Speech - January 26, 2004

Text of Gov. Rick Perry's Speech Announcing Educational Excellence Initiatives at the Texas High School Project Summit

Thank you Dr. Trevino. I am honored to be in the presence of educators, employers and community leaders -Texans who share the goal of improving our schools so that our children are taught in, and inspired by, a culture of classroom excellence.

Education is the foundation for a future of unlimited opportunity and prosperity. Educated Texans are empowered Texans - empowered to pursue the jobs they desire, and the quality of life of their choosing.

What we have done to improve education in Texas over the past decade is nothing short of remarkable. From 1994 to 2002, passing rates on the TAAS test increased from 53 percent to 85 percent. Scores have gone up across the board, among various demographic groups, at every grade level tested. And compared to their peers nationally, our students have consistently been ranked in the top ten on reading, writing and math assessments.

We are succeeding for three fundamental reasons. First, we have re-emphasized core subjects like reading, math and science. Second, we have developed a strong system of academic accountability. Third, Texas is home to some of the most dedicated, professional educators in America!

My commitment, and the commitment of our legislature to education, is unmistakable. Since 1999, we have dedicated 7.1 billion new dollars to Texas schools. More than 50 percent of that total, nearly $4 billion, is above and beyond what was needed to keep up with enrollment growth.

This record increase in education funding helps explain why teachers employed by public schools since 1999 have experienced an average salary increase of nearly $9,300. In fact, when you compare teacher salaries in Texas to the rest of the nation and include a cost-of-living adjustment, we're 16th in the nation.

According to the National Education Association, Texas schools receive $10,400 for every student. And when you adjust the NEA data for cost of living, Texas is 12th in the nation in terms of the total dollars made available to our schools per student. In just five years, we have increased per student spending statewide by $1,900 a student.

Texas is third in the nation for the percentage of our overall budget spent on education. And among the ten largest states, we rank first in education spending based on the personal wealth of our state.

Now, I recognize I am close to statistical overload, so let me put it this way: Texas schools are leading the nation in progress because we have funded student needs, championed school accountability and ensured more students can meet minimum standards.

But I believe now is the time to usher in a new era of educational excellence in Texas that is not based on meeting minimum standards, but focusing on maximum achievement.

For months I have discussed four principles I would like to see achieved during any special session on education. The first, and most important goal, is to improve public
education by rewarding educational excellence.

So far, the school finance debate has been focused almost solely on tax trade-offs. Today I want to emphasize the most important aspect of this debate which has gone largely unmentioned, the missing variable in the school finance equation, which is the quality of our schools, and the achievement of our students.

We must decide on the final destination first, and then plot the course. Educational excellence is the destination I am seeking and it is where we must focus the most attention as a state.

So let me be clear: if we have a special session this year, the subject will not be school finance; it will be educational excellence. School finance will be an integral part of a session on educational excellence because how we finance education is the pathway to educational excellence.

What I am proposing today are a series of results-based performance incentives that will give schools every reason to strive for maximum student achievement. I believe it is our duty to students, parents, teachers and taxpayers to ensure that school funding and school performance go hand-in-hand.

My plan does not mess with success by making changes to our nationally recognized academic accountability system. I believe administrators and teachers can once again rise to the challenge of tougher standards and a tougher curriculum without the burden of new mandates or micromanagement.

My plan creates a roadmap to educational excellence, but it relies on local innovation and local control to get the job done.

Today I would like to discuss three components of this plan to improve our schools.

At the heart of my education plan is what I am calling the High School Advancement Incentive: an enhancement to high school funding that will financially reward schools that keep students on course to graduation.

The High School Advancement Incentive builds on the foundation of the recently announced, $130 million Texas High School Project which combines the resources of the state and private foundations like the Gates Foundation, the Dell Foundation, and the Communities Foundation of Texas to improve learning environments for students at risk of dropping out.

We know that the dropout problem is at its worst during the ninth grade year when students too often fall behind on credits, get frustrated with tougher classes, and drop out of school and, in turn, drop out on their future.

The High School Advancement Incentive is a stair-step funding approach that provides high schools an additional $100 per student for each successive grade. This would mean our high schools would draw down an additional $100 for each student that makes it to the tenth grade, an additional $200 when they advance to the eleventh grade and $300 by the time they reach their senior year for a total of 600 new dollars for every student they keep in school.

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The High School Advancement Incentive provides just one more compelling reason for schools to develop the kind of student retention programs that will ensure fewer students fall behind and dropout. Perhaps the most compelling reason is that the average income of a high school dropout is less than $15,000 a year.
The goal of educational excellence goes far beyond keeping more students in school; it involves a renewed focus on developing the full potential of millions of students.

