Speech - March 14, 2002

Text of Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks on State of Education in Texas
(NOTE: Gov. Perry frequently deviates from prepared text.)

Thank you. Today I am honored to be in the presence of so many supporters of education, including education innovator Gail Fallon. Gail, thank you for being here.

Gail and I agree that education is our state's highest priority.

Texas is blessed to have so many dedicated educators making a difference in Texas schools. I see many of those leaders in education here today.

Anita and I are proud of your work. In fact, every school day we show ultimate faith in the job our educators do by sending our two children to a Texas public school.

I have invited you here today to discuss the state of education, and the future of education, in the Texas of the 21st Century.

I believe in a simple premise: every child...regardless of financial means, where they live, or the sound of their last name...is entitled to the best education possible.

Education gives power to the life and hopes of every child. Education means empowerment. It means opportunity. It means a brighter future.

Now, with the political season upon us, some candidates are trying to prop up their campaigns by tearing down Texas schools and Texas teachers.

But as they say out in the rural parts where I grew up, those claims are "all hat and no cattle."

The facts speak clearly: Texas public schools, and Texas students, are making outstanding progress.

Since 1995, the number of recognized and exemplary schools has tripled, while the number of low-performing schools has declined by 60 percent.

We have seen significant and measurable progress in reading. We have banned social promotion, and since 1999, more than 40 percent of all new state funds have been dedicated for public and higher education.

Education leaders around the country refer to our progress as the "Texas Miracle."

And children of every background, every ethnic group, are a part of the improvement.

Our Hispanic fourth grade students are first in the nation in math, second in writing, and ninth in reading. Our African-American fourth grade students are first in the nation in math and writing, and tenth in reading. Our fourth grade Anglo students are first in math, and second in reading and writing.

We have broken the mold. The old way of thinking held that no matter what our schools did - some children could not learn, some would excel, and the majority would be muddled
in mediocrity. That way of thinking was wrong.

Texas educators, parents and policymakers have shown that all students can do better with motivated teachers, a high-standards curriculum, effective assessment tools and proven teaching methods.

We have succeeded because we have followed simple principles:

Parents, teachers, and local leaders know what is best for local schools and their children. High standards encourage high achievement. And a strong system of accountability brings out the greater potential of our children and our schools.

As long as I am governor, the state of Texas will not stand for mushy curriculum, weaker standards, or a system of toothless accountability. And we will not advance children who are not ready for the next grade, because to do so is to doom them to almost certain failure.

As we look to the future, we should not retreat from proven reforms based on high standards and accountability. Instead, we should build on that progress in five important areas where we must make improvement.

First, we must do a better job of preparing our young Texans for school before they ever set foot in a classroom. I call this giving our children an Early Start.

Second, we must do more to keep students from dropping out of school, and dropping out on their future.

Third, we must provide teachers greater support so they are empowered to do their jobs better.

Fourth, we must focus greater attention on science instruction: the most dynamic and ever-changing subject taught in our schools.

And fifth, we must invest in human capital by better preparing our teachers to incorporate technology in classroom instruction.

Let me discuss these five areas in greater detail.

Too often, children begin kindergarten already behind. We have taken steps in recent years to expand pre-kindergarten programs, and to adopt a pre-K curriculum.

But too many parents are not aware of the learning basics their children should know before starting school.

Children enrolled in Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs should get an Early Start.

Through the creation of a new Early Start initiative, all of our youngest Texans will benefit from early childhood learning programs that are in sync with the state’s existing pre-kindergarten standards.

I would like to provide public and private daycare facilities, faith-based groups, and all pre-K programs the basic curriculum materials that will help prepare children for school. And I would like to make those standards more widely available on the Internet, so parents can measure progress at home, or at a library.

I support report cards at pre-K programs so parents can more actively participate in and
monitor their child’s early learning progress.

And just as every child learns to crawl before they walk, they learn to speak before they learn to read. There is substantial research and science on early childhood vocabulary development, phonics skills and language acquisition skills that our pre-K programs must utilize.

Once we ensure that all children are ready to learn, we must make sure they stay in school and continue to learn. For too long we have debated dropout definitions and dropout statistics, and spent too little time focusing on statewide strategies to prevent dropouts.

A child who falls behind is a child more likely to drop out. A student who must work, or who must meet extraordinary family obligations, also struggles to keep up.

