As we begin the New Year, one of my top goals remains achieving educational excellence by making meaningful and measurable improvements in our schools and how we fund them.

Helping me to create a culture of educational excellence, make education spending more efficient and prepare more students for college is an experienced and proven educational leader who has a tremendous record of success in the Galena Park Independent School District and who has agreed to serve as Texas' newest Commissioner of Education: Dr. Shirley Neeley.

Dr. Neeley is a results-driven education leader who sees challenges as opportunities and who has proven that success in our schools is not predicated on the wealth of a community, but the commitment of the educators, parents and students in that community.

I also want to note that Robert Scott will continue in his role as chief deputy commissioner of the Texas Education Agency. Together, Shirley Neeley and Robert Scott make a strong team that will help transform our education system from one that focuses on meeting minimum standards to one that emphasizes achieving maximum performance.

Under Dr. Neeley's leadership, Galena Park ISD has been rated an exemplary district for the past two years - an achievement made even more noteworthy by the fact that Galena Park serves a student population that is 66 percent economically disadvantaged.

Galena Park is the largest, most diverse exemplary district in the state, with 19 campuses that are either recognized or exemplary and a student population that is 88 percent minority. At Galena Park, the number of students taking the SAT or ACT has doubled under Dr. Neeley's tenure. Eighty-two percent of graduates attend college, and their dropout rate is among the lowest in the state. And the number of students taking advanced placement courses and advanced placement tests has tripled under Dr. Neeley's administration.

These results took a lot of hard work. Dr. Neeley initiated a curriculum audit and listened to the voices and concerns of parents and teachers. She implemented tough new standards, including giving the principals at each one of Galena Park's schools three years to achieve recognized or exemplary status. She was also ahead of the curve when it came to strengthening the curriculum so more students will graduate with a diploma that truly declares they are ready for college. The recommended curriculum that will serve as the standard coursework for all ninth grade students beginning this fall is already the required curriculum for Galena Park high school students.

Dr. Neeley's focus on high standards and classroom excellence, her refusal to accept the
status quo or conventional wisdom and her proven track record of success make her the ideal Texan to lead the Texas Education Agency. And it doesn't hurt that she is a fellow Harley rider.

As chief deputy commissioner, Robert Scott's education policy, legal and governmental expertise will be invaluable to the agency and to Dr. Neeley. During his interim leadership at the TEA, Robert Scott effectively led the agency and delivered $37 million in cost-savings within the agency's budget while ensuring the education agency continues to deliver on its core mission of educational excellence.

Robert Scott is an innovative education leader who has helped me develop a number of policy initiatives over the past few years, including a dropout prevention program, the math and science initiatives and my high school completion initiative.

At the end of the day, the reason we are all here is to ensure the Texas of the 21st century is a place of unlimited opportunity. Education opens the door to opportunity. Education is the great social equalizer that recognizes no class, income, or status, but empowers all who benefit from it.

Working with educational leaders like Dr. Neeley and Robert Scott, along with the hundreds of thousands of teachers and administrators who bear the awesome responsibility of being an educator, I know that we can realize the full potential of this state by ensuring our children realize their dreams. Please welcome the newest Commissioner of Education for the 21 million people of Texas: Dr. Shirley Neeley.

NOTE: Following remarks from Texas Education Commissioner Shirley Neeley, Gov. Rick Perry made additional comments before opening the news conference to questions from reporters. The following is a transcript of his comments.

Before we take questions, I want to make an important distinction. As the chief executive officer of this state, I take very seriously my role of protecting Texans' pocketbooks. That is why I am not convinced that we need to put new dollars into the school funding formulas beyond what it costs to keep up with enrollment growth - the funding pie I referred to last week.

But I have not ruled out new money for our schools. I would like to see any new dollars that are available for education used to fund results-based performance incentives. This can be done by making sure any new dollars are placed into a specific fund that provides positive incentives for our schools to achieve greater educational excellence and efficiency.

In the coming weeks, I will unveil new proposals that will reward schools that lower their dropout rate, successfully prepare students for AP tests and the college boards and make measurable strides in increasing the percentage of dollars spent directly in the classroom. These ideas will uphold my philosophy that local control and local innovation are the best formula for successful schools.

I am convinced that to achieve educational excellence, we need funded incentives - not unfunded mandates. And like most taxpayers, I want maximum accountability and maximum results for our education dollars.