Thank you John.

Margaret (Moran, state president), it is good to see you again, as well as Rick Dovalina, who recently joined me in welcoming the president of Bolivia to Texas.

In case you hadn't heard, the Bolivian president, Jorge Quiroga, is a graduate of Texas A&M...which means we have not only taken over the governor's mansion, but a South American country!

John Hernandez, it's good to see you as well... and it's good to once again be in the company of men and women who do so much for our state - Texans who build local businesses and create new jobs...who do important work in our communities...who know the importance of strong families and vibrant neighborhoods...the proud, talented and dedicated members of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

Ever since the founders of this organization first gathered in Corpus Christi 73 years ago, LULAC has been a force for greater empowerment, compassionate citizenship and social progress.

I want to commend our honorees this evening who have upheld the tradition of LULAC through a devotion to service. Actions speak louder than words, and your actions for Texas have spoken volumes.

With the political season upon us, some have asked me whether I would be willing to debate my opponent in Spanish. But I believe Spanish is too beautiful a language for Texans to suffer through an hour of me speaking it. I'm still working through "ser y estar."

But what is most important, when spoken in any language, are issues and ideas.

That's why I have put forward numerous concrete, detailed proposals to improve Texas. I have unveiled plans to improve public education, to make higher education more accessible, to make quality health care more available, to lower the cost of homeowner's insurance premiums, to move people and products more effectively with the Trans Texas Corridor, and to ensure a safe and abundant supply of Texas water.

In addition to keeping focused on the issues, I have reached out to Texans of different perspectives and strong qualifications, asking them to serve in positions of leadership.

My record speaks to that clearly. I have always appointed the best and brightest to serve in state government...good Texans like Economic Development Chairman Massey Villareal, U.T. Regent Bob Estrada, U of H Regent Raul Gonzalez, Department of Criminal Justice Board member Adrian Arriaga, Parks and Wildlife Commissioner Donato Ramos, Building and Procurement Commissioner Noe Fernandez, Supreme Court Justice Xavier Rodriguez, Appeals Court Justice Eva Guzman, and so many more.

I was proud to recently name Becky Armendariz Klein chair of the PUC...she is doing a
good job implementing electric deregulation that has led to lower rates for Texas consumers...especially for Texans living on fixed incomes.

And it was my great honor to appoint an individual of impeccable qualifications...a man who has served as a lifelong educator with a proven record of reform...the first Hispanic to serve as Commissioner of Education, Dr. Felipe Alanis.

Each one of these individuals brings the highest qualifications to state government, and I am proud they have answered the call to serve.

An issue of great importance to our future is making sure more Texans have access to the tools of technology. In some respects, Texas has taken the national lead in increasing access to technology by investing hundreds of millions of dollars through the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund to wire our classrooms.

But we must continue to bridge the gap between those who have technology, and those who do not, because technology use and proficiency is critical to preparing our youngest Texans for the opportunities of the future.

My focus as governor will be to eliminate opportunity gaps wherever they exist...whether it is a technology gap, an education gap or a health care gap.

We must say to the young man or woman from the Fifth Ward of Houston, the barrios of San Antonio, or a colonia along the border: "you are the future of this state, and the hope of tomorrow. And we are going to do everything we can in our power to make sure you are healthy, educated, and safe in your community."

That is a philosophy and a commitment that runs deep, all the way back to my roots, and a place called Paint Creek.

It was there that I learned strong values...values that many of you identify with: that neighbors help neighbors...that families stick together through good times and the bad...that your word is your bond, and that your reputation is more important than your street address.

I went to the Paint Creek School where, as a member of a class of 13 students, I am proud to tell you I graduated in the top 10 of my class.

The event that changed my life was the opportunity to attend college. My sister and I were the first generation in my family to attend college.

That is why I recently proposed a $20 million "First Generation" competitive grant program that gives our colleges and universities an incentive to attract students from families with no college history.

There was a day in Texas when a high school degree was good enough. That day has passed us by. There should not be one child in this state who thinks college is not for them simply because mom and dad didn't go or couldn't go.

That's also why I have put forward a proposal to revamp the College Access Loan Program...also known as Hinson-Hazlewood...so that an additional 25,000 Texans can get college loans, and at zero interest.

