Award. Each member will receive $1,000 towards their graduate studies.

Karen Deniakos
William Carey University

Shannon Doughty
University of Southern Mississippi

Patricia Frazure
Mississippi State University

Shanta Green
William Carey University

Lynda Naramore
Mississippi College

Courtney Skipper
Delta State University

Megan Ruffin
William Carey University

Rana Mitchell
University of Mississippi

Jennifer Parker
William Carey University

Let me introduce you to Quitman County Elementary School (QCES). We may be small but we’ve got heart. We focus on celebrating success at our school because we believe everyone can succeed. QCES is located in the Delta and enrollment fluctuates between 450 to 475 students every year, serving students in PRE-K-4th grade. We believe at QCES we are a community of learners that believes all students can learn and achieve at high levels. We operate with a sense of urgency to ensure that students read, write, and problem solve at or above grade level and to promote lives of joy and opportunity. We are readers, writers and problem solvers!

QCES celebrates its students often, and we show pride in our accomplishments. Our 3rd and 4th grade students who score proficient or advanced on Math and Language practice tests earn a red t-shirt and are classified as “Red Shirt Ready.” If a student is “Red Shirt Ready,” they may wear their red shirt and jeans every Friday for the whole school to see. PRE-K -2nd grade students may earn their red shirts by meeting goals in our Read Well program. These shirts are awarded at our “Book of the Month” assemblies where the entire school unites after reading a common book. Every student takes an AR quiz and different grade levels present at the assembly. When assemblies occur, you will find students walking in to music playing, clapping, singing and dancing. They can seamlessly transition from “fun” to “focused” as the program begins.

Competition and teamwork are two values seen throughout our school in every subject and grade level. Students are chosen as “Student of the Month” and are celebrated by having lunch with the principal. The students get to enjoy lunch and conversation while watching a movie and enjoying a special dessert. Perfect attendance certificates are awarded to encourage students to be at school and on time. Field trips to Ole Miss athletic games and River King hockey games have been attended by varying grade levels for students meeting individual classroom goals.

At weekly faculty meetings, we give “teacher shout outs” to deserving coworkers that have been recognized for innovative teaching strategies, exhibiting urgency, joy and commitment to the community. These “shout outs” are then posted on a bulletin board for everyone to see. This encourages our students, as well as teachers, to encourage one another on a daily basis.

“Team and Family” is who we are, and that orientation begins at the start of each year with a staff retreat. This allows us to get to know each other and learn about ourselves. We’ve ventured to surrounding cities, including Memphis, Jackson and Indianapolis. We have played at The Children’s Museum, climbed rock walls and even experienced the Blues! Students, teachers and family members alike show Wildcat Pride, celebrate, and work together to not only “show what we know,” but to continue growing our brains, together.
Congratulations to Anna Morris, Mississippi’s 2015 Teacher of the Year! Anna has been a member of MPE since 2008. MPE would also like to congratulate Leigh Curtis and Ginger Tedder who were honored as congressional district finalists for Teacher of the Year. MPE is proud to congratulate and honor the following members who were named their respective district’s Administrator or Teacher of the Year.

**SCHOOL DISTRICT**
- Covington County
- George County
- Laurel
- Lowndes County
- Ocean Springs
- Pass Christian
- Pearl River County
- Simpson County
- Tate County

**ADMINISTRATOR**
- Jon Chancellor
- Ken Culpepper
- Roger D. Hill
- Allison Block
- Dr. Kentreia Barnes
- Nlene Quave
- Dr. Roma Morris
- John Shows

**TEACHER**
- Jessica Johnson
- Tina McClendon
- Leigh W. Curtis
- Joan Easterling
- Jennifer Landry
- Chad Davis
- Tammy Wallace
- Jeffery Madison
- Penny H Wilkerson
- Anna Morris
- Emily Edgar
- DeAnna Adkins
- Catherine Andrews
- Leigh Ann Purnell
- Connie Gore
- Amy Wilkins
- Tammy Krutzfeldt
- Cynthia Sullivan
- Leslie May
- Norman J. Waters Jr.
- Ginger Tedder
- Janet Hall
- Jodie Tolar
- Stephanie Hodo
- Charles A Shryer
- Lacie G. Pumphrey

**TIMEKA PUGH - DISTRICT 2**

Timeka has served as Principal of East Tate Elementary School since 2010 and has served in the Tate County School District since 1999. A member of the Mississippi Council of Teachers of English, Timeka earned her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Delta State University, her Master of Education from the University of Mississippi, and her Specialist in Education from Union University. A member of MPE since 2004, she also serves as a MPE Building Rep.

