Speech - June 21, 2005

Good morning. In my state of the state speech in January, I made education reform the centerpiece issue of the recently concluded legislative session.

We have no greater public priority than to ensure our children can succeed because of a quality education.

That is the reason we increased education spending by more than 25 percent in the three sessions prior to this year.

Yet for all the successes of this past session, job number one was left undone when the session ended without the passage of school finance reform.

We didn’t provide schoolchildren the education reforms they deserve. We didn’t provide teachers the salary increases they deserve. And we didn’t provide property taxpayers the tax relief they deserve.

On top of that, textbooks are sitting in warehouses instead of classrooms, education technology plans were not passed and $2 billion will go unused instead of going to the classroom unless legislators take future action.

I think our children, their parents and our teachers deserve better.

And rather than giving tacit approval to unfinished business, today I am vetoing all $33.6 billion appropriated in the Texas Education Agency budget and compelling legislators to come back to Austin to get education funding right.

I have taken this action neither lightly nor flippantly, only after serious thought and deliberation and only with our state’s best interests at heart.

I believe it is the best way to ensure that schools are fully funded when our children return this fall.

And I believe it will ultimately deliver more, not less, for our children: more money for their teachers, more money directed to their classrooms and more results in their schools.

And all this can happen in the next month because I am calling legislators into special session starting Tuesday, June 21st.

Members of the Texas Legislature have been home for 20 days, 20 days of hearing from upset constituents, angry school leaders and disappointed supporters.

Today’s action gives them another opportunity to succeed, an opportunity I know so many of them want.

I recognize this is a bold step, and frankly one I wrestled with.

Ultimately, I determined this action was necessary to ensure we fully fund our schools, provide needed reforms in the classroom and pass real and sustainable property tax relief.

Wiping the school finance slate clean and starting over again is the best way to proceed.
I want to reassure Texans that there is plenty of time to finish the important work before us so that our schools not only open on time, but with better funding, better teacher pay and critical reforms that will ensure more money goes directly into the classroom.

As a product of public education and the father of two recent public school graduates, I want nothing but the best for our public schools and that includes doing whatever it takes to make sure they are fully funded.

If we do this right, we will put at least $2 billion more into public schools than what they were scheduled to receive in the state budget.

Teachers will receive a real pay raise. Schools, students and parents will benefit from greater financial accountability. And more resources will be focused on the goal of academic excellence for every child.

I will also continue to work closely with legislative leaders, Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst and Speaker Craddick on a tax reform plan that will provide real property tax relief for the people of Texas.

We have had several good discussions in recent days, and I know we can come to an agreement quickly if we continue to work toward a compromise.

To help facilitate a compromise, today I have used my line-item veto authority to cut $1.7 billion in proposed spending in other areas of the budget.

Some of that money will provide additional savings that can be used for education priorities or to finance a property tax cut.

Included among my line-item vetoes is the striking of a $440 million appropriation that would turn over state savings in a Medicare drug program to the federal government.

Today the federal government doesn’t require this, and I’m not going to fork over money we have saved in Texas to be spent by Washington.

We will provide you a full list of spending items I have line-item vetoed.

Education funding is serious business. And reforming our schools is my highest priority. We have to get it right.

I could have taken the path of least resistance and simply signed off on this budget, but I think our children deserve better.

I cannot let $2 billion go unused when it can go directly to the classroom. And I’m not going to approve an education budget that shortchanges teacher salary increases, textbooks, education technology and education reforms.

I want to make no mistake about my message today: while I respect the deliberative process and will continue to welcome and engage in negotiations, this issue has been studied and debated long enough: Now it is time to act.

Both houses know where the other stands, now it is time to stand with property taxpayers trying to make ends meet and schoolchildren trying to reach their highest potential.

We must get this right for the children of Texas. Today’s veto is intended to make sure we do.
I would be happy to take a couple of questions about this veto before getting back to work.