

STATE OF THE STATE RESPONSE

REP. BAKARI SELLERS

Good evening. I'm Representative Bakari Sellers of South Carolina's 90th District, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you tonight.

On behalf of the Democratic Party, I will respond to Governor Haley by offering a clear vision for the future of South Carolina. A future of opportunity and prosperity for all South Carolinians. A future where we encourage innovation, reward achievement and live up to our responsibility with long overdue investments in our public health, infrastructure, education, and safety.

These are the founding principles at the heart of our Democratic Party and the values that have sustained our state for generations. It is a commitment to the proud, hard working families of South Carolina that gives Democrats an unshakable faith not simply in who we were, or who we are, but what we can be.

Over the past year, Democrats have proposed a series of new policy initiatives that would have encouraged new growth and provided new opportunities for South Carolina's families. Our colleagues across the aisle have rebuked our attempts at partnership. Rather than endorsing policies that would have propelled our state through the 21st century, they responded with worn out slogans and dogmas of the past, creating a race to the bottom in classroom achievement and job growth.

We face real challenges in providing quality education for our children, creating new, high-paying jobs for our communities and securing a safe, 21st Century infrastructure for all our citizens. So tonight, I will ask for your help in pressing our state leadership to rise to that challenge and focus their energies not on driving wedge issues based on superficial distinctions for the next election, but on building solutions for a new generation.

In South Carolina, a once-proud network of public schools and technical colleges, due to years of disregard and neglect, today ranks among the nation's worst. Our K-12 schools are currently ranked 42nd, and our classrooms along I-95 have been neglected for so long that they form a "Corridor of Shame." Our best and brightest students in these communities are being locked out of their futures by empty talking points and misguided rhetoric.

To tackle this challenge, Democrats have proposed making investments in our school systems a top priority. Last year we worked with our Federal partners to bring \$144 million in direct funding to our public schools. Rather than join us in leveraging this opportunity into achievement, Governor Haley and Superintendent of Education Zais put the desires of the Republican National Committee ahead of the needs of South Carolina's children. Make no mistake: the Governor's and Superintendent's willingness to trade our state's future for short term political favor will be felt in every classroom in the state.

We believe that it is no coincidence that our most under-performing schools are often found in our most unhealthy communities. Study after study has shown that early childhood education

makes a difference in educational achievement and health outcomes that last a lifetime. That is why we must establish a Universal 4 year old kindergarten program. Democrats have further proposed increasing funding for early childhood education: funding that has either remained flat or declined every year since the late 1990s. Furthermore, a 21st Century Scholars program must be developed to support students who uphold their end of the bargain by making good grades and staying out of trouble with the opportunity to go to college right here in South Carolina. In an “Opportunity Society,” if you have the skills and are willing to work hard, you should be able to go college, even if your family cannot afford it.

We also recognize that every child deserves an effective teacher, therefore we must have a plan that would create new incentives for recruiting first-class teachers into our classrooms, evaluate teacher performance, and pay our teachers competitive salaries.

Democrats have consistently sought the Governor’s leadership on these issues, but have been disappointed to find that Governor Haley is either unwilling or unable to join us in the fight for our children’s futures.

The second area where South Carolinians demand a renewed focus is job creation.

We understand that any effort to create new, quality jobs that pay livable wages must begin with fostering private sector partnerships and creating new incentives for businesses that build and expand in South Carolina. Despite the fact that South Carolina’s unemployment rate of 9.9 percent continues to outpace the national average; that many of our main streets remain largely

empty; and that our small businesses are struggling just to survive, we have found our Republican colleagues resistant to any policy that would promote a new jobs agenda for the 21st century.

In response to this assertion, Republicans are likely to mention the Fortune 500 company Amazon. However, the fact remains that last year our Republican colleagues buckled to overwhelming pressure to build this new round-the-clock distribution center near Cayce, SC. Rather than taking the lead on this deal that will create 1,249 full time jobs and 2,500 part-time jobs, the Governor opposed bringing Amazon and the jobs it would create to South Carolina. This is yet another example of a failure to lead.

On a greater effort to prime our economy for sustained, long-term growth with broadly shared gains for the middle class, Democrats have found our colleagues largely absent. When we proposed forward looking measures to boost our economy, we were met with the worn slogan of tax cuts for the wealthy. When we proposed building the infrastructure that businesses need to move their goods to market, Governor Haley and many of our Republican colleagues have stood in the way of making our state stronger and more secure.

All across our state, South Carolina's roads and bridges are crumbling. Rather than follow the examples of Charleston Mayor Joe Riley and Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin who have brought millions of dollars in critical infrastructure investment to South Carolina or Florence Mayor Stephen Wukela meeting the people's need for new highway, water and sewer infrastructure, the Republican party line has consistently criticized efforts to invest in our state

through an Infrastructure Bank. Investment in infrastructure is not frivolous government spending. It is, however, an important foundation to the economic engine of our State.

Finally, when the people of South Carolina needed our Governor to stand with us in the fight to boost the Port of Charleston's competitiveness—a position that was once unrivaled on the east coast—the Governor let us down, apparently content to allow the Port of Savannah to continue cutting into our market and expanding at Charleston's expense. The Port of Charleston is of great economic importance to the state, and the Governor's failure to lead on this issue has had huge negative consequences to our largest employers. Leadership means that regardless of political party, the interests of our great state must be paramount.

My fellow South Carolinians, our families are facing a new age of unprecedented challenges and the obstacles before us seem tough to comprehend much less conquer. Perhaps it is because the road ahead is so daunting that the Democratic Party is now more than ever committed to the spirit embodied in our state motto "Dum Spiro Spero" While I Breathe, I Hope.

It is a hope for the young man graduating college this year who doesn't know where or when he'll find a good job.

It is a hope for the teacher reaching into her own pocket to buy supplies for her students.

...hope for neighborhoods struggling with flooding roads and bridges long past their prime.

...hope for every parent who wants more for their children than a minimally adequate classroom and a minimum wage job.

...hope for every citizen who thinks that it's time for leaders who say what they mean and mean what they say.

...hope for a people ready to move beyond a politics of white and black, red and blue and into a government of, by, and for the people.

Our time is now and we must recommit ourselves to shaping the destiny South Carolina deserves in these difficult yet hopeful times. Faced with the daunting challenges ahead, I am confident that, standing together with one breath and one hope, we will prevail.

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

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