**SPENCE ANDREWS - DISTRICT 4**

Spence serves as Assessment Coordinator for the Lowndes County School District. He earned both his Master in Gifted Education and his Bachelor in Elementary Education from the Mississippi University for Women. A member of the Mississippi Association for Gifted Children, Spence previously served as an elementary teacher for 13 years. He has been a member of MPE since 1999.

**STEPHANIE BOWLIN - DISTRICT 6**

A member of MPE since 1999, Stephanie serves as an Instructional Coach/Pre-AP English Instructor at McLaurin High School in the Rankin County School District. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Special Education from the University of Southern Mississippi. Having earned her National Board certification in 2001, she renewed her certification in 2012. Stephanie has served as a NBPTS portfolio assessor, as well a member of the Southwest Mississippi World Class Teaching Program’s leadership team.

**DEVIN WALSH - DISTRICT 8**

Devin has served as a K-1 teacher at Oak Grove Primary School in Lamar County since 2000. She earned both her Master of Arts and her Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education from William Carey University. She is a member of the Mississippi Reading Association, as well as the Alpha Gamma Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma. A member of MPE since 2002, she also serves as a MPE Building Rep.
MPE elected its 2015-2016 officers and new board members at its 2015 Best Practices Symposium held April 11 at the Jackson Hilton. Those elected as officers are: President, Angela Towers, Principal at Cypress Park Elementary; President-elect, Dr. Lela Hale, Assistant Professor of Education at Blue Mountain College; Secretary-Treasurer, Dr. Brad Johns, Math teacher at McLaurin High School; and, Past-President, Donna Robbins, a 1st Grade Teacher at Clinton Park Elementary. Members elected for three-year terms to the Board of Directors are: District 2, Timeko Pugh; District 4, Spence Andrews; District 6, Stephanie Bowlin; and District 8, Devin Walsh.

Hello to our MPE retired, soon-to-be retired...and wanna-be retired members. This is a good time for a reminder of the membership opportunities for us. The lifetime retired membership is perfect for those like me who have “gone home.” The one-time payment is $70. You will continue having all the advantages of membership, except the liability insurance, without having to renew every year. If you choose to just join on a yearly basis, the dues are $10 a year.

If you are continuing to work on a part-time basis, you would want to change to Non-certified or part-time with insurance. This is the same insurance coverage and other benefits you have always had, but for half the price--$60.

If you are retiring, please be sure to call the office (800-523-0269) and make any necessary changes to your membership status and your contact information. We don’t want to lose you—and you don’t want to lose your contact with MPE.

As retired members, MPE is still “watching our backs.” We stay informed on retirement issues and keep you up to date.

Please don’t hesitate to call me at 662-588-9011 or email me at phileneallen@bellsouth.net if I can help you in any way.

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Retiree Reflections

PHILENE ALLEN
MPE Board of Directors, Retirees

Meet Your MPE Board of Directors

GENERAL BILL HIGHLIGHTS

- HB 488 (Dyslexia loan program) Amends the Dyslexia Higher Education Loan Program to allow loan forgiveness for up to five recipients serving in nonpublic schools. The bill also provides, subject to appropriation, funds for MDE to provide financial assistance to local districts for the recruitment, placement and employment of licensed dyslexia therapy professionals to provide dyslexia screening, evaluation and therapy services to students. (Approved by the Governor)

- HB 646 (Gifted task force) Creates a 16-member task force to study gifted education. The task force is to consider the costs and returns on investment of offering gifted education through 12th grade, as well as well as coding to the gifted curriculum. (Approved by the Governor)

