NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

McCall to Stress Education and Recall His Roots in Speech Ratcheting Up Campaign

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

ALBANY, Nov. 26 — Harking back to his own poor-child-made-good life story, H. Carl McCall, in the first major speech of his run for governor, will promise to make education the centerpiece of his campaign.

"Education was my salvation," says a text of the speech, which Mr. McCall, the state comptroller, plans to deliver Tuesday at New York University and again here in Albany. "Without it, I would not be standing before you today."

It goes on to make some bold pledges. "I guarantee that within four years of my taking office, 75 percent of the students in this state will pass the standardized tests in English and math," the speech says. It also vows that Mr. McCall, on his "first day in office," will abolish the state's arcane and politically charged way of distributing school aid.

Mr. McCall's speech also promises to demand accountability from teachers and administrators, and it blames the Republican incumbent, Gov. George E. Pataki, for some of the public schools' woes.

The speech assails the governor for a flagging upstate economy, an issue used to great effect by Senators Charles E. Schumer and Hillary Rodham Clinton, a pair of Democrats who fared well with upstate voters, once the state's most reliable Republican bloc.

Mr. McCall will also accuse Mr. Pataki of lacking fiscal discipline, citing chronically late state budgets, rising debt and a current budget that all involved have described as a train wreck.

But perhaps the most striking aspect of the speech is its use of a compelling and varied personal history that McCall partisans have long called his greatest political asset. The child of a single mother on welfare, he became an ordained minister, an ambassador to the United Nations, a vice president of Citicorp and the first black person to hold statewide office in New York. It is a history he has been reluctant to trumpet at times; Mr. McCall's own advisers joke that when he was elected comptroller in 1994, many of those who voted for him did not know he was black.

"My mother raised me and my five sisters all by herself," the speech says. "Times were tough. We didn't have a lot. But she told me that if I studied hard and worked hard, education would open doors of opportunity and make just about anything possible. My mother was right."

For much of this year, Mr. McCall's allies worried that his campaigning was too subdued, as his Democratic primary rival, Andrew M. Cuomo, the former housing secretary, and Mr. Pataki consistently drew more attention to themselves. Polls have shown Mr. McCall trailing in the primary, and both Democrats have run behind Mr. Pataki.

Mr. McCall's strategists counseled patience, insisting that the race would not really begin until attention shifted from the New York City mayoral contest. Mr. McCall stepped up the pace of his campaign in late summer, but he was largely ignored in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Tuesday's speech, his advisers say, reflects the start of a more intensive effort by Mr. McCall to put himself in the spotlight, and to draw contrasts with Mr. Pataki.

"The Pataki administration has allowed a huge educational canyon to form in this state," it says, between have and have-not districts. And, it adds, "New York has the most inequitable school aid distribution in America."

The speech attacks the governor for fighting a lawsuit charging that the state did not adequately finance New York City schools.

That is a potentially powerful issue, but it carries the risk that Mr. McCall will be seen as the city's standard-bearer, traditionally the kiss of death upstate.

His remarks could also be heard as an echo of Fernando Ferrer's theme, in the mayoral race, of standing up for "the other New York" — a stance that was criticized as racially and economically divisive.

Mr. McCall's speech cites his experience as the former president of New York City's Board of Education, but Mr. Pataki's team is prepared to turn that on the comptroller, blaming him for the city schools' failings.

The pledge to have 75 percent of students pass standardized tests is also likely to raise eyebrows.

On the assessment tests that all New York fourth graders take, 60 percent passed the English portion this year, and 69 percent passed in math.

NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2001

CITY_21MC100_01183326l

NYC-WTC_000415158