

Remarks of State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex

Senate Select Committee on Funding

Tuesday, September 21, 2010

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to come before you today to speak about an issue that has been at the heart and soul of everything I have worked to do as State Superintendent of Education over these last three and a half years.

We have accomplished a great deal under difficult circumstances since I became State Superintendent of Education, and I will leave office in just a few months very proud of the work we've done together. I appreciate the work that you and other members of the General Assembly have done to give flexibility to districts to decide how to best spend their resources in this economic downturn to meet their own individual needs.

Thank you for helping us reform the Accountability Act to replace PACT with a better test, lighten the paperwork load on our teachers, and remove counterproductive negative labels from schools that were actually getting in the way of helping them improve. Thank you for giving us the authority to address the most persistently underperforming schools with a new redesign and reconstitution program that we've named our Turnaround Schools initiative.

In addition to these things, we've made South Carolina a national leader in public school choice, while holding the line against vouchers and tax credits that would, I believe, do irreparable harm to our public schools.

And as I have said, there is no question - we've done all of this in very difficult times. We've done it with an economy that took a negative turn to a degree that none of us could have predicted and that has been slower to recover than any of us desire. Therefore, the progress we have made has been with fewer people and less resources.

But the real tragedy of the last three and a half years is not that we've had to sustain drastic cuts and make tough decisions about teacher layoffs and furloughs, cutting programs, and delaying progress in many important areas. No. The real tragedy is that we haven't used this opportunity to make the changes necessary to ensure that the next time our economy takes a downward turn, we are better prepared.

Even in good times, our system was broken and not delivering what we needed. In these bad times, we are dangerously close to crippling our ability to bring a rigorous, quality education to every child in South Carolina.

It's long past time for comprehensive reform of our funding system and the revenue streams that support it in South Carolina, and that is the critical accomplishment that has continued to elude us during my time in office.

Now is the time for us to decide – Do we aspire to have our teachers earn what teachers in other states earn? If so, it’s time for reform. Do we truly believe that every child in every community – regardless of zip code – should have access to a high quality public school? If so, it’s time for reform. Do we believe that early childhood education really does make a difference and we need to provide 4-year-old programs to every child who needs them and every family who wants them in South Carolina? If we do, it’s time for reform.

It doesn’t cost us a penny right now to publicly make these commitments as a state. And if those are our commitments, it’s incumbent upon us to reinvent the existing system and create one that will fulfill our dream for a better South Carolina for our children, our families, and our future.

In 2009, I brought to the General Assembly a package of reforms that we called “Begin in 10.” It was the result of two bi-partisan task forces that I assembled to help us come up with a workable plan for reforming the system. Today, I want to outline the primary components of this package for you again, and call on you, once more, to consider them as you work to bring a plan to the full Legislature.

First, we must create a new system of flexible, student-centered funding, permanently codifying the flexibility provisos currently in place and continuing to roll up dozens of budget line items tied to specific programs and distributing the money instead on a per-pupil basis, so districts can use it in ways that best meet their students' needs. We’ve tested the districts’ stewardship with this increased flexibility over the past two years, and they have shown that are ready for this responsibility. It’s time to give it to them, permanently.

Next, we must pave the way for a modernized foundation program that fully addresses the current and emerging needs of the students of the Twenty-first Century. Instead of aiming for a "minimally adequate" education, South Carolina must commit itself to providing the resources needed for students to meet state academic standards rated as among the nation's most rigorous. This will require examining the revenue the state has – or will have – based on the TRAC Commission’s report to the General Assembly.

In addition, we must address the undisputed fact that students with special needs – students from poverty, students with limited English proficiency, students with disabilities and students who are academically or artistically advanced – require more resources to educate. Any system we put in place should include a weighting for each of those.

We need a comprehensive statewide restructuring plan for teacher pay that includes paying our teachers at the national average, incentives for performance, and incentives for teaching in schools that are struggling because of high poverty or low academic achievement.

And finally, we must codify kindergarten for all at-risk four-year-olds, as ordered in a 2005 court ruling, as well as provide it ultimately for every family of a four-year-old who wants it for their child.

Since we first brought this package of reforms to the General Assembly two years ago, we have seen little movement.

Today I stand here in front of you – a candidate for no office, an elected official with just a few short months left to make a difference before my term is up – a political threat to no one.

Looking at the members of this Committee, I have no doubt that you have the political courage to take this on and make the changes needed to move our schools forward. In getting to know each of you over the past three and a half years, I sense that this is the right group at the right time to finally take this on and get the job done.

And I know that when push comes to shove the members of the General Assembly who support our public schools far outweigh in numbers those who do not, and they will support your efforts.

We've tried doing nothing, and we've tried making a little change here and a little change there, and we've ended up with a predictable result – a system that everyone agrees is broken. If we continue to delay, then when the economy turns around and state resources are restored, we'll be putting our tax dollars back into a funding system designed 30 years ago. Everyone agrees that the system needs to change, so why not start changing it now?

What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for another generation of South Carolina's children to be treated inequitably? Are we waiting for the courts to tell us what to do? Are we waiting for yet another election cycle?

We simply cannot wait any longer. The eleventh hour has passed. This year, the clock will strike midnight if our state's politicians continue to play partisan games and engage in ideological bickering. There's simply no time left.

I implore you to reach agreement this year, bring a comprehensive reform bill to the floor of both houses, and commit yourselves to making meaningful, comprehensive reform.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have or hear your comments.