- HB 949 (Staff Leave) Amends current leave law to provide that: 1) personal leave may be taken on the first or last day of the school term or on a day previous to or after a holiday if, on the applicable day, an immediate family member of the employee is being deployed for military service; 2) personal leave may be taken on a day previous to or after a holiday if the employee has either a minimum of 10 years of service in the district or a minimum of 30 days of unused leave that has been earned while employed in the district; or, 3) personal leave may be taken on the first or last day of the school term or on a day previous to or after a holiday if, on the applicable day, the employee has been summoned to appear for jury duty or as a witness in court. (Approved by the Governor)

- SB 2695 (SPED vouchers): Provides $6,500 to parents of students who have had an IEP within the past 18 months. Parents may use these funds for private services and schools (i.e., tuition). This new voucher program will be piloted next year with 500 students, with the first 250 slots to be filled on a first-come, first-served basis. The remaining 250 slots will be filled via a lottery. (Approved by the Governor)

- HB 1536 (K-12 education funding): While HB 1536 increases MAEP funding by approximately $107 million, it underfunds the MAEP formula by more than $200 million. Approximately $40 million of the $107 million increase is for the second year of the teacher pay raise. HB 1536 provides $22 million to support classroom supply funds, as well as $1 million for early childhood collaboratives. HB 1536 provides $1.5 million for the literacy initiative and assessment. (Approved by the Governor)

- SB 2844 (IH general support funding): Provides $36 million more in state general fund support for FY 2016 than in FY 2015 for Mississippi’s universities and colleges. In addition, universities are receiving nearly $72 million in bond projects via SB 2906. (Approved by the Governor)

- SB 2854 (Community college support funding): Provides $11.8 million more in state support in FY 2016 than in FY 2015 for Mississippi’s community and junior colleges. This includes $3 million for the community colleges’ dropout recovery program. Community colleges are also receiving $25 million in bond projects via SB 2906. (Approved by the Governor)

2015 LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

- HB 926 (Dyslexia Higher Education Loan Program) Amends the Dyslexia Higher Education Loan Program to allow loan forgiveness for up to five recipients serving in nonpublic schools. The bill also provides, subject to appropriation, funds for MDE to provide financial assistance to local districts for the recruitment, placement and employment of licensed dyslexia therapy professionals to provide dyslexia screening, evaluation and therapy services to students. (Approved by the Governor)

- SB 2528 (Gifted task force) Creates a 16-member task force to study gifted education. The task force is to consider the costs and returns on investment of offering gifted education through 12th grade, as well as well as coding to the gifted curriculum. (Approved by the Governor)

- SB 2258 (Cheating on state assessments) Provides the State Board of Education with certain powers regarding investigations of state testing violations. The principal of a school will be required to execute a sworn affidavit that the statewide test was administered according to the rules without incidents of cheating. Any educator submitting a false certification with willful intent regarding the administering of an assessment is guilty of a felony and, upon conviction, may be fined not more than $15,000, imprisoned for not more than 3 years, or both. Upon conviction, the State Board may also suspend or revoke the license of the educator. (Due from the Governor)

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Every year, Mississippi has to spend more than $3.2 million picking up litter on our state’s highways. This money could be used to build and repair roads and bridges—things that improve our state’s infrastructure and economy, making life better for all of us.

So don’t trash Mississippi. Because it’s not just a can or wrapper you’re throwing away. It’s Mississippi’s money.

For additional information about MDOT’s Litter Prevention Education Program, call 601-359-7111 or visit GoMDOT.com.
Another school year ends and the planning for the next one begins. That is what we do as educators. We do the work. We evaluate the results, and we seek new goals and opportunities to improve education for students the next year. That is why you chose to become a teacher, to make a difference in the lives of boys and girls across this state. As a professional, that is why you assess your work and find new ways to engage, grow, and inspire your students.

Summer break? For most teachers, that is short lived because planning for the next one begins. Another school year ends and the strategic plan this year. This plan is the blueprint for the MDE’s work to improve outcomes for all students. As you may have heard, the Board released its new 5-year strategic plan on a daily basis to guide their work and decision making. All of us working together to execute this plan is critical to its success.

