Dr. Jim Rex

London: Welcome Superintendent of Education, Dr. Jim Rex. Dr. Rex, what is your vision for the next decade in South Carolina?

Rex: Well I assume that when you say that you want me to talk about education and not a broader vision. They are so inter-twined, as you all know. What I would like to see is for South Carolina to be known nationally and internationally as having the most fairly funded, the most innovative and the most choice driven public school system in America. I think that’s within our grasp, I think we can do it and if we do that we will become the fastest improving school system in America. And at the same time we will be creating a paradigm if you will that other states and other nations may want to look at in terms of what 21st century public education can and needs to look like.

London: You have some specific ideas about how we can do this? What are they?

Rex: I do. The first item is we have to have a comprehensive plan for reforming education, not a piece meal plan, because when you tinker with it, sometimes you do more damage than you do good. There are five major components to this comprehensive plan.

1. I think South Carolina needs to get much more directly involved in expecting, demanding if you will, but also nurturing innovation within our public schools. I see some innovative things going on but the innovation I see is for the most part the result of a creative principal or a charismatic teacher or a progressive superintendent, but not because of the state. It is happening in spite of the state not because of it. I believe innovation in education is as important and maybe even more important than other areas of American life. It’s important in all of them. I mean if you look at the challenges we have in the 21st century; whether it’s healthcare, alternative fuels or the way we interact with our environment. We have to come up with some new ways to attack some old and persistent problems and education is no exception. Proctor and Gamble, for example, spends more money on its company each year for research and development than the entire nation does on education. So we need to get serious on the need for innovation. So that’s number one.

2. I think we need to have more choices within public education. What I call public school choices opposed to vouchers or school credits. I think that using taxpayer dollars to create a dual system is a bad idea. I think you know having a dual system one part of which is fully accountable and fully accessible and another which is not is not only something that will do irrefutable damage to our public schools but perhaps more importantly, I think it will inevitably make us more unequal and separate as a people. If
we do that, I think we will become less competitive as a state, so public
school choice and innovation are really mutually reinforcing. The more
innovation you have the more choices you create the more choices you
provide, the more innovation you stimulate. So, South Carolinians
deserve and need to have these choices within their public school system.
The idea that their child ought to attend, or be forced to attend, a specific
program simply because the real estate that their house or apartment sits
on, I think, is an antiquated idea. And whether it’s Montessori, single
gender, or language immersion, or magnet schools or public charter
schools, parents ought to get an increasing level of choice and a variety of
choice to select for their child.

3. We need to have accountability and a testing system that is rational. We
have gotten to a point where we have an irrational system both at the
national and state level. At the national level with “No Child Left Behind”
and at the state level through the “Educational Accountability Act.” We
need to make some major adjustments in that otherwise we are not going
to get the kinds of improvement that we need in our system. So rational
accountability and testing program.

4. The fourth piece is very urgent. They are all urgent, but this is really
important. We need to come up with some ways to make the teaching
profession, to rejuvenate it, to elevate it. We have some terrible
shortages. They are getting worse. All the projections are they are going
to get worse still if we don’t make some major changes. All of the things
that need to be done won’t frankly matter much, if we don’t have the
quality and quantity of people we need in our classrooms. All the research
shows that if you had to pick one thing only, to make a difference in terms
of children learning, it would be defined is competent, compassionate
teaching for every classroom. That’s the fourth piece.

5. The fifth piece is last but not least. That is we simply must come up with a
better way to raise funds or allocate funds for our public school systems.
We have some terrible frankly embarrassing inequities and disparities in
our system. There are a lot of kids in South Carolina that do not have a
shot a real shot at the American dream because of where they live. When
you look at these groups of children, these areas of our state and you see
how they are disproportionately contributing to the quality of life issues
that you know we have to address as South Carolinians. Whether it’s our
test scores, drop out rates, pregnancy rates, incarceration rates, poverty
rates, you can run down the list. We are going to have to understand that
we are not going to move ahead as a state until we reach back and make
sure that all these children can be competitive and can learn and prosper
in the 21st Century, otherwise our state won’t. So those are the five things
that have to be in this comprehensive plan—innovation supported by the
state, more public school choice, fully accountable, fully accessible, a
rational accountability and testing program that leads to improvement, an
elevated rejuvenated teaching force that gives us the quantity and quality
of people we need and a way of funding our schools that provides not a
minimally adequate, but an adequate education, for every child in every
school statewide. If I thought one or two or even three of those things
would do it, I would say I don’t think so, it’s going to take all five of them in
a comprehensive approach.