Whatever obstacles to learning our children face, we must empower them to succeed. Students who drop out of school face a future of unfulfilled promise, and our state pays the price for it.

Here are the facts: Twenty-two percent of Americans over the age of 25 without a high school degree live in poverty. Half of all Texas welfare recipients have less than 12 years of education. And a high school dropout is four times as likely to be unemployed as a Texan with a bachelor’s degree.

My dropout prevention plan will emphasize proven strategies to help schools with high dropout rates.

We will provide flexible class schedules and course options for students who must work or care for a child. We will make additional alternative learning environments available, and increase our commitment to the summer school, after-school and mentoring programs at-risk children need. And we will provide greater emphasis on the role counselors and mentors must have in schools with high dropout rates.

High school graduation is no longer a goal, it is a necessity. A student that graduates from high school will earn more, have greater opportunities, and will lead a better life...especially if they go on to college.

It is time that we do for science what we have done for reading and math in Texas. A student who knows science is better prepared for college, and the technology jobs of the future.

Yet two-thirds of Texas teachers believe schools should place greater emphasis on science instruction. Clearly there are exceptions to that. As I witnessed last year, Booker T. Washington High School in Houston has an impressive robotics team that is tapping the scientific imagination of students.

I believe we must train Master Science Teachers who can better prepare students, and mentor teaching peers.

We need science academies for teachers to expand their knowledge of the core subject areas of science, while learning about advances in the ever-changing field of scientific discovery. We need to spotlight scientific achievement in the classroom, and we must close the science gap in Texas where male eighth grade students score 20 points higher than their female classmates.

Though Texas has taken the lead in putting technology into the classroom, we have not
done enough to ensure teachers have the support they need to fully utilize these wonderful new tools.

We must change the culture in education starting at the top. Superintendents and principals should be trained in the use of classroom technology tools so they understand what teachers need. We can expand the technology leadership academy funded by the Gates Foundation to ensure that educational leadership means technology leadership for our schools.

We must make sure teachers get proper training, and continuous tech support when they run into a technology obstacle.

We must look to some of the newest tools, such as broadband, multimedia and wireless technology.

The computer revolution in our schools can also help identify and correct learning gaps before students get behind and discouraged.

We should use the interactive capability of the Internet to bring on-line diagnostic tests to the classroom.

And I want to take that one step forward. My vision is to one day eliminate paper versions of the TAKS test, and use interactive Internet technology to test students on-line.

In addition, we should further explore virtual charter schools, electronic textbooks, and other technology tools that can improve the learning environment.

Lastly, we must improve the classroom environment so teachers can focus on one objective: teaching.

I am proud of what we have done over the last three years for teachers. We provided a record $3,000 pay raise, a historic statewide health insurance plan, incentives for excellence in math and reading, assistance for mortgage payments, and new Teach for Texas Grants to encourage college students to pursue a teaching career.

But we can do more to build professional prestige. I support continuing to reward excellence in teaching. We must provide incentives for teachers who develop an expertise, who mentor peers and who develop professionally.

Good professional development requires access to continuing education, support from administrators, and easy access to peer mentors who can help our younger teachers gain confidence and remain in the classroom.

Mentoring programs for teachers are as critical as the training they receive to become teachers. It is much like a doctor performing a residency.

We know that a great many students arrive to the classroom without the school supplies they need...and teachers generously reach into their pockets on behalf of those children.

I believe it is time the state of Texas reimbursed our generous teachers who buy school supplies!

We also know that for many teachers, the greatest professional fear they have is the threat of being sued.
The time has come for lawsuit reform so teachers are empowered to properly handle disruptive students, and spend more time accomplishing what they set out to do...which is to expand the potential of young minds.

In Texas, we have come a long way in building better schools in a relatively short period of time. We must continue on the same path and build upon that remarkable progress.

We must go to every length, and make every effort, to educate every child. Educating every child means advancing every dream.

We cannot give up on any young Texan, no matter what learning obstacles confront them.

That means focusing first and foremost on making sure our children get an early start, and finish their education. Along with that commitment, we must provide greater support to teachers so they can maximize their talents in the classroom. And we must utilize new technology tools, and improve science instruction, if our children are to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

Education is the key to prosperity - our greatest hope for a better tomorrow. If we ensure our children start on track, and stay on track, they will be prepared for college, and the opportunities of the future.

Our every action today must be worthy of their tomorrow. Thank you, and God bless Texas.