These ideas build on the tremendous success of the TEXAS Grant Program...an idea I worked on with a bipartisan group of legislators that now helps 100,000 Texans of modest means afford college. The TEXAS Grant Program has been especially beneficial to
our young Hispanic scholars who come from homes with limited financial means.

From humble beginnings often come the most vivid of dreams. What allows Texans to live their dreams is a good education.

Before a young Texan can go to college, he or she must be ready for college.

In Texas we have raised standards, improved accountability and focused on basics like reading and math. We passed an historic teacher pay raise, and a statewide teacher health insurance plan.

Because of these reforms, our children are setting their sights higher, and achieving more.

Children of every background 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.

Recently, the TEA reported improvement among high school sophomores taking TAAS exit tests - improvements among every ethnic group. African American student scores are up 10 points, Hispanic student scores are up 7 points and Anglo student scores are up 3 points.

My education plan builds on our successes. It involves five chief components.

First, we must do a better job of preparing 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, a field critical to preparing students for the jobs of the future.

And fifth, we must invest in the professional development of educators so they can fully utilize technology in the classroom.

In Texas, we have made major investments in classroom technology. The next step is to make sure teachers have the training and support to use it. Otherwise, the only sure outcome from better classroom technology is a higher electric bill.

If our teachers have the training and support they need to use technology tools, such as the Internet, on-line diagnostic tests, and leading edge programs like multi-media, ultimately our children will learn more, and they will be more proficient in technology...which will obviously help bridge the digital divide.

Let me say a brief word about my focus on dropout prevention.

My plan is about young Texans like Amanda Gonzales, a dropout recovery student at Jefferson High in San Antonio.
Amanda was not raised in the best home environment...her mother served time in prison. At the young age of 16, she became a teen mother. For a while, she dropped out of school, and she faced a lifetime of unfulfilled promise.

But because of a good dropout recovery program at Jefferson High, she's back in the classroom learning, and I believe on track for better things in life.

There was real pride in the tears her father shed the day I visited her classroom, and she shared her story.

Much can be accomplished when people are given second chances in life. In Texas, every dream counts, and every child matters. A child who drops out of school drops out of life.

A significant part of my education plan is aimed at keeping at-risk students in school.

My plan includes new mentoring, summer school and after-school programs that specialize in helping children who are at risk of dropping out. My plan also expands the new Ninth Grade Initiative to fund early intervention programs for students in other grades so we are not fighting this important battle too late in the case of some students.

Third, the Texas Education Agency is establishing a Dropout Prevention Division that focuses on this problem...and Dr. Alanis is a proven dropout recovery expert.

Fourth, because some students have special needs and considerations, such as work and family obligations, my plan encourages schools to provide flexible class schedules that will meet the needs of these students.

And lastly, it increases the number of guidance counselors to get students the extra help they need to stay on track and stay in school.

One dropout is too many. We must make every effort to keep our children on the road to opportunity so they can cross the bridge from hope to achievement.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to share my ideas with you about education...the most important issue facing Texas. I want to thank you for your love for America and Texas, and your active participation in our democracy.

Democracy finds its voice not just in the words of timeless documents like the Constitution, but in the daily activism and participation of people who love freedom, and who care about tomorrow.

Texas is enriched by its many diverse voices...and those diverse voices achieve greater empowerment when candidates and partys cannot take their support for granted.

At the end of the day, despite some differences, there is more that unites us than could ever tear us apart.

If you think about it, we have a lot in common. We all want our children to succeed, and to be able to live their dreams. We all want to live in safe neighborhoods with good schools and vibrant job opportunities. We share a common love for this state and nation, and a common pride in making it the best place in the world to live.

So let me close with a final thought. On that terrible September 11th day, when our nation was attacked, I was moved by something that was very apparent among the people of New York.
On that day, as people rushed from the scene of danger, and others rushed into it to save lives, some people were so covered with dust that you literally could not determine their race or ethnicity.

But it didn't matter, because in that moment of tragedy, we were reminded of an important fact...we are all of one race...the human race. And we are one people...the American people...standing together as one nation under God.

We may be Hispanic, Black, Anglo, Asian, Native American...We may be first generation or 5th generation...we may be Christian, Jewish or Muslim...but we’re all Americans, and we’re all Texans.

Our every action today must be worthy of the Texas we want our children to inherit. Let us bind together to pursue the common good. And let us ensure that every child has the opportunity to realize the full potential of freedom.

Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless this Texas we all love.