Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks To TASA and TSB Regarding Education Reform

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

Tuesday, January 27, 2004

Thank you. It is a distinct honor to be with the educators in this audience, Texans who share the singular 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. I think often about the profound difference made in my life by dedicated educators at the Paint Creek Rural School, teachers like Shirley Medford, Olga Taylor and Tom Pritchard. Mr. Pritchard not only taught social studies and math, but he was also our principal, a coach and the bus driver. You could say Mr. Pritchard was multi-tasking before multi-tasking was cool. They were just a few of many educators who pushed me to excel. And you might say they succeeded in that endeavor because I managed to graduate in the top ten in my class, of 13 students.

What you have accomplished as educators in ten short years is 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. Since 1999, we have dedicated 7.1 billion new dollars to Texas schools. 54 percent of that total, nearly $4 billion, is above and beyond what was needed to keep up with enrollment growth.

New resources have been a catalyst for greater success, but so have three other important factors. First, we have re-emphasized core subjects like reading, math and science, second, we have developed a strong system of academic accountability, and third, Texas is home to some of the most dedicated, professional educators in America!

One of those dedicated educators I am proud to now call our new Commissioner of Education, the former superintendent of the Galena Park schools, Dr. Shirley Neeley. Dr. Neeley was the architect of the educational renaissance in Galena Park, the largest, most diverse exemplary district in Texas. She is passionate about education, passionate about children, and she has hit the ground running at the Texas Education Agency.

I appointed Dr. Neeley because she understands the unique challenges faced by our schools, and she knows what it takes to educate children of every background, including those who come from disadvantage. And I want you to know
I have directed Dr. Neeley to draw upon her more than 30 years as a teacher and administrator to work with educators across Texas to eliminate unnecessary, unfunded mandates that cost our schools precious time and resources! In addition, I have asked Dr. Neeley to work toward the goal of giving administrators and teachers greater flexibility and freedom to do their jobs more effectively.

With a leader like Dr. Neeley as a model, 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 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 course to that destination.

Yesterday, I unveiled three new proposals that I believe will help students reach their greater potential. Today I want to discuss those ideas, and discuss some additional proposals that will help us shift the focus in education from meeting minimum standards to achieving maximum results.

I am a firm believer that we must continue to rely on local innovation and local control to achieve greater success in our public schools. My plan for excellence in education 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.

At the heart of my plan is a new enhancement to high school funding that will help keep more students in school and on track to graduation, the High School Advancement Incentive. The concept is simple. Our high schools will 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.

Yesterday I also proposed new incentives to help a greater number of students achieve commended performance on the new TAKS exam, and to ensure more students graduate under the distinguished achievement program. My Commended Performance Incentive will provide schools an additional $100 for every student that scores a 90 or higher on all sections of the test, and a $200 increase for commended “at-risk” students. And my Distinguished Achievement Incentive will provide an additional $1,000 for each graduate of the distinguished achievement program, and $2,000 for each “at-risk” graduate.

Today I would like to discuss three additional proposals that will set Texas on the path to educational excellence. I believe we must have a new, results-based performance incentive that will reward excellence in the core subject area of algebra. Algebra is a critical gateway course that a student must master before succeeding in other math courses, and in college. I support a new Algebra Incentive to provide high schools an additional $100 for each student that passes the Algebra One end-of-course exam. And I propose a $200 incentive for every “at-risk” student that passes the Algebra One exam.
Last year, 166,000 students passed the Algebra One exam, including 34,000 “at-risk” students. The Algebra Incentive will provide additional resources that can be used to improve student performance while encouraging as many students as possible to take the optional Algebra One exam. The commended performance, distinguished achievement and algebra incentives will help schools devote more time and resources to ensuring students realize their full academic potential.

At the same time, there are hundreds of thousands of children who arrive at our public schools unprepared to succeed because they start behind, and must overcome a language barrier: our students with Limited English Proficiency. Last year, of the 630,000 LEP students who took the TAKS, fewer than 100,000, or less than 15 percent, passed the test. And that data includes tests taken in Spanish. So today my second results-based performance incentive is a “LEP Student Success Incentive” that starts with a basic goal: helping more LEP students pass the TAKS test. This incentive would provide an additional $100 for each LEP student that passes the TAKS test, and a $200 increase for each student that achieves commended performance.

I also believe that it is good public policy to reward proven teachers that embody excellence in the classroom with performance-based incentives. We should not be afraid to single out our top educational professionals for additional financial stipends out of fear of bucking the status quo. That is why, for my third proposal, I am offering a new Teacher Excellence Incentive, a $200 million incentive fund that will do two things: First, it will reward teachers that achieve excellence in the classroom based on the meeting of specific performance measures as long as local districts match the state’s financial commitment. And second, it will reward proven, experienced teachers who elect to teach in the toughest learning environments, underperforming schools that serve large numbers of disadvantaged students.

Too often our newest and most inexperienced teachers start out in the most difficult learning environments. We want the best, brightest and most experienced teachers to go where they can make the greatest difference, reaffirming our commitment to a most basic truth: the future of every child matters. The Teacher Excellence Incentive, a concept championed by Senator Shapiro and Representative Grusendorf, sends the right message to teachers: it pays to perform!

Under my plan, teachers who perform stand to make as much as $10,000 more in any given year. And I want to point out, in keeping with my commitment to local control in education, these six proposals, along with other ideas I will be discussing in the days and weeks to come, are funded incentives, NOT unfunded mandates!

My plan does not involve a bunch of new programs, or new bureaucratic hoops…it builds upon existing programs and the existing curriculum to ensure maximum achievement 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. This is in addition to an ongoing commitment to fund enrollment growth. 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 is a nice problem to have because it will mean more students are staying in school, succeeding and excelling on the TAKS test, and graduating with the knowledge needed to succeed in college and the 21st Century marketplace.

To those who suggest we need money up front to achieve excellence, I say I agree. That’s exactly why we have increased per pupil spending by $1,900 since 1999. If you look at the dollars available to you through results-based performance incentives, you will see there is money available to help you succeed. And to be clear, these dollars are available to every public school, in every community, that serves every level of student. In fact, those who succeed with “at-risk” students have even greater incentives under my plan.

Any organization that approaches a challenge stating why it can’t accomplish something will surely achieve that end. But I believe the mindset must be “we can, and we will.” I remember math teachers telling me, when I was stumped
by an equation, to look at the problem from a different angle. Results-based performance incentives will require some schools to look at the problem from a different angle. But I know it can be done. I know it can be done because I am standing on this stage with an educational leader who has done it. Working with many dedicated educators, and without the benefit of any of the incentives I have announced today, Dr. Neeley took the approach of “we can, and we will.” And now the Galena Park School District, with a student population that is 66 percent economically disadvantaged and 88 percent minority, has an exemplary rating. Three times as many students are taking A.P. tests, twice as many students are taking the college boards, and 82 percent of graduates are heading off to college.

When we tie money to results, we will get more results for our money. And 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.

Improving education by rewarding educational excellence is one of four principles I want to see realized during any special session on education reform. Let me share the other three broad principles: 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.

It is time for Texas to stake its claim on educational excellence, shifting our focus from meeting more than minimum standards in the classroom when the goal must always be maximum achievement. Our children deserve nothing less. Thank you.