Dear Lt. Governor Patrick, Speaker Phelan, and Members of the Legislature,

In Texas, our public schools are supported and held accountable by two separate systems — a school finance system and an accountability system. House Bill 4545 filed by Rep. Harold Dutton and Senate Bill 2094 filed by Sen. Larry Taylor confuse those systems with a program that financially rewards districts based on standardized test scores like the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). This proposal will disadvantage some of our most vulnerable students and further overemphasize the reliance on a one-day test performance.

Even good tests can create dysfunctional behavior when the stakes are too high, and outcomes funding—conditioning funding on students’ STAAR performance—could result in several unintended consequences. For example, it’s not unreasonable to expect we could see an even bigger focus on test drill and preparation by dramatically increasing the already high stakes of a single test on a single day.

Not only is there a lack of research suggesting students and teachers will perform better under financial incentives, polling also proves it is widely unpopular. Studies suggest such programs can actually widen performance gaps between wealthy and poor campuses. Statewide polling has revealed almost 80 percent of Texans oppose tying increases in public
school funding to student performance on state standardized tests. Texans are more concerned about test pressure, with 93 percent citing it as a “challenge” facing teachers.

Each student in our state has a constitutional right to an equitable system of funding public schools. Decades of litigation and policy debates have created our current school finance system to base funding on the students and not the property wealth of the district. Outcomes funding will result in funding some students less to punish the adults in that district or charter. The districts rewarded by outcomes funding will have a competitive advantage in paying teachers, further widening the resource gap for some students. Our accountability system exists to control and reward adult behavior. The students and their families are entitled to equitable funding regardless of whether the adults in charge have performed well.

Schools should be focusing on recovering from the impacts of the pandemic, not a student’s performance on a single test on a single day. Studies suggest there are likely to be substantial learning losses that our schools will need years to overcome. Let’s focus on strategies proven to improve teaching and learning that don’t come at such a high cost. Upping the stakes is a risk Texas can’t afford to take. It’s time to focus on the many ways we can support better performance rather than funding a narrow measure of it.

Sincerely,

Raise Your Hand Texas
Bexar County Education Coalition
Just Fund It TX
Pastors for Texas Children
Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment
Texas AFT
Texas Association of School Administrators
Texas Association of School Boards
Texas Association of Secondary School Principals
Texas Classroom Teachers Association
Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association
Texas State Teachers Association
United Educators Association