

State of the State Address
Governor Jim Hodges
January 17, 2001

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Ladies and Gentleman of the General Assembly, distinguished guests and my fellow South Carolinians.

Even in the dead of winter, an optimist can always find a ray of hope. For example, in Major League Baseball, spring training is only six weeks away, along with the promise of a new season for all baseball fans.

I'm one of those fans. A few summers before I became Governor ... I gathered with a group of friends for a trip to historic ballparks around the country. We were Democrats, Republicans and Independents, but we shared a bipartisan love of baseball. Together, we traveled to historic ballparks. We shared stories about the game and learned about its history. It became an annual tradition.

And so I say to all of you tonight ... to Speaker Wilkins and Senate President Pro Tempore McConnell ... let's work together for the common good of all South Carolinians. Let's make that an annual bipartisan tradition.

Now back to baseball.

One of the outstanding ballplayers of our age is Hammerin' Hank Aaron, the Home Run King. After he retired from baseball, Hank Aaron once told a group of college graduates the difference between a .280 and a .300 hitter. The difference is bigger than 20 points, he said. It's the difference between being pretty good and truly great.

It all boils down to what a hitter does when he gets his pitch, the pitch he has been praying for. A .300 hitter will drive his pitch every time. But when a .280 hitter gets the same pitch, he will just as likely foul it off.

Hank Aaron's lesson from the game is worth applying to life. In life, you get an occasional opportunity to do something great. And when that time comes, only two things matter -- you must be well-prepared to seize the moment. And you must have the courage to take your best swing.

Let me introduce you to someone who's hit some tough pitches this year -- literally. Ray Tanner is the coach of the nationally-ranked USC baseball team. He's one of 20 South Carolinians who competed in the 2000 Olympics. And he helped manage America's gold-medal winning baseball team.

South Carolina has faced a lot of tough pitches in the last two years. And we've hit a lot of them out of the park.

We've focused like a laser-beam on improving our schools. And that focus is working.

We've heard a lot of talk about South Carolina being last in education. Well, here are some new statistics:

Of the fifty states, South Carolina now ranks sixth in accountability, fourth in improving teacher quality and first in the nation in SAT improvement.

Since 1998, South Carolina's SAT scores have gone up 15 points.

At East Clarendon High School in Turbeville, students posted a 157-point increase on the SAT. Penny King is one of the coaches for their SAT prep team. She remembers TV reporters coming to Turbeville ... tiny Turbeville ... to find out how they did it. Penny has a simple answer for them -- "There's no reason why other schools in the state can't do the same thing."

Other schools around the state have improved. In fact, we've seen a bigger increase in SAT scores over the last two years than in the last ten years combined.

Here are some other home runs in education...

Thanks to full-day kindergarten and First Steps, more children than ever are testing ready for the first grade.

We've provided a billion dollars for school construction, without raising taxes. I've seen children and teachers make the move from old portables into new classrooms.

At Paul Knox Middle School in North Augusta, I saw an entire wing of new classrooms rising from the ground.

I've seen hundreds of thousands of parents sign the "Compact with Our Children" and pledge to take an active role in their child's education.

I've seen students in schools like Camden Primary learn about honesty and respect ... and call their teachers "ma'am" and "sir."

I've seen such a tremendous focus on reading that at some schools, every single child has joined our Reading Honor Roll.

And I've seen more great teachers lead our classrooms. Last year, I set a goal of training 500 nationally-certified teachers in South Carolina by the end of next year. Well, last year alone we increased the number of nationally-certified teachers by more than 800 percent -- from 39 to 370.

And I've seen South Carolina succeed in the classroom ... and in the boardroom.

I've seen South Carolina enjoy another year of record economic investments. Household names like Cisco Systems, Lennox Heating and Air and Toyota have taken their place alongside Honda and BMW.

Some continue to doubt our state's ability to attract new investment, but the numbers speak for themselves. I've presided over \$12 billion in new investment over the last two years -- the largest investment in South Carolina history. And these investments have created over 60,000 new jobs, and have kept unemployment well below the national average.

