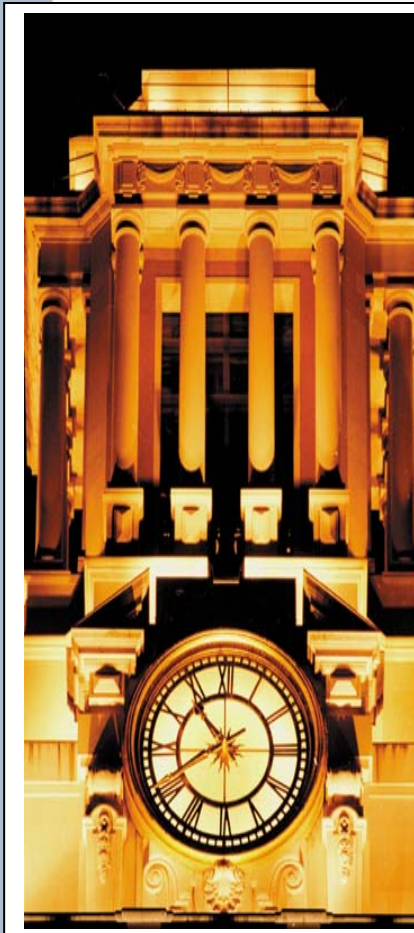


# Rick Noriega: An Education Plan to Ensure our Future Success



*Education is the Key to the Lone Star  
State's Future*

Education is the key to the Lone Star state's future success. America's strength comes from not only a robust economy but also from an education system that produces the most innovative and best prepared leaders of tomorrow. We cannot maintain our quality of life and competitive edge while trying to compete against the developing world in low-pay and low-skill labor.

We must do what Americans have always done best – educating the next generation to ensure that our nation remains the world leader in innovation and productivity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To maintain our competitive advantage, the United States must reinvest in education and develop a long term strategy for educating our youngsters, while reforming inefficient and underperforming aspects of our educational system.

Investing today in our education system will more than pay for itself tomorrow. Texas has already seen the benefits of a workforce equipped for high-technology and high-skill fields. Austin is the home to many of the nation's top electronics and computer manufacturers, such as Dell, Texas Instruments, Samsung, and IBM. Houston is home to numerous international energy companies and engineering firms. Dallas is a center of finance and commerce.

*America's strength comes from not only a robust capitalist system and unparalleled military might, but also from of an education system that produces the most innovative and best prepared leaders of tomorrow.*

However, each of these industries requires highly-educated and well-prepared workers. In an increasingly globalized economy, we must ensure that the skills and talents of our future workforce will keep these companies in Texas.

At the same time, our state's education system is not making the grade. Accessing needed higher education and skills has become more difficult over the past six years:

- Texas ranks 21<sup>st</sup> in the nation in the number of 3 year olds who participate in state sponsored pre-K or the federal head start program.
- In Math, 87% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders achieve proficiency on the state math test, compared to 33% who do so on the NAEP. With a 54 point gap, Texas ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation on this measure. In reading, with a 58 point gap, Texas ranks 49<sup>th</sup>.
- 30% of the middle and high school classes in core academic subjects are taught by instructors who lack at least a college minor in their subject area. Texas ranks 39<sup>th</sup> in the nation on this measure.
- Texas ranks the lowest in percentage of adults with at least a high school diploma;

- From FY 2002 to 2006, tuition and fees at public universities increased over 60% and at community colleges by over 50%; and
- From FY 2002 to 2007, the Texas state budget was cut in terms of real dollars per-university student by 20% and by over 35% for community college students.<sup>1</sup>

Education opens doors for people. Education lifts people out of poverty. Texans deserve leaders who will put the education of our young people first, and ensure the future economic security of our state. Rick Noriega is offering a new approach, geared around the idea that each child in Texas deserves the opportunity for life-long success and that our state must train and keep the best and the brightest in our state.

