Texas Business and Education Coalition

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

Tuesday, February 21, 2006

Thank you, John (Stevens, executive director).

I am truly honored to be here with men and women whose work to raise classroom performance is opening new doors of opportunity for Texas children and laying a strong foundation for a bright future.

The fact that our schools have improved so dramatically in recent years is a testament not only to the hard work of Texas teachers and students but to the efforts of the Texas Business and Education Coalition, as well as the many like-minded organizations represented here today.

Texans can be proud of the remarkable results we have achieved in education by focusing on higher standards and accountability.

But the way the education debate tends to play out in Texas reminds me a lot of the courtroom dramas you see on TV. Every week, a familiar cast of characters acts out the same predictable plot. Forces of the status quo always seem to land the role of the hard-charging prosecuting attorney while proponents of reform usually find themselves on the witness stand fending off a barrage of accusations.

And too often, courtroom flare and emotional appeals are substituted for real evidence in order to convince the public sitting in the jury box that past reforms have accomplished little and future reforms are unnecessary. But when the people of this state are given the opportunity to examine the facts for themselves, they will reach a starkly different verdict.

The reason is simple: the facts show that no other state in America can measure up to the progress Texas has made in improving education.

Scores on national assessments have gone up in every age group, ethnicity and subject area and the achievement gap has steadily gone down.

We are the first state in America to make a college prep curriculum the standard coursework in high school, the first to provide individualized study guides for struggling students, and the first to tailor individualized graduation plans for students at risk of dropping out.

We lead the nation in the number of students taking advanced math courses and total dollars invested in pre-K
More high schools than ever before are offering college credit courses, more students are taking the SAT, and a record number of children are attending an institution of higher learning because we are challenging them to achieve.

We have made these tremendous gains despite unique obstacles that few other states face. A majority of our students – nearly 55 percent – come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. We have more than 630,000 students who speak English as a second language. And many of our students are immigrants from other countries who arrive in Texas classrooms performing below their grade level.

While some might expect these challenges to diminish the Texas story, they have, in fact, made it all the more remarkable.

Our record in education is one that all Texans can be proud of, and much of the credit goes to those members of the reform movement who spent years – decades in some cases – faithfully fighting for higher standards, stronger accountability, and a renewed focus on the fundamentals of learning.

Together, what we have accomplished in public education from kindergarten to the 12th grade has been nothing short of revolutionary.

We have put a premium on early childhood education, recognizing that the road to a lifetime of opportunity begins when a child walks through those schoolhouse doors for the very first time.

Today, Texas has more children enrolled in public pre-kindergarten programs than any other state in the nation. We have invested more than half a billion dollars to expand our pre-K programs even further so that more children can build a strong foundation in basic learning skills.

We are continuing to pioneer innovative strategies to improve early childhood education. Through the Texas Early Education Model we are putting new instructional materials into the hands of teachers at more than 1,000 pre-K programs throughout the state and helping them develop new professional skills so our youngest students gain pre-literacy and language acquisition skills.

Children that participate in the program have significantly outperformed their peers in language, vocabulary, letter recognition and letter sounds.

For our children to succeed in the global marketplace of tomorrow, it is vitally important for them to not only master the English language but as many other languages as possible. That is why Texas has become a national leader in developing aggressive foreign language immersion programs for elementary school students so that children can be exposed to new languages during the prime years for learning.

And we have placed a greater emphasis on the core building blocks of education like reading and math. This year alone, Texas will provide more than $53 million to help elementary school students overcome dyslexia and other reading disabilities, and millions more to educators certified as Master Teachers through our math and reading initiatives.

Test scores bear the fruit of new reforms and investments. Last year, the National Assessment of Education
Progress showed that, when compared by ethnic peer groups, Texas 4th graders ranked in the top 10 in reading and the top 2 in math.

Our eighth grade students also performed well, outpacing their peers in other states in reading and ranking in the top three in math.

In fact, Texas was one of only three states to show significant progress on three out of four assessments.

The result of early education reform has led to more children being prepared for success in high school where they are being challenged like never before.

When it comes to high school reform, chief among our concerns must be the children who quit school before graduation because a child that drops out of high school drops out on his or her future.

That is why Texas joined several charitable foundations in establishing the $260 million Texas High School Project, which will help more children stay in school through early intervention efforts and help create more productive learning environments at dozens of schools across the state.

Texas also gained nationwide attention after we became the first state to implement personalized study guides for students at risk of dropping out. When our program resulted in a 19 point increase for 11th grade students passing the TAKS test in just a year’s time other states, like Arizona, took notice. Now they are beginning to develop their own study guides.

Every diploma awarded is a key that unlocks the door to a child’s dream. We should be encouraged to know that graduation rates have steadily improved for the past several years. But we cannot be satisfied until every child experiences the pride of walking across the graduation stage.

And we must not only work to ensure that more children graduate, but that more children graduate prepared to take the next step, which is to pursue a college degree.