I've seen this legislature set aside party and personality to solve problems that have troubled our state for decades.

We've cut taxes for seniors and working families. We've provided prescription drugs for over 33,000 seniors in need.

We've ended our state's status as the nation's nuclear dumping ground. We've resolved the difficult debate over video poker ... and we've finally resolved the Confederate flag controversy.

And after a decade of talk, we let the people of South Carolina have their say on an education lottery. And they spoke loud and clear.

Ladies and Gentleman, that is the State of our State... And the best is yet to come. South Carolina is strong. And it will only get stronger.

But this is no time to rest on our laurels. We can't be satisfied with hitting .280. Because the next pitch is coming. It's time to step up to the plate.

It is time to step up to the plate for our teachers. I'd like to introduce you to one of our best.

Meet Christa Compton. She's an English teacher at Richland Northeast High School. One of her fellow teachers once said, "Christa would excel in any calling she chose to pursue. Fortunately, she chose to use all of her gifts to enhance the lively art of teaching."

Christa is South Carolina's Teacher of the Year. As Teacher of the Year, she earned a \$25,000 bonus. And BMW, a proud Palmetto State company, has given her the use of a royal blue Z3 Roadster for the duration of her term.

Christa's accomplishments set a standard of excellence for all of South Carolina's teachers. And it doesn't stop there. Christa was recently selected as one of four finalists for the National Teacher of the Year. Christa, you do us proud.

Now that we've thanked Christa with words, we ought to thank her ... and her fellow teachers ... with actions.

So tonight, I am challenging you --raise teacher pay by \$2,000 this year. And raise teacher pay to the national average within six years.

The public understands the need for paying our teachers well. But the taxpayers also deserve accountability for our investment in education.

Thanks to the Education Accountability Act, schools will receive their first report cards in November. I support accountability and high standards. But we can't just grade a school and walk away. We must provide underachieving schools with the means to improve.

Parents tell me they want to know how their children's school measures up. But they expect the state to do something when they don't measure up.

Tonight, I make this challenge: help our schools make the grade ... as required by the Education Accountability Act. Devote the \$54 million required to fully fund our commitment to accountability. Those dollars mean homework centers, teacher specialists, principal specialists, review teams and retraining grants.

We will demand excellence from the classroom. But we must give our schools the tools they need to get there. We must help our kids -- and our schools -- do better.

Two years ago, we stepped up to the plate and began to fix our aging school buildings. Now we need to do the same with our aging school buses. Over a thousand school buses are more than 15 years old. Some have more than 200,000 miles on them.

These old buses are three times more likely to break down. The engine dies or the axles wear out. And the odds are one in five that your child rode one of these buses to school this morning. As a parent, I'm not willing to take that chance with my child's safety. As Governor, I'm not willing to take that chance with South Carolina's children either.

So tonight, I make this challenge: replace our oldest and most dangerous school buses. Our parents deserve peace of mind. And our children deserve a safe ride to school.

We also have to step up to the plate for our youngest children.

On your way into this chamber, you walked past dozens of young children who are benefiting from my preschool initiative, First Steps. These children are different from the folks you usually see in the State House lobby. They don't have cell phones or carry briefcases. They can't afford to lobby for a tax break or a budget increase. All they are asking for is the chance to get a fair start in life.

Listen to the facts:

In Greenville County, 181 at-risk students tested ready for school this fall, thanks to an innovative summer school initiative funded by First Steps. In McCormick County, First Steps has created a quality child care center for the most needy children -- where no center existed before. In Kershaw County, First Steps is raising the quality of child care and making it more affordable for working parents.

Our pre-school initiative is already getting results. And it's getting results faster and with far less money than similar programs in North Carolina, which spends over \$200 million per year.

But despite our success stories throughout the state, there are some who want to put the brakes on First Steps. Some of the same folks fought us on full-day kindergarten -- and we all know how successful that's been. They were wrong then ... and they are wrong now. Say "no" to the naysayers and say "yes" to preschool.