Noriega's plan will:

- **Expand Access to Early Childhood Education.** Early childhood is the most important time to lay the foundation for future academic success; and it provides a massive return on investment. If we want Texas to continue to be an economic powerhouse and a leader in our nation's continued economic success, we must invest now in early childhood education and expand access to pre-kindergarten.
- **Reform No Child Left Behind.** We must also take a close look at the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program. NCLB added a much-needed dose of accountability into our education system, but it hasn't been adequately funded, in many cases is poorly implemented, and has left some schools and districts short-changed. Washington has failed our public schools. Instead of acting as an absent parent issuing demands on our districts, the federal government should serve as a partner to states and districts to overhaul public schools.
- **Value and Attract the Best Teachers.** We should provide more incentives for talented people to become teachers, and not provide more reasons for teachers to quit and find more lucrative jobs in the private sector. By attracting and retaining the best teachers, we can be sure to train and retain well-prepared students within our state.
- **Make Higher Education More Affordable.** While Texans are proud of their world class universities and community colleges, too often the cost of attending is out of reach for many Texas families. For Texans to be able to compete in a global economy, they must have access to affordable higher education. Greater access to higher education means a more skilled and competitive workforce that will continue to attract employers and good jobs to the Lone Star state. We must rein in the out of control costs of higher education if we hope to compete in the economy of the future.

# The Noriega Education Plan

## Improves Early Childhood Education by:

- Expanding Funding for Head Start and Early Head Start.
- Creating a Voluntary Texas Universal Pre-K Program.

### Early Childhood Education

Investing in pre-kindergarten education provides a massive return on investment. According to the Director of National Institute of Early Education Research, “No other public expenditure can reasonably claim to produce higher economic returns [than pre-K].” Students who benefit from a pre-K program are better prepared for their first days of kindergarten, and have a better foundation for learning. But the benefits don’t stop there. They are also less likely to commit crimes later in life, they make better life choices, are more likely to graduate, and will earn more over the course of their lifetime. Universal pre-K might be the single best investment this state can make.

The Noriega plan calls for:

- **Expanding Funding for Head Start and Early Head Start.** Head Start, a national effort to provide low-income children with access to pre-school, is one of the most successful government program ever created. Rick wants to expand access to Head Start by expanding the eligibility requirement to encompass more children. Head Start programs focus on the development of children’s cognitive, physical, and social development and helps ensure that children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn and succeed.
- **Creating a Voluntary Texas Universal Pre-K Program.** Ensure universal access so that every four-year old in the state will be eligible. Noriega would make the program void of income requirements and completely voluntary so that communities and districts could decide for themselves whether they wanted to participate. It would also put the local school district in charge of distributing the state and federal funds. Local school districts know where they need resources most.

## Reform No Child Left Behind

While federal support of Texas schools has increased in the past decade, this amount still makes up a relatively small portion of the overall cost of educating one of the fastest growing states in the nation. If we are serious about making education a priority, then our budget should reflect it.

- **End Unfunded Mandates from Washington.** The relationship between the federal government and state education systems should be a partnership, not a one way street. Washington D.C. should do more than just hand down edicts to the states; they should share in the responsibility and accountability necessary to carry out the goals of making education a national priority—especially in areas such as school construction. Federal assistance for Texas education in the past decade has increased little despite a nearly 25 percent increase in population. This fact is most evident by looking at the increasingly crowded classrooms. Elementary and high schools have gone from being merely overcrowded to the point where teachers and students are forced to conduct class in temporary trailers. To encourage learning in a disciplined environment, class sizes for primary education should be limited to 22 students per teacher.
- **End Illogical Rules from No Child Left Behind.** The well-intentioned, but poorly executed system for NCLB has created an environment in which schools and states are encouraged to ‘game the system.’ We should respect the advice of educators—the people at the front lines—on how to better measure performance and to ensure that performance and accountability metrics accurately reflect the challenges of each school district. Congress needs to demand better oversight in how states and schools report their statistics, and hold leaders accountable for attempts to deceive the system. It must be more than a single snapshot standardized test. Schools are graduating students who do well on the TAKS test, but are academically unprepared for college and the future workplace. Teachers, who do more than merely ‘teach to the test,’ but actually develop bright and talented students who will succeed in college and in the marketplace should be sought out, praised, and rewarded. Noriega thinks we should seek to build students and reward teachers who develop critical thinking skills instead of rote memorization exercises. These transferable skills are much more relevant to the future workforce than many of our current metrics.

