Gov. Perry Calls for Expansion of Online Learning for Texas High Schools

Will also provide educational opportunity for dropouts pursuing a diploma.

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

Tuesday, January 19, 2010

Thank you, Gail [Stiller, Superintendent] and thank you to all the folks here at Cole High School for having us here today.

It’s good to be at the home of the Cougars and I want to thank all of the students here for the contribution you make to our national defense, as you thrive under the challenges of military living, including frequent relocations and changes in schools. Your relentless pursuit of an education, no matter what school you’re in, is a reminder to us all that an education is worth the effort, and an inspiration to those who are contemplating dropping out.

The unfortunate truth is that not every student who enrolls in a Texas high school ends up getting their diploma, because the demands and distractions of real life can pile up to the point that hope is blocked out, and walking away is perceived as the only option.

I am here today to propose the Texas Virtual High School, a technology-driven solution to re-engage dropouts, that will take the classroom TO the student in crisis.

Over the years, education has been predominantly school-centric, with children sitting in a classroom, taking tests under the watchful eye of a teacher. While that system will continue to be the foundation of our educational approach here in Texas, and has done a great job teaching generations of kids, preparing them for success after graduation, it can sometimes lack flexibility.

The growing capacity of the Internet and the increasing sophistication of distance-learning technologies, are making it increasingly
possible for students to take non-traditional approaches, to continuing and completing their education.

While most distance learning programs have focused on providing greater opportunity to high-performing students, I believe it’s time to expand our use of these technologies to our state’s more vulnerable students, as a way to decrease our state’s dropout rates even farther.

It is time to unleash the potential of the Texas Virtual School Network.

Established by the 80th Legislature, the Texas Virtual School Network currently allows students in certain districts to take courses online. This is not just mindless surfing or busy work: the courses offered through the network use the same testing, and observe the same stringent standards, that are making Texas high schools stronger all the time.

This embrace of technology can help vulnerable students avoid the lower wages and chronic unemployment that plague dropouts. This program would be yet another element in our successful efforts to lower the dropout rate in our state, like mentoring programs and graduation plans, that have re-engaged students who have walked away.

Just last October, the National Governor’s Association recognized Texas as one of just a few states making serious progress in that area.

Make no mistake, the Virtual High School diploma will be every bit as hard-earned as any diploma in Texas. Participating students will be held to the same, nationally-recognized standards as any other student, ensuring that any graduate of a Texas public school, be it brick-and-mortar or virtual, will be ready for college or a career.

They will, however, be able to learn at their own pace, meeting the needs of their own schedules, and following their own, individualized graduation plan. Upon completing their coursework, they’ll visit a local testing center, and complete the same end-of-course exams, as those who attend traditional public schools.

While we’re expanding this Virtual School Network to dropouts, we should also make it available free-of-charge to students pursuing their education under their parent’s instruction at home, and those who wish to take a greater variety of classes.

I am calling on the Legislature to expand the Texas Virtual School Network, by increasing the number of classes a student can take from two classes to four, and investing in even more teaching content, to make educational opportunities even broader and deeper.

No matter where a student studies, be it a school in rural Texas or the inner city, or in their home, under a parent’s instruction, an expanded program can provide them the resources they need to pursue their educational dreams, and accelerate them to even higher levels of achievement.

These are the kind of efforts our children deserve, as we pursue innovations that work, and fulfill our obligation to educate them, to compete for future success.

To put it simply, until every Texas high school student who genuinely wants a diploma has a diploma…our work will not be done.

Now, before we open this up for questions from the press, I’d like to take a moment to touch on something that’s likely on your minds. You might recall last week, when I announced that Texas would not be participating in the federal government’s attempt to purchase control of our school system, otherwise known as “Race to the Top”.

To put it simply, until every Texas high school student who genuinely wants a diploma has a diploma…our work will not be done.
Surrendering control of our education system and throwing our arms open to a raft of yet-to-be-written national standards, in exchange for as little as $75 per student, was a bad idea last week and is still a bad idea this week. Teachers and state leaders all across the nation have agreed with us.

If you need any evidence that the federal government is bound and determined to intrude even farther into state affairs, you need look no farther than today’s news that the Obama administration will now try to entice school districts directly, further interfering in state and local affairs, and betraying their clear disdain for our rights.

This kind of overreach is exactly why this administration has its hands full today even in the bluest of blue states, Massachusetts.

I will say this slowly so there is no confusion: Texas will fight any attempt by the federal government to take over our school system.