ARLINGTON - To the many educators in attendance today, school administrators, school board members and our hardworking teachers, I want to say how grateful I am for the sacrifices you make for our children. You are making a difference every day, and our purpose for gathering today is to discuss how the state can further help you in educating our children.

I also want to recognize business leaders like Erle Nye and Bob Estrada, as well as the staff and consultants working with the Governor's Business Council who have helped us organize this College Ready Summit: Justin Yancey, Marina Walne and Vance McMahan. And I want to thank the members of the business community who have accepted our invitation to be here today.

Our students represent the future workforce of Texas, and our businesses and entrepreneurs will depend upon public education to produce highly-skilled and talented Texans that can fuel the economy of the future.

Texas is facing a great challenge. As we usher in an era of higher standards, tougher tests and a more rigorous curriculum in our schools, we must do all we can to ensure more students graduate from high school, more high school graduates attend college, and more students graduate prepared to succeed in college.

As governor, I have dedicated my service to two primary objectives: improving the climate for job creation in Texas, and improving the learning environment in Texas classrooms. Education and job creation are the twin pillars upon which we can build a Texas of unlimited opportunity.

There is no better job creation tool than an educated child. Education is critical to meeting the demands of the 21st Century marketplace, and a strong economy and job creation are critical to sustaining needed investments in our classrooms.

The students sitting in our classrooms today represent nothing less than the very future of our state. They will either be the high-paid, highly-skilled workforce of tomorrow, or they will be confined to a lifetime of limited opportunity because they have developed limited labor skills.

Texas high schools are the bridge between vast potential and the realization of that potential. If we ensure more high school students are "college ready," we will go a long way toward fulfilling the goal of ensuring more Texans are also "job ready."

Educators in our high schools can be proud of the progress we have made since 1994. During the era of the TAAS test, passing rates rose by 32 points from 53 percent to 85 percent. Our schools have benefited from more than $6 billion in additional state funding; a renewed focus on the teaching of core subjects like reading, math and science; and a system of accountability that identifies pockets of failure and provides strong incentives for improvement.

And record teacher pay raises mean teachers in Texas today, on average, make $9,600
more than they did just four years ago. We have focused more resources on reading and math in the early education years so that students are better prepared for the harder disciplines they will encounter in high school.

But the fact is, for all the gains we have made in Texas high schools, we have two tremendous challenges we must address: Texas must keep more students in school, and we must improve the passage rate among 11th graders who failed portions of the 10th grade TAKS test.

These two challenges have risen to the forefront today because we have taken two important and necessary actions: we have required students to master a tougher curriculum incorporated in a harder new test, and we have ended the destructive and discredited practice of social promotion.

The 10th grade TAKS results pointed to storm clouds on the near horizon. There were more than 1,000 high school campuses with a passage rate below 50 percent on the 10th grade TAKS. And barely more than one in three of our Hispanic students, African-American students and economically disadvantaged students passed all sections of the TAKS.

Now, there is a heated debate about how we should respond to this challenge. But let there be no confusion about where I come down: I will not support lowering standards, or weakening our system of accountability, so that we can advance students who are not ready for the next grade, the next level of education, and the great test we call life.

We will not back away from the requirement that high school students be able to pass the graduation exit test simply because the test is harder. The fact is the TAKS test measures what high school graduates need to know. We can't lower the bar to raise performance, and we cannot send the wrong message to our children: that we are going to give up on them instead of giving them the help that they need.

I, for one, am not willing to give up on any child. Every child matters. Every child has a future, and every child is deserving of the best education possible.

That is why we have created the $130 million Texas High School Project in partnership with the Gates Foundation, the Dell Foundation, the Communities Foundation of Texas, and other generous benefactors.

With roughly $65 million put forward by private foundations, and another $65 million put forward by the State of Texas, we are focusing on underperforming schools and students that struggle within those schools. Underperforming schools can apply for state funding from a $20 million early intervention program administered by the Texas Education Agency.

Schools can also apply for funding from a separate, $5 million dropout prevention program. In a matter of days, the TEA will be announcing awards from this fund for school districts in various regions of our state. This additional funding can put more counselors in schools where there is a large dropout problem, or be used to develop dropout prevention programs within those schools based on proven models of success.

