Gov. Rick Perry’s Remarks to the Governor’s Business Council 2007

Monday, July 16, 2007

Thank you Charles (McMahren.) It is good to be back on Texas soil after a week in the Middle East. It was a fascinating visit. One day we had a sand storm that made me think I was in West Texas. We also saw a lot of pipelines, drilling rigs and gas flares. And one of my staff aides was almost attacked by a camel. In Abu Dhabi I went to a UAE air base where their military is training in American-made F-16’s with the assistance of US fighter pilots. In Dubai I saw rapid commercial development that would make your head spin. Twenty-five percent of the world’s construction cranes are located in that one city. I suppose one of the advantages of a benevolent monarchy is that when the emir decides he wants to build 800 skyscrapers, neither the bureaucracy nor the legislature stand in the way. They just go out and do it–like many of you who run businesses. I also visited a Texas A&M Engineering facility in Qatar that is delivering a world class education to aspiring students in the Middle East. I was struck by the thought that peace and prosperity in the Middle East are not dependent upon armies, diplomats or peacekeepers, but educators. An education based on Western values can forever change lives, and that remains true right here in Texas.

I commend your vision as an organization in pushing the envelope of reform in education. Ultimately, this is not about the unions or the politicians, it’s about the children. We must give them a chance through a quality education that sets the highest standards for them, that measures their progress and that grounds them in the basics. Part of that is insuring we have the best teachers possible in the classroom. I support efforts to improve professional development and to assess teacher competency. And I strongly support performance pay for teachers. Starting this fall Texas will have the largest performance pay program in the nation to reward teaching excellence, and I will do everything in my power to see that it stays that way.

I have heard the arguments about how performance pay impacts morale and about how it can be arbitrary and subjective. But I know it works because for more than 200 years it already has–it’s called the American Enterprise system. For more than 40 years our nation engaged in a cold war against an ideology that 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. I’m not trying to say our education system is communist, I am trying to say that a collective approach to teacher pay that ignores individual achievement and that rewards mediocrity the same as excellence is pretty close. Let’s reward ingenuity, and the
individuals that produce it.

In education, we have done some groundbreaking work. We were the first state to implement a college-prep curriculum as the standard coursework, the first to tailor individualized graduation plans for at risk students, the first to create customized study guides for students that fail state assessments. Texas was one of only three states to make progress on the nation's report card in three of the four tests administered. And students of all backgrounds are making measurable gains. Let’s build on our progress rather than retreat from it. And let’s pass the most comprehensive higher education reforms in the nation, starting with a 60 percent increase in financial aid dollars. A college degree is the certificate of entrance to the global economy of the 21st century, an economy increasingly dependent upon knowledge. It only makes sense therefore that we pass a technology scholarship program that will double the number of engineers graduated from our colleges and universities. And it only makes sense that we target new funding for higher education based on their meeting of performance targets. Why not measure whether a degree program actually prepares students for jobs in that field? I’m not talking about high stakes testing, but I am talking about tying funding incentives to student success on field exams. And if schools succeed with at-risk students that so often fail to graduate, why shouldn’t they be rewarded for it?

I believe what you reward you get more of. And I believe that if we are to improve higher education we need to stop funding higher education earmarks that are nothing more than pork for politicians and pour that money into financial aid. Let’s direct more money to the students instead of the institutions because ultimately this isn’t about the buildings we fund but the students we educate. For all the coverage about TYC, HPV, TXU and every other three letter acronym, progress is quietly being made on the higher education front. We are also seeing movement on an additional $100 million for border security. And I believe we will continue to have transportation policies that empower local leaders to solve their own gridlock challenges without a bunch of obstacles from Washington and Austin.

Let me close with this thought. In this room is the capacity, brainpower and experience needed to change Texas. You are the leaders of private industry, the men and women who have built wealth, created jobs and charted Texas on a course of opportunity and prosperity. Government often doesn't work the way your businesses do, but when you get involved in the business of government, things happen. You have clout in this building, and we have 62 days left in this session. I want to work with you to reform education, build the public infrastructure needed to support jobs and growth, and invest in jobs. Thank you and God bless you.