Gov. Perry Promotes $100 Million STEM Challenge Scholarship Initiative

*Initiative to increase high tech education for young Texans*

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

**Tuesday, December 15, 2009**

Thank you, [President] Elton [Stuckly] and thank you to your team here at Texas State Technical College-Waco for hosting us today.

I am here to discuss the state of public education in Texas, and why it’s so important to focus on better preparing young Texans to compete in the global economy.

About nine years ago, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board adopted a plan called “Closing the Gaps by 2015: The Texas Higher Education Plan.” The plan covered a lot of ground on closing the educational gaps between Texas and other states, but a key goal was to significantly “increase the number of college graduates with high tech or STEM degrees, by the year 2015.”

This goal makes sense, because technology continues to advance at a blinding pace, pulling the marketplace along with it. That plan gave us a set of clear goals that we have pursued ever since, as we have improved the quality of public education in Texas.

All of our programs and measures are focused on one overriding priority: ensuring young Texans, no matter what their economic status, graduate from our high schools career- and college-ready. I would point to this year’s education bill, House Bill 3, as proof of the progress we’re making.

This education bill emphasizes 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 are the latest in a series of education improvements that have led to TAKS scores that were up in every subject.
and every grade, for the 2008-2009 school year, and recognition for Texas as one of only four states closing the achievement gap in math.

Our efforts are also yielding big improvements in our advanced placement testing, which improves our teacher corps with specialized training, and can reduce the cost of higher education by reducing the number of courses our students have to take. I am proud to say that, over the last nine years, the number of Texas students taking AP tests has increased by 170%, and that the number of students passing went up 140% in the same timeframe. At the same time, the percentage of minority students taking and passing the AP test has had double digit increases.

We have made significant progress…but we have more work to do.

As our nation deals with the global economic crisis, our state’s continued 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, equipped to meet the demands of a high tech economy.

Employers 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, I have called for the doubling of the amount of STEM academies at Texas high schools from 46 to 92, thereby doubling the students receiving a STEM education.

To staff these new academies, I propose we expand our STEM-qualified teacher pool by doubling the size of our U-Teach program. U-Teach has been very successful at luring college students with math and science concentrations into the teaching profession.

As we engage more high school students in the STEM fields, we should encourage them to continue their studies at the next level, with a $100 million STEM Challenge Scholarship fund, that removes financial barriers to their education.

I hope to see this scholarship fund fuel regional partnerships all over the state between local employers, school districts, and institutes of higher education, including two-year schools like this one, that will tailor STEM scholarship programs to local needs.

This effort will complement our existing incentive funding program, which provides universities $80 million to increase the number of graduates, particularly in STEM fields. Together, these initiatives will continue to provide young people an incentive to study in the STEM fields and take their rightful place in the Texas workforce.

Finally, we need to keep challenging students to aim higher, by expanding our Advanced Placement Training and Incentive Program, by adding 50 additional high schools by 2015. This program, which targets large, urban school districts, has dramatically increased the number of traditionally under-represented students taking AP exams…and earning college credit.

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 young Texans, 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 Texas educators 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.