Baseball is all about the fundamentals. In the first two years of my administration, we have focused on the most basic skill our students need to succeed: reading. Every Thursday during the legislative session, I read to children.

Tonight, I am pleased to announce the Middle School Reading Challenge. This new program will expand our reading initiative. It will introduce children to the magic of Harry Potter and other children's classics.

And my wife will continue her outstanding "Reading With Rachel" initiative. You might have seen Rachel reading at a school in your town. Or you might have heard her reading on public radio. She's my Ambassador for Books. She's even convinced ten major publishing firms to provide books free of charge to South Carolina children. Thank you, Rachel, for all that you do.

I'm particularly proud of one pitch that we hit out of the park. We kept our promise to give the people of South Carolina the chance to vote on an education lottery. And the people responded with a remarkable landslide endorsement that transcended racial and party lines. Over 700,000 South Carolinians voted for the lottery. That's a home run for education.

Yet some members of the legislature haven't heard this message. Some elected officials have even said "the General Assembly will first be debating whether or not we're even gonna have a lottery."

Well... let me issue a clear warning tonight. The people of South Carolina have demanded an education lottery. The people of South Carolina deserve an education lottery. The people of South Carolina will get an education lottery.

We must deliver on our promise. Now, I don't want the legislature to be a rubber stamp. But don't think you have a blank slate, either. Ratify the will of the people. Don't second-guess the will of the people.

The people have endorsed a lottery framework. It has four parts: First, a free technical education for anyone at any age. Second, college scholarships that dramatically expand the number of students receiving aid. Third, master's degrees for our teachers who want to upgrade their skills. And finally, classroom technology to make our state a national leader in high-tech learning.

This plan is the people's plan. So let's meet two of the people who stand to benefit from our education lottery:

Let me introduce you to Kandi Oxner and Valencia Edwards. Kandi is a nursing student at Midlands Tech. Kandi has big dreams. But because of her mother's medical bills, Kandi's family also has big debts.

Valencia is a freshman at Columbia College. She wants to be an elementary school teacher. Valencia worked hard in high school to earn a B-plus average. But Valencia doesn't have a LIFE scholarship to help pay her bills.

Kandi and Valencia have big dreams. And we shouldn't let financial obstacles stand in their way. Don't disappoint them: use the education lottery to make technical and 2-year college education free to anyone who wants it. Use the education lottery to give a \$2,000 HOPE scholarship to every South Carolina student who earns a "B" average. And use the education lottery to make South Carolina first in the nation for per-pupil spending on technology.

This plan belongs to the people of South Carolina. It belongs to Kandi Oxner and Valencia Edwards. It belongs to the more than 700,000 people who voted "yes" on November 7th.

Our education lottery plan will be the most equitable in America. If you are willing to learn, then we are willing to help. And nothing is going to stand in your way -- not age, not race, not ability to pay.

So I make this challenge - don't break faith with the people of South Carolina. And don't let the politicians micro-manage the lottery. Let's run the South Carolina lottery the way President-Elect Bush ran his successful Texas lottery -- like a business.

Members of the legislature, every day that you wait is a day that the doors to college stay shut to another South Carolina student.

Even as we go to bat for education in South Carolina, we must dedicate ourselves to fiscal responsibility. This means we must continue our investment in education, while promoting targeted tax cuts and downsizing state government.

We must budget responsibly. Every dollar wasted on bad budget practices is a dollar that's not being spent in the classroom. And the worst budget practice of all has been the habit of using one-time money to pay for ongoing expenses.

To rein this practice in, we must downsize state government. First, reduce non-education spending by 15 percent. That's a cut of more than \$460 million. Then join me in passing a comprehensive budget reform package that outlaws spending surplus money on recurring expenditures.

I want state government to be run like a business, with our scarce tax dollars devoted to our core priorities -- education, health care, safe communities and targeted tax relief. We must do it now ...

And speaking of tax relief ... Last year, we hit a home run with South Carolina's new sales tax holiday. Held in August, it was targeted to families and students getting ready for the new school year. Since it was a targeted tax cut, I decided to do my shopping - where else? - at Target. Let me tell you what I saw there.