The Board kept students at the center of every decision as they formulated this plan. Here are the Board’s five goals:

• All students are proficient and show growth in all assessed areas.
• Every student graduates high school and is ready for college and career.
• Every child has access to high-quality early childhood education program.
• Every school has effective teachers and leaders.
• Every community effectively uses a world-class data system to improve student outcomes.

Are these goals ambitious? Absolutely! Do we need to challenge ourselves to help our students? Certainly! We should keep high expectations for our students so that they are prepared for post-secondary education, without remediation, or direct entry into the workforce.

The improvement of Mississippi’s educational system is based on the foundation of Mississippi College and Career-Ready Standards. These standards have always been viewed as the floor, or minimum, of what to expect from students. The Board has made it clear that it is open to discussing how to build upon these standards, and we are working to provide an avenue for you to share your thoughts and ideas with the Board. We will announce more about those efforts soon.

Thank you for your hard work over the last year, and the MDE looks forward to continuing to build strong partnerships with our teachers and administrators. After all, we have exactly the same goal – ensuring that all students in Mississippi reach their absolute greatest potential. Our children deserve nothing less.

You can find more information about the Board’s 5-Year Strategic plan by visiting http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/MBE/goals-objectives-and-strategies.

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This is the last article that I will write for the MPE Journal as Executive Director of the Mississippi Community College Board, since I will be retiring on June 30. For the past 40 years, I have had the pleasure of working as a high school and college history and government teacher, member of the Mississippi House of Representatives, Secretary of State, and Executive Director of the Mississippi Community College Board.

During my time with the community college system, I have been able to see first-hand the importance of our colleges and the wonderful service that our instructors and administrators provide to so many Mississippians. Each year, they play a direct role in helping to improve thousands of lives, and it has been a privilege to be a part of this system. I thank everyone who works so hard to educate and train our citizens.

The 2015 legislative session addressed the first part of April. For appropriations, our community colleges received an overall increase of $8.4 million in General Funds. We also received $4 million in our appropriations from the Capital Expense Fund, for Repair and Renovations on our campuses. We recognize the budget constraints that exist for state leaders, and we are grateful for the increase that we received. These new funds will help our colleges improve the lives of many Mississippians. Additionally, we received $25 million in bonds for capital projects.

For General Bills, Senate Bill No. 2127 was signed by Governor Bryant in mid-March to bring our community colleges and universities in compliance with a change in federal law. The federal act prevents states from charging out-of-state tuition to individuals who are entitled to federal Veterans Educational Assistance in-state tuition. The need for the change to state law was a result of President Obama signing the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 last fall.

One other General Bill that is related to higher education is House Bill No. 951. This legislation allows our community colleges, along with other institutions of higher learning in Mississippi, to voluntarily become members of the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA). By joining SARA, each institution will save time and money by not having to reach out to other states where our online students reside. It will also ensure that similar standards are in place for online programs and instructors for all states and institutions that join the organization.

Also during the session, Governor Bryant re-appointed Mr. Chip Crane of Fulton and Mr. Todd Hairston of Gulfport and appointed for the first time Mr. Johnny McRight of Greenville, to the Mississippi Community College Board. All three were confirmed unanimously by the State Senate. Each of these appointments is for six years and will expire on June 20, 2021.

As another school year is wrapping up, I want to again say “thank you!” Regardless of the subject or grade, each of our teachers plays an integral role in the success of our students and of our state. The emphasis that currently exists to get students to the finish line (regardless of secondary or post-secondary) has put immense pressures on all of you. Please know how appreciative I am to all of you for the outstanding job you are doing, and keep up the good work!
Roderick Davidson
Ridgeland High School - Madison County Schools
Yoga for Life

The MPE grant that I received provided the opportunity to incorporate “Yoga for Life” skills and movements in the Physical Education class. I used the funds to purchase yoga mats and medicine balls for the students in order to practice effective yoga stretching movements that they could use outside of the PE classroom. Using these items, the students learned practical movements that stretched all the major muscle groups. The students developed a routine consisting of different movements to present to the class. Using the equipment, I was able to teach the students lifelong healthy habits that they can use to increase their strength and flexibility.