London: Do you think that we have the political will in place to make this a reality?

Rex: Not yet. I think it’s building. As I move around the state doing what I call
town hall meetings and I have done many, many of them. I promised when I ran
as a candidate that I would average two days a week outside of Columbia, I’m
closer to three now and that is all directed at creating this grass roots support the
will if you will to make the changes to make the necessary to make our state
prosper. We are not there yet, but I think we are getting much closer.

London: How in your mind do we position ourselves to take advantage of
opportunities that are presented by the new global society and still
maintain our quality of life in South Carolina?

Rex: The easy answer is just to say education. The hard answer is to get in the
nitty-gritty of what it’s going to take. We know that for our young people to be
competitive as adults as they move into the 21st Century they are going to need
the basic skills, they are going to have to be literate, have computation skills and
to be technologically literate and lots of those things. They are also going to
have to be entrepreneurial, creative, and they are going to have to have
imagination, because if we don’t constantly create new services and new
products in the American economy to create with the global economy we are
going to lose our economic power world wide. Every nation in the world is trying
to figure out how to do that. Most countries are beginning to understand that the
battlefield of the 21st Century is going to be who can educate all of their people
the best. India is beginning to understand that, China and all other countries in
other parts of the world. It’s going to take a commitment on the part of our nation
to take a learned individual who understands that they are part of a global
economy a global community not just a local one and we have a long way to go
in that regard but I think there is an increasing sense of urgency, but for America
to remain a world power, we have solve that problem.

London: What are the responsibilities of South Carolina leaders regarding
future generations of South Carolinians?

Rex: Well, let’s start out with them becoming in the future less partisan. Extreme
partisanship has hurt us as a state and it has hurt us as a nation. When I talk to
groups, I sometimes remind us that we have so much in common and we aren’t
Shiites and Sunnis that we are Americans. We need leaders that focus on our common ground about those minor areas that we disagree with. Secondly, all of us have stood on the shoulders of those before us in terms of the willingness to commit to provide our resources for education. Our leaders need to remind our generation that we have that obligation for the next generation. We also need leaders who are politically courageous. Who are willing to go up against the status quo who are willing to risk not being reelected. Political risk I call them. Political courage. Which I would not place politically high on an index of courage or risk. I try to remind groups that it’s not too much to ask of risk. When you think of a young man or woman who is in Iraq as we speak or in Afghanistan. Compare that risk with political risk. Or a single mother who works two jobs and tries to raise her children by herself—compare that to political courage. Or the fireman in Charleston in the last nine months who ran into a burning building because they thought there was someone in there who needed their help. The point is we need political leaders, community leaders and business leaders and faith community leaders who are willing to take some risk to help change these things in our state and create a sense of urgency to do so.

London: Do you think the next generation will be better than our generation?

Rex: That is the real question, isn’t it? You know, we are faced with the prospect that many of us are beginning to realize that the next generation in the history of our nation. We have never considered that as a nation. We have always assumed that the next generation will be better off, better educated, and more prosperous. It is going to depend upon not just our leaders but all of us. When I talk with people who are baby boomers, who are wanting to relocate to our state, but they want to retire here in the Upstate or along our coast. I ask them why they chose South Carolina. They say well, I love your climate, I love your beaches, I love your mountains, I love your culture, I love your people. When they finally stop, I ask them to add one thing to their love list. I ask them to love our children. Because you have chosen our state, which is great. Welcome to you. If you don’t ensure our children to have it better than our generation, you are limiting South Carolina, you are limiting your chosen state, your home state. So, I don’t know. I don’t know the answer to that. But I do know that the children who are in our public schools today will determine that.

London: I don’t know if you have room for any more passion, are there any more issues you would like to address?

Rex: When I think of other things I have a passion for—a lot of them begin with “E” education, environment is another. The natural world, the environment that we have here in South Carolina is so wonderful. It’s so precious. When I mentioned about the people who say them come here they don’t come here because we have a great reputation in terms of our economic climate or they don’t come here because we have a great reputation for our education system,
or our legislative leadership or you can run down the list. Most of them come
here because of our natural environment in South Carolina. It would be terrible if
we ruined that, if we didn’t recognize what an asset that is for us. Protecting that
natural environment and making sure that we have green space, clean air, clean
water and all the things that people love about South Carolina. That’s a passion
of mine.