My second proposal is a new Commended Performance Incentive. Of the more than 2.5 million students who took the TAKS test in 2003, fewer than five percent of those students achieved commended performance by scoring 90 percent or better on all sections of the test.

Today I propose providing our schools an additional $100 for every student who achieves commended performance on the TAKS. And I propose doubling that new incentive for every student deemed "at risk".

Last year, fewer than one percent of 778,000 at-risk students met the commended performance standard.

The Commended Performance Incentive ensures that while we continue to focus on the many students struggling to pass the TAKS test, we won't forget the hundreds of thousands of additional students who have the potential to excel on the TAKS and achieve maximum results.

Third, I am proposing a new Distinguished Achievement Incentive that will reward schools that encourage students to take our most rigorous course of study. The distinguished achievement program requires students to take an additional year of a foreign language, and complete a combination of advanced academic requirements such as college courses, AP courses and a comprehensive research project.

Of the 225,000 young men and women who graduated from high school this past spring, only six percent were distinguished achievement scholars. And among the 83,000 at-risk students who graduated last year, less than two percent completed the distinguished achievement program.

I propose providing a $1,000 per pupil increase to our high schools for every graduate of the distinguished achievement program, and a $2,000 increase for every at-risk student who completes this program.

These three proposals will raise the bar of excellence in Texas schools, help to fundamentally shift the focus of our schools from minimum expectations to maximum performance, and signal a new day of achievement in Texas that will serve notice that Texas is writing a new chapter in education reform.

And even better, my proposals are funded incentives, not unfunded mandates!

Later this week, I will unveil additional components of my educational excellence plan that utilize results-based performance incentives to improve results in our schools, including concepts that are being championed by Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst, Senator Shapiro and Representative Grusendorf.

We should settle for nothing less than excellence in Texas schools. The cost of this entire plan for educational excellence is roughly $500 million a year based on the most current data on student performance.

Some might ask the question, how will you pay for this plan if schools and students rise to the challenge and the cost balloons in the years to come? I say that's a nice problem to have because it will mean more students are staying on course to graduation, more students are excelling on the tough new TAKS test, more students are graduating as distinguished scholars and more students will be ready for college, the 21st Century
marketplace, and a lifetime of opportunity.

There will be some who will argue that we should just put more money into the system regardless of results. But I say when we tie money to results, we will get more results for our money.

I believe Texans will support school funding that is results-based because Texans want more education for their tax dollars, not just more tax dollars for education.

I know this kind of unprecedented commitment to educational excellence can produce tremendous results because there are school districts where excellence is being achieved without the benefit of any of the financial incentives I am proposing.

That's exactly what is happening in Galena Park ISD.

Galena Park is the largest, most diverse exemplary district in the state, with a student population that is 66 percent economically disadvantaged and 88 percent minority. Eighty-two percent of graduating Galena Park students enroll in higher education. And since 1995, the number of students taking the SAT or ACT has doubled, and the number of students taking AP tests has tripled.

I want to see the success achieved in Galena Park duplicated all over Texas. In fact, that's why the outstanding superintendent who for nearly nine years called herself the "head cheerleader for the Galena Park schoolchildren" is now serving as our newest Commissioner of Education: Dr. Shirley Neeley.

This no-nonsense, lifelong educator with a "can do" spirit is the ideal choice as education commissioner because she has demonstrated her commitment to giving the best education possible to every child.

And that is my focus too: ensuring the best education possible for all of our children by ensuring Texas parents and taxpayers get the most for their education dollars.

I mentioned earlier I have four stated principles as I work with Governor Dewhurst, Speaker Craddick, and legislative leaders on an education reform plan.

Today I have focused on the first goal, and my highest priority, shifting the focus from minimum standards to maximum achievement by rewarding educational excellence.

But let me also mention the other three remaining principles that are guiding my decision-making process.

We must cut, control and cap school property taxes.

We must maintain equity in education funding, but do so without the divisive Robin Hood funding scheme that requires local education dollars to be spent outside local communities.

And we must sustain and enhance a healthy job climate.

But it all starts with designing a formula for our schools that equates to excellence in education.

We should not settle for the lowest common denominator in the education equation. Instead, we should seek to multiply success, and strive for maximum achievement, by linking funding to results.
On the whole, Texas schools have made great progress. But there are still pockets of the system where failure and mediocrity are still all too common.

When we fund failure equally with success, we make failure its own incentive. When we predicate additional funding on additional progress, we make excellence the focus of every school in every district.

It is time for Texas to stake its claim on educational excellence and to move forward with the most ambitious initiatives in the nation to enhance student achievement. Our children deserve nothing less. Thank you.