REGULAR SCHOOL ATTENDANCE—SOUTH CAROLINA'S URGENT NEED

Members of the Women's Council for the Common Good and Friends:

Permit me in the beginning to congratulate the Women's Council for the Common Good in conducting this three-day Institute on 'Public Affairs'. Such an Institute should furnish valuable information and much inspiration to all who are privileged to attend. I am delighted to see the leading women of our State taking an active interest in public affairs and I believe that a new day dawns for South Carolina because of this.

It is to the fine women of our State and nation that the public looks for its noble ideals and high standards. To them must be attributed making politics cleaner and public life purer. To them we look for the worthwhile things of life and their exemplary lives should be an inspiration and could well be emulated by us all. They are beacon lights who forge ahead and take the lead in matters pertaining to the welfare and upbuilding of a community.

I deem it a privilege to appear before you on this occasion and your well prepared program should attract many people here throughout the State.

The subject on which I shall speak "Regular School Attendance—South Carolina's Urgent Need" is a slight variation in wording from the subject given on the program but carries the same thought.

The greatness of a nation lies in its manhood and womanhood. It is the duty of a State to produce fine, noble citizens: men who love their home and their state, men who are courageous in war and vigilant in peace, men who are willing to shed their blood for an ideal, God-fearing men, educated men. The noblest purpose of a State should be to produce citizens like these by properly training her youth. In the face of danger or disaster on a sinking ship we would strike down anyone who attempted to save himself at the expense of a child. Children come first, not only on sinking ships but in our hearts, our homes, our schools and our churches. They should come first. Mankind can elevate itself only when the children are lifted up. Daniel Webster once said, "If we work upon marble it will perish; if we work upon brass, time will efface it; if we rear temples, they will crumble into dust; but if we work upon immortal minds, if we imbue them with principles, with the just fear of God and love of our fellow-men, we engrave on those tablets something which will brighten to all eternity."

A good government is dependent on fine men and women. These in turn are dependent upon fine boys and girls, and in order to have these we must educate them. Our young people have a right to the best educational opportunities of life. One ($1.00) Dollar invested in a young person's head should be worth more to him than putting One Thousand ($1,000.00) Dollars in his pocket. During the period of depression with its extreme wants on one side and its extreme fortunes on the other, many schools were carried down to disaster, their doors closed, their funds...
out off. It is true that we have passed through a terrible depression but we cannot afford to give up the idea of children first. We have heard a lot about the 'forgotten man' in the past several years, and there was ample reason for the feeling along this line; but, during this same period, the one whom future history will probably testify suffered the greatest injustice was the 'Forgotten Child'—the child who was born from financially embarrassed parents, undernourished during the tender years of its life, reared amidst sorrow and failures, and handicapped by proper educational opportunities.

Every child in America has a right to an adequate education—a right guaranteed by the State Constitutions and implied by Democratic government. The welfare and stability of the nation depends on the continuously effective educational system. To cripple the schools even for a year or two, means an irreparable loss in national health, stability, culture, leadership and citizenship. We must not forget the lessons of the World War—The utter helplessness of the illiterate and untrained men to cooperate effectively with others, the tragic wastefulness of poor schools or no schools at all.

Not a nation in the world today which has a large amount of illiteracy ranks as a great power. The comparative weakness of the South American Governments is largely due to its backward education. Illiteracy means waste, and it has been established that it is costing this nation almost a $1,000,000,000.00 a year. Illiteracy has no place in this great land of progress. During the past thirty years South Carolina has made considerable progress in reducing its illiteracy, and great credit for this is due to Miss Wil Lou Gray, State Supervisor of Adult Education, who has worked untiringly and unceasingly, in and out of season, to blot this curse from our State. Yet South Carolina has a greater per cent of illiteracy than any State in the Union. In 1900, 13.6% of our white population and 52.0% of our negro population with an average of 26.8% of the total population was shown to be illiterate. In 1930, 9.1% whites and 26.9% negroes was shown to be illiterate. Although this is a reduction of 5.5% in illiteracy from 1900 to 1930, yet South Carolina as a State ranks at the bottom of the other States in the Union. In 1930 Statistics show that South Carolina ranked as the 4th State (Counting District of Columbia) in white illiteracy with 5.1%, compared with 1.5% for the average for the nation. It showed that South Carolina ranked as the 49th State (Counting District of Columbia) in negro illiteracy with 26.9% compared with 16.3% for the nation. For total illiteracy of both races this places us as the 49th State (Counting the District of Columbia) with 14.9% compared with 4.3% for the nation. Shall the frightful surging billows of illiteracy sweep our innocent ones into a sea of poverty, of crime of infamy?

