

The Annual 'State of Education' Address
The Honorable Inez M. Tenenbaum
State Superintendent of Education
Kingston Plantation Resort, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina
Wednesday, June 23, 2004

Pulitzer Prize nominee Clifton Taulbert tells a story about a little boy who lived in the Delta with his great-grandparents, Mama Pearl and Poppa Joe. The account begins one day before the first day of school, and everyone is excited—everyone except Little Cliff.

Cliff doesn't want to leave his great-grandparents and everything that he loves. And it's hard for Mama Pearl and Poppa Joe to convince Cliff that he will like school. As far as Cliff is concerned, school is about "work, work, work," and being "quiet, quiet, quiet."

As the story unfolds, he says goodbye to all of his toys, his tin tub, and his favorite chinaberry tree. He tries to hide, but Mama Pearl finds him, grabs his hand, and walks with him to Miss Maxey's school.

When Cliff arrives at school, he is surprised. Pulling his head from behind Mama Pearl's apron, his eyes rest upon all his friends. No one had told him that you could have fun at school.

This is how the book ends:

"As Mama Pearl walked away, Cliff ran to hug her and was surprised to see her wiping the corner of her eye on her apron. 'Mama, why (are) you crying?' he asked. 'You wanna go to school?' Now Mama Pearl was laughing and crying. She reached down and gave Little Cliff a big, big hug. 'No, no, baby, Mama can't stay. I am just so happy we made it to the school on our first day,' she said.

Little Cliff waved and ran back to play. Mama Pearl stood at the edge of the schoolyard, holding the green corduroy cap in her hands. She stood for a while and watched the children playing, her face beaming with pride. Then slowly, she made her way home.

And Cliff, now laughing with his friends, went inside the schoolhouse to learn."

Little Cliff's story reminds me of a time shortly after I was elected to my first term as State Superintendent of Education. Early one morning, I sat in my car behind a school bus.

Countless thoughts ran through my mind as the sun rose and I watched a mother send her child off to school.

Like Mama Pearl in this book, *Little Cliff's First Day of School*, that mother had placed a lot of trust in us. She trusted us to keep her child safe and to return him home at the

end of the day. She trusted us to reinforce her own values. And more than anything, she believed that when her child entered the schoolhouse, he entered to learn.

From Latta to Chapin, from Georgetown to Arcadia, from Chester to Walterboro, from Sullivan's Island to Rock Hill, each one of you proves day after day that you understand that trust.

Thank you for keeping our children safe and returning them home at the end of the day. Thank you for reinforcing the values that our parents hold dear. Thank you for remembering that we're in the business of teaching and learning, and for making sure that children remain our top priority.

Good morning!

It's always a pleasure to join you for what has become State Department of Education Day at the Summer Leadership Institute.

The late Hubert Humphrey once said, "The pursuit of peace resembles the building of a cathedral. It is the work of a generation. In concept, it requires a master architect; in execution, the labors of many."

Because of your dedication, and your hard work, and your creativity, we are building a world-class public education system in South Carolina—a system through which all students will become educated, responsible, and contributing citizens.

Together, we have set high goals, and the results have been phenomenal.

- Our students have made significant improvements in statewide PACT testing, with gains across all grade levels, subjects, and demographic groups.
- Our high school seniors have improved their average SAT score by 38 points in the past five years, the largest gain in the country and four times the national increase.
- The national report card "Quality Counts," published by the respected magazine *Education Week*, again ranked our state No. 1 in the nation for improving teacher quality, and seventh in the nation for improving academic standards and accountability.
- South Carolina has the nation's third-best improvement rate in mathematics, and the fourth-best improvement in reading, on federal NAEP tests required by No Child Left Behind.
- We rank third in the nation in the number of teachers certified by the prestigious National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (3,226).