Parents were lined up with baskets full of back-to-school supplies. A store manager told me that ... apart from the day after Thanksgiving ... the sales tax holiday was the busiest shopping day of the year.

The numbers speak for themselves. Sales volume increased 75 to 80 percent from the same weekend last year. South Carolina merchants estimate they took in \$250 million because of the sales tax holiday.

I've heard from governors across the country. They want to copy what we've done with the sales tax holiday. I love it when the Palmetto State is a trailblazer.

Ladies and Gentlemen, sales tax holidays work. So let's give our citizens a sales tax holiday every six months -- one in August and one in February. Let's give the people the chance to buy spring clothes and Easter baskets tax-free, just like they did last August with notebooks, computers and back-to-school items.

We must also fulfill the promise of food tax relief. The legislature has temporarily cut the sales tax on food by one penny. I propose we make this food tax relief permanent, with a \$25 million food tax credit. Let's target this valuable relief to South Carolinians alone.

And before you leave in June, let's budget the money to permanently establish a \$50,000 homestead exemption for our deserving seniors. I say that's money well spent. And I want to introduce you to someone who agrees with me.

Verdell Raysor lives in her own home in West Columbia. Thanks to the homestead exemption, her property taxes have been cut in half this year. But property taxes aren't the only expense in Verdell's budget. In order to cope with diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, Verdell has to fill eight prescriptions every month. Her drug bills were so high, sometimes she had to choose which medicines she could afford that month, and was forced to go without the others.

Fortunately, Verdell is now one of 33,000 seniors who carry one of these - the South Carolina SilverCard. Thanks to the SilverCard initiative begun last year, Verdell and seniors like her now have affordable access to prescription drugs.

SilverCard is just one of the health care initiatives being funded with revenue from the tobacco settlement. This year, South Carolina will receive over \$32 million from the tobacco settlement for health care.

Let's use these funds to continue SilverCard. Let's continue our efforts to provide health screenings for newborns and smoking prevention programs for our teens.

Let's invest these funds in the health of our state. South Carolina ranks near the bottom when it comes to the prevention and treatment of many serious illnesses. We are plagued with diabetes, hypertension and stroke. Sadly, these diseases take a larger than average toll on African-Americans in our state.

So I make this challenge: let's close the gap on health care disparities. As a start, let's fund mini-grants for community efforts to prevent and treat these deadly diseases. And let's partner with efforts in the faith community that are already making progress -- such as the "Heart and Soul" program that offers hypertension screenings at 400 churches in our state.

The growth of South Carolina's economy is a major focus for my administration. As we make strides in the new economy, we must make sure that those employed in the old economy aren't left behind. We need to make sure that all of our communities share in our prosperity -- especially our rural communities.

I have asked Commerce Secretary Way to lead the Rural Task Force for South Carolina. One of the members of this task force, Darla Moore, is with us here tonight.

This task force will look at ways to improve job retraining programs for displaced workers. It will focus on making high-speed Internet access affordable in rural communities. And it will support small business incentives to diversify the job base in agricultural areas.

I am pleased to report that we are using an important new tool for both rural and urban areas - the community economic development act I signed last year. In the next several weeks, we will provide financial institutions with the guidelines to access state tax credits for community development.

I am very excited about the potential that this provides. We are working together with local groups to achieve common goals - increased availability of affordable housing.... small business development ... and job growth.

A few years ago, South Carolina adopted "three strikes and you're out" for certain violent crimes. Being tough on criminals has made our streets safer. But there's one particular type of crime that has become an epidemic.

Let me introduce you to LaNelle DuRant. LaNelle was married for seventeen years. She had a lovely home in a prosperous suburb. But she told me she was in an abusive marriage. LaNelle thought she was powerless. She told me, "I was afraid the only way out of my marriage was if one of us died."

Unfortunately, this tragedy is far too common in South Carolina. Our state now leads the nation in the number of women who are killed by abusers. And too many women have nowhere to turn. At one women's shelter in Columbia, nearly 400 battered women and their children had to be turned away for lack of space. Domestic violence is a fact of life for too many women in South Carolina.