Campuses with a low TAKS passage rate that receive early intervention grants will also be eligible for funding from the private foundations participating in the Texas High School Project. Private foundation dollars will be used to redesign underperforming high schools, with an emphasis on restructuring learning environments so students benefit from smaller campuses and smaller class sizes.
Private foundation funds will go toward the creation of new schools...including those that focus on math, science and technology...and will also be used to develop "early college high schools" that not only allow students to earn a high school diploma, but either an associate's degree or two years of college credit too.

Our focus is not only on certain underperforming schools, but on giving every student at risk of failure new tools to succeed. Starting this school year, every high school student that has failed the TAKS will receive an individualized graduation plan prepared at the local level by their school, and a personalized study guide provided by the state.

Beginning next year, the ninth grade class that will graduate in 2008 will be the first that benefits from the curriculum change that makes the recommended program the standard curriculum in Texas schools.

This college-prep curriculum is essential to ensuring more students earn a diploma that certifies they are indeed ready for college. Students that take either the recommended or distinguished achievement program score, on average, 102 points higher on the SAT college entrance exam than their counterparts who take the basic curriculum.

In a state as great as Texas, we should not have to spend $174 million on remedial college coursework as we did in the last biennium. Switching to a college-prep curriculum in our high schools will ensure more students are prepared to pass the TAKS, prepared to succeed on the college boards, and prepared for the first day they set foot on a college campus.

I also believe that while we have done a good job in Texas of ensuring more students meet the minimum standards, we can do much more to ensure more students strive to exceed the highest standards.

Over the coming months, as I discuss new education reform proposals, one of the centerpieces of my plan will involve new incentives for schools to cultivate a culture of excellence in Texas classrooms.

We want to reward schools that stretch the potential of their student body. We must reach those students who too often get lost in the middle...students who are neither low-performing, nor taking advanced coursework...but who have the potential to succeed in advanced classes and on tests like the Advanced Placement tests if they are motivated and pushed by their schools and parents.

And we must change the culture all across Texas so that attending college is the expectation, not the exception to the rule.

Too many students think college is not for them because mom and dad didn't go...or because they have limited financial means. That's exactly why we passed programs like the $324 million TEXAS Grant Program, and increased its funding last session despite tough budgetary times.

We must send a message to Texans of all walks of life, of all ethnic and racial backgrounds: It's not where you come from that matters, but where you are going - and college will help you get there.

The average lifetime earnings of a college graduate exceed the lifetime earnings of a Texan with a high school degree by $1.2 million. That gap is profoundly widened when a Texan drops out of school.

The education gap that exists today is simply the opportunity gap by another name. The
The state of Texas should be in the business of tearing down barriers to opportunity by declaring our colleges and universities wide open to the best and brightest of all walks of life.

We are here today because we know there are models for successful high schools that cannot be simply explained by a community's affluence...but instead by a community's commitment. There are school districts all across Texas with campuses that defy expectations and succeed despite teaching a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students - Galena Park, Hidalgo, Eagle Pass and Harlandale ISD all come to mind.

Those schools often succeed because they have dynamic leadership at the top, they are innovative in the classroom, and they ignore conventional wisdom that says some children can't learn. Vibrant high schools not only inspire our students to learn their lesson plans...they stir their imaginations, and point their hearts to great pursuits.

I can still picture myself sitting in a classroom at the Paint Creek Rural School, not sure about what exactly I would do with my life, but feeling inspired to go to college and make a difference not only because our teachers cared about our test results, but because our teachers cared about us as people.

My sister and I were the first generation in my family to go to college. We began an important new family tradition. Texas needs a lot more first generation college students who are not only awakened to the possibility of a college education, but who are prepared for that rigorous challenge.

With a harder curriculum and a tougher graduation test, we have taken two giant steps toward preparing more students for college and the job market that will await them.

But along with higher expectations we must provide additional new tools to ensure more students succeed. This College Ready Summit is sounding the alarm to alert all of Texas to the importance of lowering the dropout rate, increasing the college attendance rate, and ensuring the students in the classroom today are prepared for the job market of tomorrow.

Education opens the door of opportunity. Opportunity has drawn people to Texas for more than 200 years. May it always be so because of good schools and good jobs.