Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks to the Texas School Alliance
*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Thursday, February 22, 2007

Thank you. It is good to be here with men and women who share a singular passion: building the best schools in America. It's great to see so many public servants and school advocates enrolled in that cause. Working with you I want to help continue the fight for higher standards, a stronger curriculum and reasonable accountability measures. I think I am qualified to do so having finished in the top ten in my class- of thirteen students!

It seems when we convene in Austin every two years, a lot of energy is focused on what's wrong with our schools. I want to talk to today about so much of what is right in our schools. 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 education. More high schools than ever before are offering college credit courses, and 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 600,000 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. I have asked the legislature to increase pre-K funding for the Early Start program by $80 million, recognizing the best time to address learning gaps with at-risk students is before they ever enter the kindergarten classroom.

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. Two years ago, Texas provided 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. Two years ago, 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 thee 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. And that is why Senator Shapiro was wise to pass groundbreaking reform that will put hundreds of millions of additional dollars into the fight to retain struggling students so they stay on course to a high school diploma.

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. And to all of you in this room, I say this: let’s not back away from the need for end-of-course exams as a way to gauge the college readiness of our students. Keep in mind the philosophy behind testing: we test because we must know whether students are learning, and because there must be some academic standard by which students are advanced to the next grade, and not merely reasons of self-esteem. The end goal of the education is not to build self-esteem, but to educate. Let’s not back off this sound approach to learning.

Education reform must not exclusively focus on minimum achievement when so many students must be pushed toward maximum success. We have 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, two years ago 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. Looking forward, I happen to believe the single-most significant reform we passed in special session that will revolutionize the classroom is performance pay for teachers. Starting this fall we will have the largest performance pay program in the nation. And I believe it will work because performance pay has worked for more than 200 years, it’s called the American Free enterprise system. I have heard the arguments about how performance pay impacts morale and about how it can be arbitrary and subjective. But this debate reminds me of the 40 year struggle our nation engaged in with a cold war enemy whose ideology shunned the individual for a misguided, collective attempt to create equal outcomes. To them, the value of the individual was merely its value to the state. Their economy failed because production was owned by the state, and so were most of the profits. There was no place for ingenuity because there was no individual benefit derived from it. And over time, their vision of the world could not compete with a capitalist vision that values the ingenuity of the individual. Pay for teachers should not reflect an outdated, disproven collectivist approach that ignores individual achievement and that rewards mediocrity the same as excellence. Let’s reward ingenuity, and the individuals that produce it.

Education is the great social equalizer. It can lift up those trapped in poverty to experience a life of unlimited opportunity. Our funding commitment over the years reflects our desire to make life better for the children of disadvantage. Billions of dollars on top of funding for enrollment growth have expanded worthwhile programs to help mentor teachers, provide support to students at risk of dropping out and increase math and science standards. Our path must continue to lead toward excellence in education, believing children of all backgrounds can succeed if given the chance. Because the fact is, every child deserves a chance. Let’s do our best to give it to them. Thank you, and God bless you all.