# The Noriega Education Plan

## Reforms No Child Left Behind by:

- Ending Unfunded Mandates from Washington.
- Ending Illogical Rules from No Child Left Behind.

# The Noriega Education Plan

## Will Value and Attract the Best Teachers by:

- Providing a Living Wages for Teachers.
- Allowing Teachers to Keep What They Earn.
- Recruiting Teachers in Math and Science.

### Value and Attract the Best Teachers

- **Living Wages for Teachers.** Money is not the solution to every problem in the education system, but we are clearly losing many talented young teachers because they can not earn a reasonable living on their teaching salary alone. Congress should help states with large rural and inner-city populations to increase pay for teachers willing to work in these areas. We should also consider incentives such housing assistance in areas where teachers would be unable to afford a home.
- **Allow Teachers to Keep What They Earn.** Teachers and other school employees in Texas lose a significant portion of benefits they and their spouses earned from Social Security. When these teachers retire, after they or their spouse have paid dutifully into Social Security, their benefits are slashed simply because their school district chose not to participate in Social Security. This means that although they worked to educate Texas students for modest pay and benefits they lose much of their earned retirement security.

The current system is unjust and counter to the values that have helped to build our nation. We should not punish people who are willing to make the personal and financial sacrifices to become teachers. Teachers should either be allowed to keep what they earn, or they should see some benefit after paying into a system for years. We should provide more incentives for talented people to become teachers, and not provide more reasons for teachers to quit and find lucrative jobs in the private sector.

- **Recruit Teachers in Math and Science.** A successful program in Texas called UTeach attracts outstanding college students into K-12 teaching careers in math and science. It encourages math and science majors to enter the teaching profession by offering a math and science degree plan integrated with teacher certification, financial assistance and early teaching experiences for undergraduates.

A similar program at the University of Pennsylvania for more established teachers offers a master's degree program for teachers of Math and Science. The program has been recognized as a model for the nation by the National Academy of Sciences because it is a flexible initiative that offers a part-time master's degree that focuses teachers on math and science curricula. We must expand funding for these sorts of innovative initiatives to ensure that our children are well-prepared for the high-tech fields integral to our state's future economic success.

## Make Higher Education Affordable for Texas Families

Higher education is increasingly unaffordable for middle class families. In Texas, after tuition deregulation, the cost of attending a public university has doubled in less than a decade. Middle class families are being forced to make the difficult choice of sending their children to school or taking on crippling amounts of debt.

Students are now graduating with, an average of about \$20,000 in student debt. Nearly two thirds of students graduate with debt. Our nation suffers when students graduate with such high debts. Given their debt load, fewer students are able to enter fields that traditionally offer lower salaries—such as teaching or public service. New workers, saddled with massive debt, do not save money for retirement, they are less likely to purchase homes, and they are more likely to have long term financial problems. If we want to revive the economy, and create the new innovation economy, we must make higher education more affordable and more obtainable.

- **Control Costs in Public Universities.** The deregulation of tuition has done nothing for higher education but shift the costs onto the backs of already distressed middle class families. We should all share in an investment that benefits the entire society. Inflation increases the cost of all goods and services—including education. Schools need to maintain certain levels of funding in order to provide quality educational services. Large unpredictable tuition hikes puts even greater strains on working families who often must budget on a week to week basis.

