Thank you, Dr. Lomax. It is an honor to follow you to the podium here and a little intimidating given your accomplishments in life. I commend you for your efforts to make college accessible for so many who might otherwise miss out. I also want to say how much I enjoyed the chance to break bread today with Mayor Hardberger and AT&T’s Jim Epperson.

We have come together today for a tremendously important cause. Education is often the critical difference between people who dream great things and people who do great things. In a recent report, the Commission for a College Ready Texas stated that roughly 90% of jobs coming available in our state require some form of post-secondary education. It also said too many students are graduating high school unprepared for what’s next, whether that’s their freshman year in college or a job. We stand poised at a critical juncture in our state’s history. We live in a world where technology is accelerating at a blinding pace, the marketplace has become truly global, and economic power has become truly mobile. The students who graduate this May and June will not just be competing for jobs with their classmates, but students and workers around the world.

So I have convened a Competitiveness Council that is bringing together the best minds from business, education and the public sector to refine our approaches to education, regulations and resource delivery. Their charter is to make our state and its citizens truly competitive in the global marketplace. They are already moving us forward. To succeed in our fast-moving world, people need to continue their education past high school. And you play a key role in that process. It is no secret that “equality for all people” was not consistently maintained throughout much of our nation’s history. Our union was founded on the truth that all men are created equal, but those words were not always heeded in the conduct of our country’s affairs.

Horace Mann, a legendary American educator, once said “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” It is in this spirit that traditionally black colleges came into existence, to provide that avenue to equality, for people who had been denied access, equality and opportunity. They are to be commended for their tireless labors in this cause.

As Governor, it is my mission each and every day to build a Texas that welcomes all and includes all, that recognizes the hopes and aspirations of all of our citizens, and that empowers each and every citizen to dream, dare and achieve great things. That empowerment does not just start on the first day of a college student’s freshman year. I believe success in college depends on how well we prepare high school students for the next level. To this end, we have instituted several programs in Texas including the Texas High School Project.
An alliance between the public and private sectors, this program provides grants to schools and districts that are making strides in preparing students for college. You might also recall the craziness of 2005, when we called multiple special sessions of the legislature, primarily to reform our system of education in Texas. We made remarkable progress that year. We established baseline course requirements for high school students to make sure they have the knowledge they need to succeed. We also initiated a program to make sure that what is being taught in high school actually aligns with what is taught in college. Those programs reflect a significant effort directed at high school students, but those students must have that foundation if they aspire to future success.

When Texas students do reach college, we have other initiatives in place to help them succeed. Before this last legislative session, I proposed a 60% increase in financial aid to Texas students, representing more than $362 million in aid and incentives. I am a big fan of incentives because they resonate with people at a heart level. People know in their heart that the combination of personal risk with the promise of a potential reward gives them ownership of the outcome. These incentive programs offer money to students who choose to study in certain under-staffed fields, like engineering and nursing. There are also incentives for schools, rewarding them for each student who graduates with a bachelor’s degree.

These rewards are more lucrative for graduating at-risk students. These include students with ACT/SAT scores below the mean, students from low-income families, students older than 20 on their first day of college, and those who begin as part-timers. Those criteria have traditionally disqualified people from a college education and it pleases me to help kick down that door. These initiatives all work toward a day in Texas where opportunity is truly equal and the outcomes will be a much more accurate reflection of an individual’s ability and effort, not his or her zip code.

I believe that an educated Texan is an unlimited Texan. I want Texas children to know this simple truth: “We don’t care where you come from; we care where you are going.” Some might consider my focus on incentives a little mercenary, perhaps not fitting with the lofty ideals of academia. But I will say that my years on this planet have shown me that when we tie money to results, we will get more results for your money. And I believe that our traditionally black colleges do get great results for the money. I have been told that these colleges educate roughly 50% of African American school teachers, 35% of our African American attorneys, and 50% of our African American physicians.

Those are great results. These schools provide a nurturing environment where students can confidently inquire of the truth, grow in their understanding of their worth, and launch themselves into careers that can change the world. These institutions supported by the UNCF also provide an avenue into higher education for many who might not otherwise have that chance. They are worth our attention and our time.

The United Negro College Fund is a worthwhile and enduring organization, committed to academic excellence in schools across the country. I hope that you will join me in saluting them for their achievements, celebrating their vision, and supporting them in their efforts to improve education in our state and across our nation.

Thank you and God bless you and God bless Texas.