But LaNelle learned that she wasn't powerless. It was the hardest thing she had ever done, but she ended her marriage. She now practices as a licensed attorney and volunteers as an advocate for other survivors of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a vicious crime. It can happen in any neighborhood. It can happen in any economic class. And it's time we did something about it.

I've proposed initiatives that will prevent domestic violence from falling through the cracks in our judicial system. It will stop the practice of diverting offenders to pre-trial intervention, where abusers get off with a slap on the wrist. We're going to make sure judges are fully aware of the extent and severity of domestic violence.

LaNelle took control of her life. Now it's time for South Carolina to take control of our domestic violence problem.

Just as every family deserves a safe home, every motorist deserves a safe highway.

I propose a 3-point plan on highway safety: more guardrails along our medians, more troopers on our roads, and more responsibility from our drivers.

I support using \$30 million from our State Infrastructure Bank to build highway medians along some of our most dangerous stretches of road ... as Speaker Wilkins has proposed.

I support adding a new class of state troopers to patrol our highways and catch reckless drivers.

And I support teaching our young people responsible driving habits at an early age. Teenagers make up less than 4 percent of the drivers in South Carolina. But they are responsible for twice that number of traffic fatalities. And many of these crashes happen late at night.

So I challenge the legislature to adopt a youth driving curfew - no teenage drivers on our roads after midnight.

Every death on the highway is more than a statistic. It is a promising life snuffed out forever. Most tragic is the loss of our young people.

I've seen this tragedy strike my own hometown of Lancaster. Larry and Elizabeth Williams will never forget the late September evening when a highway patrolman came to their home. Their beautiful 15-year-old daughter, Lisa, had been killed in a crash that afternoon on Potter Road. A seat belt would have saved her.

For Larry and Elizabeth, the pain of losing Lisa will never go away. Elizabeth told me, "We hurt every time someone else dies in a crash." Their sadness is mixed with frustration every time they see a driver who isn't buckled up, or a child crawling around the back seat unrestrained.

South Carolina is one of a handful of states that doesn't require our citizens to buckle up. It's time for primary seat belt enforcement in South Carolina. It costs nothing, and it can save everything.

While we do our best to hit these pitches, we should take a minute to look around the baseball stadium.

If states were ballparks, ours would have more history, more memories and more beauty than Wrigley Field, Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park combined.

Thankfully, we protect our natural parks better than some teams guard their ballparks. Look at what we've saved here in South Carolina. The ACE Basin. The Jocassee Gorges. The Congaree National Monument. And to my friends in the Midlands, soon we're going to protect the unique treasures of Lake Murray.

Still, there's more to do.

We are becoming an urban state. Over the last ten years, South Carolina lost over half a million acres in farms and forests to urban space. That's enough sprawl to pave over every square inch of Greenville County with room to spare.

South Carolina needs to grow. But imagine a South Carolina with no woods to hunt in and no parks to play in. If we are going to keep South Carolina livable, profitable and enviable, we must protect our natural resources.

Now is the time to plan for the next decade of explosive growth. We must promote and preserve open spaces. We must dedicate ourselves to historic preservation.

Let's partner with local communities and businesses. For an investment of \$15 million, we can preserve historic assets, enhance wildlife habitats and promote green space for our citizens.

Let's never ... ever ... live in a South Carolina where our children have to ask where all the parks went.

And let's never ... ever ... see a South Carolina where history is found only in textbooks. Let's make South Carolina a national leader in historic preservation.

In the end, it all comes back to what Hank Aaron said. We know a good pitch is coming. We must be prepared to seize the moment. We must have the courage to take a swing.

So let's go to bat for our teachers ... and pay them what they are worth.

Let's go to bat on the lottery ... and pass the people's plan.

Let's go to bat for our children ... and give them modern school buses, new learning opportunities and a healthy start in life.

It's time to step up to the plate. The next pitch is coming. Let's hit it out of the park.

God bless you, and God bless the great State of South Carolina.