PULSE: A special opportunity

Remarks by Coker College President Robert Wyatt, 2.21.11

Thank you Dr. Zais.

Thank you for your presence, for your remarks this morning, and especially for the guidance you bring not only to our efforts in Hartsville today, but to forward-leaning educators and business leaders across South Carolina who daily aspire, as do we, to bring greater scholarship and success to our citizens.

As president of Coker College, an institution whose birthright, is rooted in these same two ideals, I am humbled by the privilege I have to work in collaboration with state leaders and colleague-role models in the Darlington County School District, the South Carolina Governors School for Science and Mathematics, and one of the nation’s ten most trustworthy companies, Sonoco, to improve the educational achievements of students in Hartsville.
Some of you may know that Coker College has, along with most institutions of higher learning who wish to exist a decade from now, been doing a good deal of soul-searching lately.

I prefer to tell my wife, Nancy, that it is “strategic planning.”

Whatever we call it, since the day we moved to Hartsville, I have listened and asked and read and prayed about the work we are doing here.

What are we really doing, what is our core enterprise and why must it prosper?

Nearly a year ago, at my inauguration as the 16th president of Coker College, I stood before friends and family, peers from the academy and from the business world, and I pledged myself and the colleagues I serve, to prepare our students not for the world as it is, but for the world that will be.
I pledged to help redefine ready, to turn the tables on the future so that our young people turn from self-doubt and stand prepared to command their success, regardless of what their future holds.

But I knew then, as today, that our work could not be done alone, that Coker’s birthright in Hartsville springs from this community. Its success is shared with and the direct result of collaboration with students, parents, alumni, community members, educators and business leaders. And we have much to learn.

**So for me, today represents a special, personal opportunity to ensure that Coker College models what we ask of our students, that we, ourselves, are true to our strategic commitment to “Redefining Ready.”**

Through PULSE we will re-define what it means to be a community partner, re-define what it means to serve, re-define with discipline and a mind ever-ready to re-learn what it means to prepare young men and women to lead in the future they will create.
As I moved past the fanfare of my inauguration, I was drawn forward and back to a partner I have long admired.

Dr. James Comer, the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University, often called a giant of education, has spent more than a half-century attending carefully to one objective: helping children achieve greater school success.

I’d seen first-hand the difference that Dr. Comer’s School Development Program made in Springfield, Missouri, where, partnering with Drury University, my previous institution, the scores of second graders at Boyd-Berry Elementary School, the district’s lowest-performing school, soared.

The number of students, for example, whose language arts scores were in the nation’s top 40 percentile during the first year of the program had nearly doubled by Year 3.
And student discipline improved even more dramatically. The year the program began, about 10 percent of the students received out-of-school suspensions, and by Year 3 that number had shrunk to just 2 percent.

So, I along with my colleagues in Hartsville, turned to Dr. Comer in the hope that a Yale-Coker partnership might serve as a catalyst for achieving our shared aspirations in Hartsville.

Today, I am thrilled to announce that Yale-Coker partnership – a commitment that our two institutions will work together to strengthen Coker’s teacher-education programs and create professional development opportunities for local teachers – and to share in celebrating the news that thanks to the generous support of Sonoco and the committed leadership of the Darlington County School District, the internationally acclaimed achievement of Dr. Comer – his School Development Program – will be implemented here in Hartsville.
At the luncheon that follows this morning’s conversation, Ms. Camille Cooper will share details of how the Comer Process works. But for now, I’ll sketch an overview. In its simplest form, we might consider the process a matrix – three teams, doing three things, led by three guiding principles.

We have the School Planning and Management Team, the Student and Staff Support Team, and the Parent Team. These groups, in collaboration, work to create a comprehensive school plan, design and conduct staff development, and assess and modify the plan as needed to ensure continuous development.

Guiding their efforts are commitments to decisions by consensus, no-fault problem solving, and collaboration.

And while the School Development Program is naturally center stage here today, through PULSE the educational achievements gained in elementary school will be intentionally enriched in middle school and high school as well. In this work, too, Coker is committed to serve.
Partnering with the Governor’s School for Science and Mathematics, we will offer enrichment programs to talented middle school and high schools students.

Coker College will provide college credit courses to eligible high school students in fine arts programs including art, design, music, theater and dance.

Students will benefit from the mentorship and teaching of Coker’s distinguished faculty, and have the privilege of learning in extraordinary facilities such as the Elizabeth Boatwright Coker Performing Arts Center, the newly re-modeled Margaret Coker Lawton Music Building and the Gladys C. Fort Art Building.

To share more about how the PULSE program will benefit students in Hartsville, I’d like to ask my friend and colleague, the President of the South Carolina Governor’s School for Science and Mathematics, to come to the podium.

Some of you know that Dr. Brockman came to Hartsville following a successful career in chemical research with Dupont and that he will celebrate his 10th year of service at the helm of the Governor’s school this May.
For those who don’t know him, it is my privilege to introduce a man deeply committed to his family, to our community, to scholarship, and to the students of South Carolina, Dr. Murray Brockman.