Good morning. Let me begin by thanking two friends I have been honored to serve with, and who were kind enough to extend this invitation for me to be with you today, Senator Rodney Ellis and Senator Royce West. It is good to see many friends in the Legislature, including Representative Joe Deshotel, who stood by my side a month ago at Wilson Middle School in Port Arthur. It wasn’t too long that I served in the Texas House alongside old friends like Senfronia Thompson, Ron Wilson, Harold Dutton, Sylvester Turner, and Al Edwards. We didn’t always agree then, and we don’t always agree now, but we always agree about one thing, that Texas matters most.

I want to welcome each of you who traveled here today to the people’s building, your State Capitol. Regardless of where you come from, what your life’s work may be, or what party you may belong to, this is your Capitol, and it is your future that gets deliberated in these halls. As governor, it is my mission each and every day to build a Texas that welcomes all and includes all, that recognizes the hopes and aspirations of all of our citizens, and that empowers each and every citizen to dream, dare and achieve.

Nothing empowers a Texan more than a quality education. Education is the great social equalizer. It recognizes no class, status, creed or color, but gives power and hope to all who benefit from it. An educated Texan is an unlimited Texan. We should be willing to say to every child in this state, “we don’t care where you come from, we care where you are going.”

That’s why I was proud to work with Rodney Ellis to pass the $324 million Texas Grant Scholarship Program that allows Texans of modest means to pursue their college dreams. That’s why I was proud to work with Royce West to create a university center in South Dallas County. And it is why I was proud to take up the cause with Garnet Coleman to support funding for the Teach for Texas Grant Program.

Time and time again we have stood together without regard to party or politics because Texas is more important than anyone of us. And that’s what I ask us to do again, stand together without regard for partisanship, as we debate the most important of all issues in the near future, educational excellence, and the school finance system that supports that goal.

If our new Commissioner of Education, Dr. Shirley Neeley, can transform Galena Park ISD, where two out of three children come from economically disadvantaged homes, into the largest, most diverse exemplary school district in Texas, then we know that failure, complacency and mediocrity must never be acceptable in any school district.
anywhere in Texas.

I’ve spent the past month traveling the state to share my vision for achieving educational excellence in Texas. My plan recognizes that when we tie money to results, we will get more results for our money. When you reward achievement and excellence, achievement and excellence become their own incentives. I want to reward schools that do more than bring students up to minimum standards, schools that help students realize their full potential, and push them to achieve.

With results-based performance incentives, we can increase the number of students that score 90 or better on all sections of the TAKS, increase the number of students who take our hardest curriculum, the distinguished achievement program, and increase the number of students who succeed on the Algebra One end-of-course exam.

I am proposing financial incentives that reward schools for each student they keep on track to graduation, while also providing a progress incentive that rewards schools that make great progress toward these goals even if they have a ways to go before attaining excellence. I have also proposed financial incentives for students who speak English as a second language that succeed on the TAKS test, while also rewarding great teachers that stretch the potential of our students, including added incentives for teachers that do so in struggling schools.

What I am proposing are funded incentives, NOT unfunded mandates. They target high achievement, utilize the existing curriculum and existing assessments, and THEY ARE EQUITABLE. In fact, when you look at current student performance in the wealthiest districts, and compare that with student performance in the poorest districts schools in property poor areas come out ahead, drawing down slightly more money per student based on 2002-2003 school year data. And if these property poor districts make progress, they will draw down even more money because my incentives are double for every “at-risk” student.

When I visited with the new Superintendent of Port Arthur ISD, Dr. Willis Mackey, he expressed genuine enthusiasm for the opportunity his schools would have to draw down additional funding based on achievement. He didn’t have an attitude of “we can’t and we won’t” he had a mindset of “we can and we will.”

From the colonias of Laredo to the Fifth Ward of Houston, from South Oak Cliff to a thousand small towns across our vast landscape, there are no second-rate dreams, no second-class children. We want every child, in every community, to have a chance to succeed. When we make educational excellence the standard, everything else will follow, and that includes answers to tough questions about tax-trade-offs and preserving a strong job creation climate.

Thank you for being here, for caring deeply about our state, and for giving of your time and talent to make a difference. God bless you, and God bless Texas.