South Carolina is a great State. She has produced some of the greatest leaders and men in history. She has distinguished herself by martyrs unequalled in the Union. What generals more daring than Marion or more gallant than Sumter ever clashed with foe? What Statesmen more resolute than Laurens or more spirited than Pinckney ever addressed an assembly? What soldier bolder that Jasper or more daring than Hampton ever trod the battle field? Yea, what name is more significant of liberty than that of the hero John C. Calhoun? And with all of our tradition and noble ancestry, are we upholding the good name of proud South Carolina when 182,311 people or 14.9% of her total population is illiterate, and when she ranks at the bottom of the list of all the states in the Union?
Such figures as these indicate the manner in which our manhood and womanhood are being wasted in ignorance. Our State may be accumulating enormous wealth but childhood, which is the foundation of her greatness, and on which depends her future citizenship, is being deprived of its birthright. "Ill fares the land and to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates and men decay."

You might ask the question why so much illiteracy in South Carolina. The answer to this question would probably be the crying need in South Carolina today, that is, a regular school attendance law. It is startling when I tell you that 28% of the pupils of school age, that is between the ages of 6 and 17 years, are not even enrolled in school at all. It is no less than calamitous when I tell you that 30% of the pupils enrolled in school fail to make their grades. These failures can be understood, however, when you are informed that 22% of the school children are absent from school every day. Lack of textbooks, improper nourishment, and other causes contribute some to failure, but, to my mind, the biggest cause of failure is lack of attendance. Failure and lack of attendance run hand in hand. South Carolina is spending between $12,000,000.00 and $15,000,000.00 per year to educate her children, and you can readily calculate the great economic loss sustained by our counties and the State on account of the lack of proper school attendance. It means that from a mathematical standpoint we are getting 78¢ worth for every dollar we spend. It means that when we spend something over $12,000,000.00 for education we are getting about $9,000,000.00 in value. The public will support the schools so long as it deems they are efficient and performing a good service, but we must provide better school attendance, if we are to justify ourselves before the taxpayers of the State. The prevalent idea is that most of the lack of attendance is on the part of the negro but it might interest you to know that 15% of the white children are absent every day, and 27% of the negroes, giving the average of 22% as heretofore stated. With such a large per centage of our school pupils absent every day, the schools cannot perform the service to the future citizenship that they should.

The present Compulsory Education Law provides attendance at school for only four months during the entire school session, of pupils between 7 and 14 years of age. This law is antiquated, ineffective and practically useless. It should be replaced with a new law to require the pupils between 6 and 17 years of age to attend school for at least the State-Supported term of seven months, and preferably for the entire school term.

At the 1935 Session of the General Assembly the State Senate passed such a bill three different times, but it failed to receive favorable action in the House of Representatives. The bill provided for regular attendance officers in each county and appropriated $1,500.00 to the respective counties to pay the salary of an attendance officer, making a total appropriation of $69,000.00 for all of the counties in the State. We realize, of course, that one attendance officer in the big counties would not be sufficient, but this person could do the work in the smaller counties satisfactorily, and could head up the work in the big counties and consolidate forces in such a manner that an efficient job should be put over in all of the counties. $69,000.00 may sound like a large appropriation, but if it will enable us to take advantage of the $3,000,000.00 or $4,000,000.00 now being spent from which we are not receiving benefit, it would certainly be a worthwhile appropriation; then
the biggest value would be the benefits of the education the thousands of boys and girls would receive. We changed the name from 'Compulsory Attendance' to 'Regular Attendance' as we desired to get away from the idea of compelling people to send their children to school. We think that persons possessing a social approach should be selected for this work, and that they should form the connecting link between the home and the school. The bill provided, in the event of the lack of proper food or clothes or textbooks, that the attendance officer would contact the Social Agencies in the State and would endeavor to secure such necessities for the pupils in need of same.