Traci Stoll
West Elementary - Gulfport Schools
Word Nerds

After reading Word Nerds by Overturf, Montgomery, and Smith, I was determined to implement strategies that would help students gain word power. The grant money from MPE helped me purchase items needed to increase students’ exposure to academic and story vocabulary. Students were excited about reading the nonfiction collection. Students increased their schemas of words and word power by participating in kinesthetic activities for connecting words with self to text, text to text, and text to the world examples. The listening center device gave students more opportunities to practice the strategies they learned. It also helped differentiate by providing fluency practice with nonfiction read aloud. Thank you, MPE, for helping to enrich my students’ vocabulary knowledge.

Candice Savage
Lillie Burney Elementary School - Hattiesburg Schools
Nook E-Readers for 1st Graders

As part of a yearly grant through Mississippi Professional Educators, 1st graders at Lillie Burney Elementary School in Hattiesburg received three Nook Tablet E-Readers for their classroom. Students have been using their new Nook Tablets during Literacy Work Stations, during Accelerated Reader time, and during Math Centers. The Nook E-Readers allow students to download and read full color books, both fiction and nonfiction, and even download books that can be read aloud to them! Students have also enjoyed educational apps, such as ‘Dolch Sight Word Games’ and ‘Monkey Word School Adventure.’ Thank you MPE for the opportunity to bring Reading and Math to life for our 21st Century Learners!

Jackie Massey
Eastside Elementary School - Clinton Schools
Destination London

Destination: London was a journey made on $500 thanks to an MPE Grant. Participants in the fifth grade gifted education program at Eastside Elementary School in Clinton sighted the River Thames meandering through the city and noticed the bridges crossing it. Curious minds at Eastside asked, “How do bridges bear tremendous loads and support their own weight as well?” Investigation included the construction of popsicle stick bridges and the evaluation of their efficiency. South of the river, students spotted the Globe Theater and were inspired to present a live performance of Romeo and Juliet with transition music by the Beatles.
PLANTING SEEDS THROUGH EDUCATION IMPORTANT FOR FUTURE OF STUDENTS, STATE

Spring is a time of renewal and planting seeds that, over time, will produce the crops that provide the nutrients necessary to sustain life. Having worked on all levels of education for more than 30 years, I know that it is also a time when we see the seeds we planted throughout the school year come to fruition as our students complete one academic year and prepare for the next chapter in their lives.

As I begin my tenure as Commissioner of Higher Education, I look forward to planting the seeds that will strengthen the university system so that our institutions can continue to help our students and our state grow and thrive through education, research and service. I am excited to lead a system that plays such an important role in the lives of our students and the future of our state.

Having served as a Trustee for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges, I understand the challenges and opportunities we have in higher education today. While other states may have more resources, I know that the quality of instruction and the preparation our students receive is on par with any other state. Our nation and global society are changing at a pace that was unimaginable a century ago, but I have full confidence that our students are prepared with the critical thinking skills and technical literacy needed to adapt and thrive as they enter the workforce.

Today, more than ever, it is critically important that we have a seamless transition from early childhood, to elementary school to secondary school to higher education and the workforce. Having worked with the Education Achievement Council since its inception, I understand that having more students earn a degree is an essential step for our state to increase economic development and improve the quality of life for all of our citizens. Collectively, Mississippi Public Universities represent an unmatched resource for advancing Mississippi. While sharing a tri-fold mission of education, research and service, each one plays a unique role and must have the resources and support necessary to succeed and help our students succeed.

I appreciate the Legislature providing additional resources to the university system. Last fall, as we were preparing our budget request, the leaders of all of the universities agreed that our most pressing need was to provide salary increases for faculty and staff and also agreed to direct any additional appropriations over last year’s funding level for this purpose. All funds appropriated above last year’s level that were not restricted for a specific use by the Legislature will go toward the faculty and staff salary increase.

Education is an investment for our students. For our state, education in an investment in our students, our future and each succeeding generation of Mississippians. I can think of no better use of our resources and best efforts. I look forward to working with the talented faculty and staff across the university system to help students succeed in the classroom and beyond.