Thank you, Chairwoman [Barbara] Cargill, for that introduction and for all the hard work you're doing here at the State Board.

Your leadership and the contributions of all the board members is a key part in making a better Texas for tomorrow.

I'd also like to give a special word to your new members who may not have been through this before: Relax, you're going to do fine.

Tincy Miller knows what I mean, she's done this drill.

Welcome back, Tincy.

This isn't the easiest job in the world, but as long as you work hard and remember the people who sent you here, you'll be an old hand at this in no time.

It is a tough job, because, in terms of philosophy, this is really where the rubber meets the road in our ongoing efforts to improve our public education system.

Over the past 10 years, you all have helped us vastly improve the rigor of our courses and the accountability of schools.

Education Week, in fact, recently scored our standards and accountability at over 90 percent, a solid A.

As recently as 2004, however, Texas hadn't merited much better than a C-plus.

That simply wasn't cutting it, because the demands of the world economy demands students prepared to take on challengers from all across the globe.

There are other good signs.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, our graduation rates are at an all-time high, the third highest in the nation, which represents a significant turnaround from just a few short years ago.

As I said during the State of the State this week, we can't let up now.

Students have different goals after graduation and not every child thrives in the same settings and schools.

Texas' academic future must be built with the flexibility necessary to serve those different students, producing workers ready to step into any occupation or role necessary.

That future will, by necessity, involve more public charter schools which offer parents a tuition-free alternative to their neighborhood school.
Public charter schools already serve more than 150,000 students across Texas and more than 100,000 students are waiting for their chance to get in.

It's also time to introduce scholarship programs that give students a choice, especially those who are locked into low-performing schools.

At the same time, we have to continue encouraging teachers and administrators in traditional schools to produce excellent students.

While we're giving students a choice of schools, we should also give them more flexibility in the courses they take in high school to prepare them for whatever their goals may be without sacrificing our rigorous academic standards.

We also need to allow students access to additional Career Tech courses.

These courses, in fields as far-ranging as engineering and veterinary science, are efficient and common-sense ways to prepare students to graduate ready for hard-to-fill jobs across our state.

These jobs are stable and good-paying, and all they're waiting for are the skilled people to fill them.

I know late last year, Senate Education Chairman Dan Patrick called on you to double the number of approved Career Tech courses available, and I think that's a great idea.

We need to continue working to find innovative, smart ways to educate our children for the future, because the future is already here.

I wish you all the best of luck in your terms and encourage you to continue doing all you can to make a Texas education the best education available.

May God bless you and, through you, may He continue to bless the great State of Texas.