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Destination Graduation summit brings hope, inspiration, action

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Last week, more than 2,000 Mississippians who are committed to making a difference for Mississippi's children filled First Baptist Church in Jackson for Destination Graduation: Adult Summit. There was energy, enthusiasm and excitement in the air. I was thrilled at both the number of committed adults present and the level of commitment expressed by them.

However, I am haunted by a question posed by our keynote speaker, Alma Powell, Chair of America's Promise Alliance, who asked us, "Will this be a moment or a movement?" Keeping students in school through graduation is not an easy task and it is one that we, as schools, families and communities, must work on together every day. I believe that Mississippi is up to the challenge and ready to demonstrate to the rest of the country what can be accomplished through hard work and effective partnerships.

Sponsored by the Mississippi Department of Education, State Farm Insurance and the Public Education Forum of Mississippi, the summit itself was a shining example of what can happen when public and private entities come together to help children. Helping America's children is at the core of the work that Alma Powell and America's Promise Alliance are doing. As Mrs. Powell challenged us, "I have great hope for what it is you will do and your ability to keep America's promise to the promise of America—her children."

Governor Haley Barbour also cautioned us to make Destination Graduation more than a slogan. He challenged us to demonstrate the same spirit and character of Mississippi that the world saw in the wake of Katrina and reminded us that having a good workforce a decade from now depends on the students in our classrooms today, noting that our workforce must have higher skills to compete in a global marketplace.

Mississippi Economic Council President Blake Wilson charged us to become modern-day Paul Reveres and share the message of the importance of dropout prevention with our fellow citizens in every town, village and farm in Mississippi. He noted that the difference would be made in the hometowns across the state when citizens come together and develop solutions. He also introduced several Mississippians who

are making a difference in their communities across the state, including Donna Barksdale, Barksdale Reading Institute; Dr. Tom Meredith, Institutions for Higher Learning; Rachel Mitchell, WTVA-TV; Mary Peavey, Peavey Electronics; Dr. Dolphus Weary, Mission Mississippi; and Malcolm White, Mississippi Arts Commission. They are addressing dropout prevention in a myriad of ways, from infusing arts in the curriculum to holding after-school programs; from community engagement to building early reading skills. Dr. Meredith announced at the summit that members of my Student Advisory Board would receive tuition scholarships at any public university in the state when they graduate.

After the opening session, participants moved to small group sessions where they joined others from their hometowns to discuss how to make a difference in their own communities. Guided by trained facilitators, each group examined the issue by looking at where we are, where we need to be and the best way to get there, in the context of our individual communities, their challenges and opportunities.

It is said that faith without works is nothing. The small group sessions were truly about the action steps necessary to make a difference on the dropout issue. I have no doubt that it will be continued and expanded upon in the months and years ahead.

Destination Graduation: Adult Summit was about hope, inspiration and action. Each one of you holds the power to make an incredible difference in your community. As Mrs. Powell said, “Never underestimate the power of one.”

Mississippi native William Bell, who now serves as president and CEO of Casey Family Programs, gave us a great standard to live by. He called it the “Standard of Your Own,” which means that if it is not good enough for your own children, then it is not good enough for any child.

Every child deserves the opportunity for a successful life, which begins with a high school diploma.