The fact is, a high school diploma by itself no longer gives a worker the same advantage it used to in the competitive workplace. We took an important step to improve college readiness by becoming the first state in America to require that all high school students take a college preparatory curriculum. Now we are developing end of course exams for core subjects to ensure students have the skills they need to succeed in higher education.

We have also worked to expand advanced placement programs across the state. Today, students in 4 of every 5 Texas high schools – an increase of 50 percent over the last decade – can start earning college credits before they receive their diploma.

And because we have devoted funds to help more children prepare for college entrance exams, not only are more students than ever before taking the SAT, but scores on both the math and language portions are up significantly.

To improve college readiness and workforce readiness even further, last year we launched a $71 million expansion of the Texas High School Project to establish 35 new science and math academies around the state. These academies will eventually enroll 25,000 economically disadvantaged students each year who will benefit from better trained teachers, a more rigorous and engaging technology curriculum, and an education system that prepares them for high-end achievement in college and success in the workplace.
What Texas has proven with high school reform is this: when you raise expectations, student performance follows.

At the heart of any successful education effort are the men and women who answer the calling of the classroom: Texas teachers. Educators do much more than teach students how to read, write and multiply. They inspire children to strive for new heights, they encourage them to realize their fullest potential, and they provide a positive role model young Texans can look up to each and every day.

That is why it is critically important that we do all we can to attract and retain good teachers. To keep our best teachers in the classroom, I recently ordered one of the first statewide merit pay systems in America.

200 years of experience with the American free market system says that when you reward high performers you get more high performers.

That is not to say we shouldn’t raise pay for all teachers. We should. But it’s not as though the trend in teacher pay has been stagnant. In fact, a teacher that has remained in the classroom full-time since 1999 is making an average of $11,700 more a year than they did six years ago.

We also ordered an increase in minimum teacher pay and helped renew funding for a reimbursement program that offers teachers up to $200 for supplies they purchase for their classrooms.

Supporting teachers is more than a monetary matter. That’s why we have made it easier for schools to deal with unruly students and provided new liability protections against frivolous lawsuits.

We are also helping teachers succeed in the classroom by investing more in technology. Today, there is one multimedia computer for about every 4 students in Texas public schools. And we have launched new technology pilot programs that will make a teacher’s job easier, including equipping teachers at several elementary schools with handheld diagnostic tools that will help them identify a student’s math strengths and weaknesses and track their progress over the year.

There is one other group that must be included in any discussion about education, and that is the taxpayers who foot the bill.

Taxpayers have a right to know that their money is being spent responsibly and wisely to help their children reach their potential. That is why I issued an executive order making Texas one of a handful of states to require that 65 percent of all tax dollars be spent on direct classroom instruction.

And in addition to providing millions of new dollars for education without a tax increase, this order will also give taxpayers the accountability they deserve because it opens every school district’s financial books to public scrutiny.

When it comes to paying for education, I am proud that we have increased education appropriations by nearly $10 billion over the last seven years. But to me, the true measure of success in education is not how much we spend, but how much our children achieve.

And by that measure – the only measure that matters –Texas is truly succeeding.

Let us not gloss over this point – and let us all agree – it is not merely how much we spend that matters, but how we spend it.
We have revolutionized public education by raising standards and demanding more of our schools. But that doesn’t mean we should stop raising standards and demanding more of our schools.

Our children deserve nothing but the best, and the answer is not just more money for education, but more education for our money.

The analogy for Texas education is a simple one: we have climbed further up the mountain than most states have – and further than most expected. But we’re by no means near the summit. And the hardest climbing is always at the highest altitudes. What worked below will only get you so far. To get to the top takes additional rigor, innovation and discipline. That’s why reform should be central to the education funding debate going forward.

And while it remains to be seen whether new education reforms can be accomplished during the window of time presented by the upcoming 30-day special session on tax reform, let there be no doubt that education reform will be central to the debate of the next 15 months.

We must not retreat on accountability or send a message to our children that we expect less than the very best they are capable of.

At the same time, the next time someone criticizes the state of schools in Texas in order to advance their political agenda, feel free to educate them that our children have come as far as children in any state – and further than most – despite tougher challenges.

The facts show a state that has made remarkable progress. We have a ways to go, but don't forget how far we have already come.

To my friends in the legislature that have supported education reforms that have produced results I say there is no need to defend what you have done in education, you should proclaim it from the mountaintops.

You have succeeded. And most importantly, more children are succeeding, because we have devoted more resources to early learning, focused on improving instruction in reading and math, provided additional resources for students that struggle, challenged students to attain a higher standard of excellence, and strengthened our system of accountability.

This recipe has worked, and will continue to work, if we keep raising standards, fund results, and keep innovating in education.

May our efforts continue to build a bright future of unlimited opportunity for the children of Texas.

Thank you, and may God bless you.