At this point, I wish to take the opportunity to tell you that Mrs. Laurence, your President, and the representatives of the Women's Council for the Common Good appeared before the General Assembly and worked most earnestly on the regular attendance bill and performed a magnificent service. Mrs. Laurence is one of the most energetic and hardest working ladies I have ever known, and her sincere, forceful and capable personality won her many friends, and she was a potent factor in the passage of the bill through the State Senate. Mrs. Paul Leonard, Mrs. Corrie Flyler, and others also rendered valuable aid.

After the House of Representatives failed to act favorably on the Regular Attendance Bill which was sent to it three different times, the State Senate bob-tailed a bill to provide free textbooks in the first grades of the State for the next school term, and to increase the Compulsory Attendance period from four months to the State-Supported term of seven months and place the enforcement of the present law on the State Textbook Commission. The House passed this bill but the Governor still has it under consideration, and has not indicated yet whether or not he will sign it.

Although we did not get what we wanted in this matter in our first attempt, and what we felt confident was best for the State, we should not get discouraged, and on this I am reminded of that poet who wrote a little poem entitled "It's All in the State of Mind", which goes:

"If you think you are beaten, you are;
If you think you dare not, you don't;
If you'd like to win, but you think you can't;
It's almost a cinch you won't.
If you think you will lose, you've lost,
For out in the world you will find
Success begins with a fellow's will;
It's all in the state of mind."

Full many a race is lost
Ere ever a step is run;
And many a coward fails
Ere ever his work's begun.
Think big, and your deeds will grow;
Think small and you'll fail behind;
Think that you can and you will--
It's all in the state of mind.

If you think you're outclassed, you are;
You've got to think high to rise;
You've got to be sure of yourself before
You ever can win a prize.
Life's battles don't always go
To the stronger or faster man,
But soon or late the man who wins
Is the fellow who thinks he CAN."
In conclusion, let me remind you that education is an investment that pays large dividends. While many of the values of education cannot be reduced to figures or tangible measures, there are many direct evidences of the economic and social values which the State derives from its investment in education. Several years back a study was made of the relationship of expenditures between certain classes of individuals supported by public funds. The record shows that the State spent $40.65 on each child in the public schools and $811.49 for each prisoner in Penal Institutions. So which is cheaper, school or jail? Statistics show that most crime is committed by uneducated people, and especially ignorant young people. If we can get our young people in school and keep them there, the crime record of the youth will be far less than if they are turned loose upon the streets and highways; so from the standpoint of crime alone, and the cost to the State of supporting prisoners, it would pay South Carolina to pass a Regular Attendance School Law that would be effective in enrolling the 23% of the boys and girls of school age not in school at present, and in keeping in school regularly the 82% who are absent every day.

The future of education in the State is dependent to a great extent on the action of the General Assembly, and it is my sincere desire that this body be composed of farsighted citizens, men who have vision, and who are interested in our future civilization, and who will study seriously the great problems confronting our State. When I think of public office and the trust that should accompany it, I am reminded of a little poem by Josiah Gilbert Holland with which I shall close, thanking you kindly for your attention:

"God give us men! These times demand
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands;
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;
Men who possess opinions and a will;
Men who have honor; men who will not lie;

Men who can stand before a demagogue
And damn his treacherous flattering without winking;
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog
In public duty and in private thinking;

For while the rabble with their thumbworn creeds,
Their large professions and little deeds,
Mingle in selfish strife, lo, freedom weeps;
Wrong rules the land, and waiting justice sleeps;

God give us men! Men who serve not for selfish booty,
But real men, courageous, who flinch not at duty;
Men of dependable character; men of sterling worth;
Then wrongs will be redressed, and right will rule the earth.

God give us men!"