Gov. Rick Perry Speaks with Texas Public Education Foundation
*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Friday, May 13, 2005

Thank you Vidal (Martinez.) It is honor to appear before the membership of this distinguished organization, the TPEF, not to be confused with the TPPF, and certainly not the CPPP! It wouldn't be a government town without a lot of acronyms. So I have come up with a couple of my own, such as PERN, Pass Education Reform Now. And 140 DIE, in other words, 140 Days Is Enough!

With the legislature so busy these days, it is understandable that two champions of public education reform couldn't be with us today, Senator Florence Shapiro and Representative Kent Grusendorf. For many years, Kent must have felt like a lone voice in the wilderness when he was talking about reforms that would bring free market principles to education. Now he is a leading voice in this Legislature on the verge of passing landmark reforms that will firmly cement his legacy as a proponent for academic excellence. I also want to express my great gratitude to the chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, Senator Florence Shapiro. She did an outstanding job garnering bipartisan support for education reform, and the schoolchildren of this state will greatly benefit from her commitment to the classroom.

It is good to see so many leaders in the field of education reform. For years, many of you have given voice to a movement based on higher standards, stronger accountability and a tougher curriculum. Instead of accepting the conventional wisdom that some children are destined to fail, you have stuck to your belief that every child can succeed when placed in the right learning environment: one that stresses the basics, measures progress, and expects results. Students and teachers have risen to the challenge. Passing scores rose 32 points on the old TAAS test, and are on the rise again with the tougher new TAKS test. Our students fare well compared to their peers nationwide on assessments measuring proficiency in reading, writing and math. We are now the first state in the nation to require a college-prep curriculum as the standard coursework for a class in school today, the Class of 2008. We are also the first state to provide individualized graduation plans for students at risk of failure, and to provide a personalized study guide for those students who fail the state graduation test.

I’m proud we have raised the bar, and even prouder that students and teachers are clearing it. At the same time, I have never believed education reform should lose steam or become a thing of the past. As my friend Sandy Kress likes to say, we have climbed a long way up the mountain, but that doesn’t mean we have reached the top. And in many instances, our children don’t even have a view of the top. That’s why we must pass landmark reform in House Bill 2. As House and Senate Conferees negotiate the final bill, I believe their efforts should be based on four important principles: greater transparency and accountability, greater voter control, improved college readiness standards, and
results-based reforms. Central to this effort must be a robust effort focused on schools that need the most help, schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. Education is the great social equalizer, the roadmap to fulfillment of the American Dream. Too often, our toughest learning environments attract the most inexperienced teachers. That’s why we must make two critical reforms: we must increase funding for teacher mentoring so that young teachers grow professionally and succeed in the classroom, AND, we must appeal to our best and brightest teachers to teach in difficult settings by paying them significantly more to do so.

Along those lines, I also applaud members of the House and Senate for enhancing bilingual funding with the goal of ensuring more students reach English proficiency sooner so they can flourish in the classroom. I also support the two-tiered approach to teacher pay increases. Increased pay for teachers will keep more teachers in the classroom. But why stop there? Performance pay that rewards results will lead to greater results. There is no reason to ignore more than 200 years of proven success in the private sector that tells us rewarding top performers is the best way to keep them on the job performing, and the best way to increase the number of top performers.

We must also ensure that parents and taxpayers have access to clear and concise information, not undecipherable bureaucratic code, on how schools spend tax dollars. This concept is about the public’s right to know, an idea espoused with great regularity by our friends in the media. My philosophy is simple: if the taxpayers are going to pick up the tab, they ought to be able to look at every item on the receipt. The only way to ensure more dollars make it to the classroom is to make sure classroom expenditures are disclosed in plain terms. I think taxpayers deserve to know how much is spent on administration and instruction, and how much they are paying lobbyists and lawyers to extract more tax dollars from their pockets. Taxpayers should also be empowered to control future spending by having the authority to vote on future property tax enrichment increases. The decision to spend more local tax dollars on local schools should be made by local voters.

Most Texans support additional spending on public education. Since 1999, I have supported a $7 billion increase for public education, and we are on the verge of spending billions more in addition to what we will spend to meet enrollment growth needs. That is an extraordinary commitment over a six-year period, even if it doesn't satisfy the voracious spending appetite of some critics. But the measure of our success is not whether we provide more money for education, but more education for our money. Ultimately, our task is to usher in a new era of academic achievement that is based not on the number of students that pass state assessments, but the number of students that graduate ready for college. One of the most important components of House Bill 2 included in the versions passed by both the Senate and House is an added emphasis on preparing students for college. We will not only know the number of students that pass the TAKS test, we will know what percentage of students graduate ready for college. And we will help more students qualify for college by having the state pay the cost of college boards like the SAT and ACT.

Recognizing that our greatest challenge is in our high schools, House Bill 2, as passed in the House, wisely increases funding per student when an eighth grader enrolls in ninth grade. This builds on the High School Initiative, which focuses state and private sector dollars on improving failing high schools. We also face some strong challenges in charter schools. I applaud the senate for their strong reforms to shut down failing charter schools and provide facilities funding for high-performing charter schools. It is important to shut down failing charter schools run by fly-by-night operators because children suffer real consequences when the quality of their education is neglected. Now, if so many of my friends in both parties feel this way about failing charter schools, I encourage them to apply the same standard to traditional public schools that chronically fail our children too. Public schools that fail our children should get expert help. But if they refuse to change their ways despite the state’s best efforts, they do not deserve protected status, they deserve to be shut down and reopened under new management because our children should not be sentenced to a lifetime of mediocrity!

Innovation in education doesn't stop with bricks and mortar investments. As a state we should not shy away from a
greater utilization of technology to teach our children the basics, or other subject areas that enrich their education. Technology is a great tool in capturing the imagination of young learners and heightening their curiosity. And it can ultimately help the state save costs too, such as when we use on-line testing tools as envisioned by Chairman Grusendorf.

Conferees are working hard to pass an education reform bill that will once again put Texas on the leading edge of education reform. Landmark reforms are on the table, such as the most sweeping performance pay plan in the country that allows for both local innovation and a state-designed program to reward our best teachers. They are set to pass an education bill with a record funding increase, comprehensive financial accountability reforms, and new performance indicators that will determine how many Texas students are college-ready. And along with House Bill 3, they are on track to passing a record property tax cut that will shift the burden of school financing back to the state.

The differences that may exist between the two bodies concerning funding formulas and other issues are small when compared to the sheer size of what they are on the verge of accomplishing. Today, tomorrow and over the next twelve days I will continue to work with legislative leaders to bridge any gaps that stand in the way of the real reforms, historic funding increases, and property tax relief Texans are clamoring for. By focusing on greater transparency and accountability, more taxpayer protections to control local school spending, improved college readiness standards, and results-based reforms, legislators can pass a landmark education reform bill that forever changes Texas. I anxiously await the opportunity to sign it.

Thank you, and God bless Texas.