Schools should be allowed to reasonably raise the cost tuition rates and fees as needed. However, let's require that any school that accepts federal assistance dollars allow students to lock-in a flat rate that is slightly higher than the existing rate. For example, if the current yearly tuition for a school is \$20,000—and likely to rise to \$23,000 by the end of the fourth year—the student could lock-in their rate for \$21,000 per year. The school would receive slightly more money than they needed for the first few years, but the student would be protected from increases during the last few years. This lock-in program will give schools a buffer for future cost increases, while giving working families predictable rates of expenditure.

- **Increase the Number and Size of Pell Grants.** Public college tuition has increased 35 percent over the past four years, but student financial aid has not kept pace. Rick Noriega advocates for Pell Grants to cover the average tuition rate at public universities in Texas for hardworking Texas families.

# The Noriega Education Plan

## Make Higher Education Affordable by:

- Controlling Costs in Public Universities.
- Increasing the Number and Size of Pell Grants.
- Increasing Support for Technical Schools and Community Colleges.
- Creating and Funding Advanced Worker Retraining Programs Through Technical Schools and Community Colleges.
- Increasing Funds for Government-Backed Student Loans.
- Developing New Scholarships and Loan Forgiveness Efforts for High-Demand Fields.
- Improving Minority and Rural Connections to Higher Education.
- Rewarding Service to Community and Country.

- **Increase Support for Technical Schools and Community Colleges.** More than half of the students who obtain a higher education degree in Texas do so through a technical school or a community college. For many, a four-year university education is unobtainable and unnecessary to fulfill their goals. More funding needs to be redirected toward vocational and technical colleges
- **Create and Fund Advanced Worker Retraining Programs Through Technical Schools and Community Colleges.** The economic reality is that we will continue to lose low-skill jobs to overseas competitors. But this does not mean that the workers who have lost jobs are doomed to poverty. We must immediately re-train these workers for positions demanded by the emerging information and technology economy. Laid off workers should have easy access to free or low cost retraining education with money from the private sector as well as government.
- **Increase Funds for Government-Backed Student Loans.** As the number of college students increases, the funds available for subsidized loans must not only match the increase in the population, but it should be increased to even higher levels to encourage middle class families to make the investment to send their children to college.
- **Develop New Scholarships and Loan Forgiveness Efforts for High-Demand Fields.** If we want more engineers, researchers, and teachers, then we must provide economic incentives for students to enter these fields. We should offer scholarships or loan-forgiveness for students who enter specified fields and graduate with good grades.

There are also numerous emerging fields where Texas has the opportunity lead the global market. Just as the development of computer technologies and medical services have helped to produce tremendous wealth for our state in the past two decades, these emerging fields will produce jobs which will not be able to be duplicated by foreign competitors for decades to come. These include bio-engineering, nano-technology, and alternative energy.

- **Improve Minority and Rural Connections to Higher Education.** Since 2003, the number of students enrolling in either public universities or two-year colleges has tapered off, despite the continuing increase in the population. Our state collectively suffers when students choose not to attend college. We lose the benefits their future increase in income and productivity, and we lose our initial investment of their primary education. We should utilize improved technology to increase opportunity through distance learning.
- **Reward Service to Community and Country.** Rick Noriega wants to reward and encourage the Texans who serve their communities and the nation. He believes we should provide incentives for those who choose to become public servants and will reward those who have already served by expanding educational opportunity. The plan will:
  - Expand scholarship and tuition assistance programs for military veterans and those who devote a year of their life to such service programs as AmeriCorps;
  - Increase low interest, federal education loans for college and graduate students interested in public service careers;
  - Create a national web portal that links Americans with service opportunities in their communities.

- Providing individuals who participate in Teach for America and other certified service programs with federal student loan reductions, tax credits for graduate school, and higher stipends;
- Create a federally supported scholarship fund for college and graduate students with a demonstrated commitment to public service.

---

<sup>i</sup> Each bulleted statistic from *Where We Stand: Major Challenges Facing Texas Education Today*, State Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn, February 2006: <http://www.window.state.tx.us/comptrol/wwstand/wws0512ed/wws0512.pdf>