Gov. Rick Perry Speaks on High School Initiative

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Tuesday, November 11, 2003

Thank you Phil (Phil Montgomery.) I want to begin by thanking Superintendent Moses, and Principal Joy Barnhart, for opening up the doors of W.T. White High to us today. Senator Shapiro, thank you for being with us today, and your leadership on education issues. Let me also say a word of thanks to Susan Dell, who has been gracious enough to join us today, and to make available $20 million from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. Susan, welcome back to your alma mater, W.T. White. I also want to commend Bill and Melinda Gates, who are represented today by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Gates Foundation is a driving force behind educational improvement across America, and we are grateful for their $35 million commitment to Texas schools.

These two foundations, along with the Communities Foundation of Texas, and several other private foundations, are joining forces with the State of Texas to improve the learning environment for students struggling in under-performing high schools. As we usher in a new era of higher standards, tougher tests and a more rigorous curriculum, we face the difficult challenge of lowering the dropout rate, improving the college attendance rate, and ensuring students are prepared to succeed in college and the 21st century marketplace. This $130 million high school reform initiative, which includes $65 million in state funds along with roughly $65 million in private funds, is one of the largest public-private efforts of its kind aimed at improving our schools. And it couldn't have come at a better time.

Over the past few years, because of new accountability measures, a $6 billion increase in education funding, a renewed focus on the teaching of core subjects like reading, math and science, and record teacher pay raises, we have seen clear and verifiable improvement among Texas students. But with a tougher new TAKS test requiring students to master a wider range of knowledge, and a new emphasis on students taking the college-prep, recommended curriculum beginning in 2004, we must double our efforts to ensure thousands of students do not fall short of the goal of graduating from high school, and succeeding in college and beyond. The tenth grade results from the tougher new TAKS test administered last Spring were a warning signal to us all. There were more than 1,000 high school campuses where less than 50 percent of tenth grade students passed all sections of the TAKS. Only 35 percent of African-American students, and 38 percent of Hispanic students, passed all sections of the TAKS. And slightly more than one in three students from economically disadvantaged homes passed all sections of the tenth grade TAKS.

Starting this school year, all 11th graders, including those who failed the 10th Grade TAKS test, will be required to pass all sections of the TAKS test in order to graduate. And I, for one, am not interested in backing off this tough
requirement. A high school diploma should mean that our students have mastered the subject areas that will prepare
them for college, and the working world that awaits them. The education reforms funded by these private foundations
dovetail nicely with the High School Completion Initiative I announced in my State of the State address in February.
With the leadership of Senator Shapiro and Representative Grusendorf, we passed a new law that provides an
individual graduation plan for every student who fails the TAKS test. And we are working on providing a personalized
study guide for each student who must re-take the TAKS. We are also working to provide $20 million in early
intervention grants to high school campuses with a TAKS passing rate below 50 percent. And we have made an
additional $5 million in state funds available for dropout prevention programs at campuses with high dropout rates.

This $65 million component of my High School Completion Initiative, along with much of the funding from the Gates
Foundation, is aimed directly at low-performing high schools. But our focus is not only on struggling students and
struggling schools, it is also on helping more students meet the highest standards. That’s why, despite tough budget
negotiations, we continued to fund the $27 million Advanced Placement Incentive Program. The teachers and
administrators here at W.T. White are to be commended for emphasizing educational achievement. In the last eight
years, the number of students taking A.P. tests at W.T. White has increased from 24 students to 844 students. That
is a tremendous accomplishment. 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 the classroom.

Our focus has long been on bringing students up to the minimum standard. I envision a new approach where schools
earn additional funding based on the number of students who meet the maximum standard. Excellence at Texas high
schools must not be confined to what happens under the Friday Night Lights, it must be our mission every day in every
high school classroom. In the State of Texas, there are no second class citizens, no second-rate dreams. This $130
million high school reform plan will provide new resources and new tools to ensure students complete their studies,
attend college, and achieve their dreams. And there is no greater commitment this state can make than to empower
future generations with the opportunity to succeed.

Thank you. We would be happy to answer your questions.