- South Carolina is one of only three states in the nation that has increased high school seniors' scores on the ACT college entrance exam over the past five years despite doubling the number of students who took the exam.
- The number of South Carolina first-graders scoring "ready" for school is at an all-time high. Full-day kindergarten has dramatically improved school readiness, with the biggest improvements made by minority students and students from low-income families.
- Scores on the South Carolina High School Exit Exam have improved by 3.8 percentage points in the last three years.
- For the fourth consecutive year, South Carolina students are scoring above the national average in reading, language, and math on TerraNova.
- South Carolina eighth-graders meet or exceed the international average in the Third International Math and Science Study, which compares test scores of students in 38 nations.
- The Princeton Review ranked South Carolina's testing system as No. 11 in the nation.
- Four independent research studies have confirmed that our standards for student academic proficiency are among the nation's most rigorous.
- And finally, there is this amazing statistic. Each year in South Carolina, 100,000 of our students volunteer more than a million hours of community service linked to their academic studies.

That's a long list of accomplishments.....give yourselves a round of applause.

Not one of these accomplishments was an accident. Not one was due to "luck."

Each one happened because you believe—as I do—that excellence can be attained only if you "care more than others think is wise; dream more than others think is practical; expect more than others think is possible."

These wonderful accomplishments happened because we've acknowledged that our children's future and our state's future are one and the same. They happened because we've stayed the course by continuing to focus on six key things:

Accountability: *(putting academics first, raising the bar, and remembering that everyone has a role to play if our students are to succeed)*

Safe and Healthy Schools: *(updating school facilities and intervening early with troubled youth)*

Teacher Quality: *(ensuring that we have a caring, competent teacher in every classroom)*

School Leadership: *(providing you with world-class training)*

Early Childhood: *(funding full-day kindergarten and maintaining our emphasis on reading and family literacy)*

Parent and Community Involvement: *(increasing our partnerships with business and industry, with volunteers, and with organizations—including the faith-based community)*

Another reason for our accomplishments is your focus on learning.

They happened because you realize that written communication is a critical part of everyday life and work and have created instructional programs that help students acquire these abilities. Last year, twenty-six of your schools received the Exemplary Writing award.

This is the second time in four years that South Carolina has had a finalist in the National Teacher of the Year Program. Our accomplishments happened because teachers like Jason Fulmer, a 2004 national finalist, are tough-minded originators, able to dare, risk, try, and experiment—all the while opening students' minds to ideas not yet imagined.

Our accomplishments happened because principals like Dr. David O'Shields, a Milken award recipient from Bell Street Middle School in Laurens District 56, has completely reorganized his school around effective instructional practices.

They happened because we have strong teams like those at:

- Bookman Elementary School *(Richland District 2)*,
- Newington Elementary School *(Dorchester District 2)*,
- Palmetto Middle School *(Anderson District 1)*, and
- Ridge View High School *(Richland District 2)*.

Will these Carolina First Palmetto's Finest winners—and the twelve program finalists—please stand?

Our accomplishments happened because you involve parents and community members in the decision-making process. You provide warm and friendly environments where people not only feel welcome, but also like an important part of your school family.

Our state's Red Carpet program continues to be a model for the country. In fact, the program recently won a national award from the National School Public Relations

Association. This year, 78 Red Carpet winners join 211 recognized over the past two years.

Another reason we're progressing is because of a group of talented individuals working behind the scenes.

In recent years, there have been many changes for South Carolina's public education system. We took a giant step in implementing the Education Accountability Act with distribution of the first report cards. The state's budget crisis has forced us at the State Department of Education to restrict travel and purchases, reduce some technical assistance services, and maintain vacancies for some very important positions.

At the Education Department, as in any organization, there are challenges, and there is room for improvement. Still, we continue to be a strong partner with local schools—providing our 663,000 children and the teachers and administrators who serve them with the tools they need to succeed.

I feel privileged to work with the staff at the State Department of Education. They are not just employees. They are my colleagues. They are my friends.

Thank you.

Andrew Carnegie once said, "Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. It's the ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."

But I think Helen Keller said it best when she said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

As a team, we are proud of the initiatives that are making an impact on teaching, learning, and leading.

- The Governor's Institute of Reading is working to ensure that all children learn to read well and independently by the third grade. The Institute administers the South Carolina Reading Initiative, an intensive staff development effort carried out through study groups of teachers and administrators in participating schools.

The staff administers the program, implementing the South Carolina Reading Initiative in Grades K-5; piloting the South Carolina Reading Initiative at the middle and high school level; and developing the South Carolina Reading Initiative for the middle grades.

