Gov. Perry Announces Plan to Expand High Tech Education in Texas

*Proposes doubling T-STEM academies and training more high-tech teachers*

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

Thursday, October 15, 2009

Thank you, [REP] Angie [Chen Button], and thank you to the good people of Berkner High, the home of the Mighty Rams, and one of our state’s T-STEM academies.

I am here today to discuss the state of public education in Texas and announce a plan to accelerate our efforts to prepare students to compete in the global economy.

They say everything is big in Texas, and that definitely holds true for our growing population, and for the challenge to properly educate our young people.

Your leaders in Austin have not ducked their responsibility in that area, working in pursuit of our core goal: ensuring young Texans, no matter what their economic status, graduate from our high schools career- and college-ready.

We have done this by crafting and signing sensible legislation, like this past session’s House Bill 3, which puts an emphasis on the basics, ratchets up the level of accountability, and ensures our standards, curricula and textbooks are college-ready, while giving students more flexibility to choose courses that interest and motivate them.

It also provides parents with access to vital information on not only their children’s progress, but also their district’s financial efficiency.

These improvements build on our other education improvements like the largest teacher incentive program in the country.

This year and next, Texas will spend more than $395 million on a program intended to get our best teachers into the hardest-to-staff classrooms, where they can have the biggest impact.

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Thanks to efforts like these, TAKS scores for 2008-09 were up in every subject and every grade, and Texas was recently recognized as one of only four states to close the achievement gap in math.

I was pleased to learn yesterday that African-American 8th graders in Texas tied their counterparts in Massachusetts for first place on the National Assessment of Educational Progress mathematics exam.

For those of you in the know, that test is the gold standard. By averaging a 272 on the N-A-E-P, these Texas students beat the national average for their demographic by 12 points.

That is GREAT news for Texas.

Education Week Magazine also spoke well of us lately, identifying Texas as being one of the first states in the nation to hold schools directly accountable for ensuring students graduate college- and career-ready.

Bottom line, we have made significant progress, but we have more work to do. As our Competitiveness Council made clear in their report last year, our state’s future prosperity depends on our ability to attract new jobs, and draw investment to the state.

Besides our low taxes, predictable regulations and fair legal system, the most important job attractor is a well-educated workforce that is equipped to meet the demands of a high tech economy.

Business and government leaders across the state agree that the ever-growing demand for students in the science, math, and medical fields exceeds the supply by a large margin.

To overcome that shortfall, we must increase the number of college graduates in the science, technology, engineering and math fields; expand the number of rigorous math and science courses available to high school students; and increase the number of effective STEM teachers.

I am here today to propose a solution: we must significantly expand STEM programs across the state of Texas.

Four years ago this December, I announced the T-STEM initiative, which grew out of the Texas High School Project, a public-private partnership formed to improve outcomes for at-risk students.

Our partners included the Gates Foundation, represented here today by John Fitzpatrick.

Our goal was to engage more at-risk high school students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, and prepare them to compete in the global economy, thereby strengthening our high tech job force over time. Since then we have funded 46 T-STEM schools across the state.

Already, 86% of these schools are exemplary or recognized, and all are meeting state standards.

On average, T-STEM campuses outperformed their peers by 18 percentage points in the 2008 Math TAKS, and 19 percentage points in the 2008 Science TAKS.

This is remarkable given the challenges the average student in these academies face, and the comparatively short time these T-STEM academies have been in existence.

Expanding our state’s investment in the STEM program will require us to focus on four essential elements.

First, I propose that we double the number of T-STEM academies in Texas from 46 to 92, thereby doubling the students receiving a STEM education.

To capitalize on our state’s critical mass in biotechnology research, developing due to market demand, Emerging Technology Fund investments and the Cancer Prevention & Research Institute of Texas, some of these schools will
focus on medical and biotechnology.

All will increasingly serve as “lab-schools”, training more teachers to teach in these essential subject areas.

Second, I propose the creation of the $100 million STEM Challenge Scholarship fund, for students seeking degrees or certificates in STEM fields.

These scholarships will not only provide an incentive for our hardworking high school students, they will encourage them to continue their studies in Texas.

Third, we should ramp up our efforts to expand our STEM-qualified teacher pool by doubling the size of our highly successful U-Teach program.

U-Teach is designed to lure high-performing college students with math and science concentrations into the teaching profession, supplementing their technical pursuits with teaching courses, and graduating them with a teaching certificate in-hand.

Originally created at UT-Austin in 1997, U-Teach programs are now in place at UT-Dallas, Arlington and Tyler, along with U of H and North Texas, supported by partners like Texas Instruments, represented here today by Trisha Cunningham and Gail Chandler.

I propose we add an additional five programs at five other Texas universities as a way to produce an additional 2,000 excellent STEM teachers in their first five years of existence.

Fourth, and finally, we should expand the Advanced Placement Training and Incentive Program to 50 additional high schools by 2015.

This program, which targets large, urban school districts, has been dramatically increasing the number of traditionally under-represented students taking AP exams and earning college credit.

Let’s expand the program further and give even more bright Texas students a chance at the opportunity that higher education brings.

When you combine these four initiatives, you end up with a strategy that will accelerate the pace of our high-tech education, expand opportunity for the young people of our state, and strengthen our state’s workforce of the future.

I look forward to discussing these initiatives with our legislators as the 82nd legislative session approaches, along with educators across the state and our private sector partners.

Together, we can continue providing Texas students the opportunity they deserve, to pursue the education they need, as they fulfill their potential, and keep Texas moving into the future.