- Our Grants Office at the Education Department is helping teachers and administrators navigate the grant procurement process—from finding potential funders and staying informed about grant opportunities, to locating statistics,

understanding grant guidelines, polishing narratives, and reviewing budgets.

- The EIA Competitive Teacher Grant program supports the improvement of classroom instructional practices and procedures. Three hundred sixty-eight (368) grants were funded last year for a total of \$1.3 million.
- When our web site (www.myschools.com) was first established, we averaged 400 hits a day. Currently, we average 18,000 hits a day. Teachers form one of our largest user groups. Through SLATE, they are creating, saving, and aligning lesson plans linked to our state standards. And through South Carolina Teaching Learning and Connecting, (SCTLC) teachers and administrators can access professional development opportunities by content, region, and date.

The Education Department's Office of School Leadership provides a continuum of leadership development opportunities and services.

- The School Leadership Executive Institute offers intensive leadership and management training that develops knowledgeable, caring, and credible leaders.
- The Principal Induction Program provides support and professional development for first-year principals. In addition to training, participants are paired with an experienced principal who serves as a mentor throughout the first two years.
- Topical seminars offer career school administrators high-quality, but affordable educational opportunities and training, all aligned with national and state standards.
- Last summer, we began a residential program for aspiring principals. Designed for current assistant principals, the program's curriculum includes self-knowledge, leadership, instructional leadership, self-improvement, and legal issues.

The development of these and other initiatives has come in the midst of many challenges. During tough times, I've often quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, who said, "The ultimate measure of a man (*or woman*) is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

The state's budget cuts have devastating to our districts.

You know too well about the layoffs, program eliminations, reductions, cancellations, cutbacks, and postponements. You have had to make hard decisions—decisions that hurt you . . . decisions that hurt our children.

I've said all along that we cannot meet the higher academic goals of the South Carolina Education Accountability Act and the federal No Child Left Behind Act if the resources

needed to meet those goals are drained away. And we can't continue to compensate for the loss of state funds by forcing local communities to raise property taxes.

The question is not whether we can afford to invest in every child. As Bennettsville native Marian Wright Edelman said so eloquently: "It is whether we can afford not to."

Ladies and gentlemen: For thirty (30) years, we have tinkered with a school finance system that has steadily gotten more complicated and more confusing. We must start with a "clean sheet of paper" and keep working until we have developed a comprehensive and equitable system for funding ALL of South Carolina's schools.

Have we learned anything since Briggs v Elliott? Have we learned anything from Brown v Board of Education? Have we learned anything from the courtroom proceedings in Clarendon County?

We need to do something we have never done in South Carolina. We need to sit down and have a detailed discussion about what is required to give children an excellent education. Next, we need to determine what level of resources is required to provide that education. And finally, we need to determine how we are going to pay for that education.

Courage sometimes is the power to let go of the familiar. And we need to break some familiar patterns here in South Carolina.

The future of our state is at stake. The future of our children hangs in the balance.

Starting right here—starting right now—we must recommit to helping change the status quo in our state. That's imperative if our children are going to be able to compete with students from across the country and around the world.

Robert F. Kennedy once said, "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."

We must have the courage to do whatever it takes to accelerate the academic gains our students have made. We can't allow the improvements we have made to unravel right in front of our eyes.

During the journey, there will be nay-sayers. There will be many hills to climb. But we can never let the powers that be forget that South Carolina's constitution gives public education "highest-priority" status.

The quest for quality education for every child in South Carolina is not ours alone.

It belongs to the teacher who, after her own kids are asleep, grades papers until the wee hours of the morning.

It belongs to the custodian who takes pride in his shiny corridors and freshly mowed grass.

It belongs to the lady who sits in your pew, singing off-key each and every Sunday. To the deli worker at your Piggly Wiggly; to the CEO of your town's largest business; to the plant worker who toils through ten-hour shifts.

It belongs to the parent who rises at 4 o'clock each morning to take that long bus ride to work. And it even belongs to the senior citizen who doesn't have a child, or even a grandchild, still in school.

This quest is about ALL of our children. That's why we must continue to work hard. We must continue to advocate. We must continue to collaborate. We must continue to fight. We must carry on.

We must remember that "Courage does not always roar. Sometimes it is the quiet voice at the end of the day, saying, "I will try again tomorrow."

Thank you very much.