

December 10, 2018

Dear Chairman Scott Brister and members of the Texas Commission on Public School Finance,

Raise Your Hand Texas would like to thank the Texas Commission on Public School Finance for its work over the past year. The Commission initiated numerous beneficial policy discussions we hope will continue and advance during the upcoming legislative session.

Raise Your Hand agrees additional resources are required for our state to achieve desired outcomes, especially for students with greater educational needs. We appreciate the Commission's forward thinking and recommendations on this issue. New funding approaches are needed to address student poverty, language, special needs, and mental health challenges.

While we appreciate the direction of many of the Commission's proposals, we have policy concerns with several of the allotment and incentive programs being recommended. First, we do not believe the Third Grade Reading Allotment appropriately addresses funding of full-day pre-K. Funding a full-day pre-K program through the formulas is essential. Second, incentive programs are not an appropriate framework on which to base our state's school finance system. The finance system must be structured to provide sustainable, reliable program funding so school districts can appropriately plan and fund innovative programs. Finally, meaningful property tax relief for Texas taxpayers must be balanced with meaningful new investments for public education.

Prior to adopting final recommendations, we encourage the Commission to further consider the Third Grade Reading Allotment, the teacher incentive pay program, the Third Grade Reading Incentive program, and potential property tax relief.

### **Third Grade Reading Allotment**

The goal of students reading on grade level by the third grade is crucial. However, this outcome represents a culmination of five years of dedicated, focused instruction, starting in pre-K. Pre-K has a proven track record of greater improvement in learning for those students entering kindergarten, especially for economically disadvantaged or dual-language learners. Many Texas students are mobile and attend multiple districts through their early education. Public schools must provide a consistent foundation to produce the desired outcomes in third grade and beyond. Our state has seen this firsthand in many district programs. In Dallas ISD, students who attend full-day pre-K outperform their peers on third grade reading tests. The most effective investment Texas can make in early childhood education is full-day pre-K.

As proposed, the recommendation still only funds pre-K on a half-day basis, allowing the Third Grade Reading Allotment to potentially fill in any funding gaps in a full-day program. We encourage the Commission to adopt a final recommendation that funds full-day pre-K through the existing formulas because it is the most sustainable approach. However, if the proposed working group recommendations move forward, we believe, at a minimum, the new Third Grade Reading Allotment should fund full-day pre-K first, prior to funding any other activities allowed under the new funding mechanism.

## **Teacher Compensation Program**

Raise Your Hand supports funding for programs that work, not funding for student performance based solely on a single test. Proposals that tie funding to assessment divert the school finance system from its intended purpose. The proposed High-Quality Teacher Compensation and Third-Grade Reading incentive programs end up reducing funding to students that need it most.

The state must address teacher compensation and place a priority on recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. The current teacher compensation recommendation only phases in a teacher incentive program at \$100 million per year with no discussion of across-the-board pay increases for all teachers. Raise Your Hand respects the need for locally developed and locally approved teacher pay incentive programs. We also believe the state must focus on attracting a new, highly trained generation of teachers who will stay in the profession for years to come. Pivotal prerequisites to meeting this goal include:

- More field experience for aspiring teachers prior to full-time classroom,
- Ongoing professional development and mentoring while in the classroom
- Compensation that acknowledges the value of teachers and makes the profession more attractive in the state's competitive economy

Raise Your Hand believes the Commission must develop a more comprehensive and robust recommendation on teacher compensation.

## **Third-Grade Reading Incentive Program**

While we appreciate the policy intent to drive better student performance on the third-grade STAAR exam, basing school funding on a third grader's performance on one test given on one day is not a school finance plan. The state already holds schools accountable for STAAR exam results within our state A-F accountability system. The state has mechanisms in place to turn around and even close campuses not meeting our state's accountability standards. Withholding funding from campuses with a high percentage of educationally disadvantaged students because they did not "Meet Standards" on the STAAR exam is a contradiction to the other policy recommendations of the Commission that flow additional funding to these students. Raise Your Hand urges the Commission to rethink this policy recommendation and direct funding to programs proven as more effective and efficient.

## Property Tax Relief and Education Funding

Raise Your Hand understands the need to provide Texas taxpayers with meaningful property tax relief. We believe any reduction in property taxes, however, should be equal and uniform across the state to maintain Texas as an attractive business destination. We also believe in upholding the standard of “similar revenue for similar tax effort” in our school funding system to ensure meaningful equity.

In addition, the state must provide at least an equivalent amount of new funding for education programs as it does for property tax relief. For each dollar of property tax relief, at least an additional new dollar must be invested in public education.

And while Raise Your Hand fully understands the Texas Legislature must approve the final program changes and funding amounts, we hope the Commission will adopt a recommendation to fund our public schools at a level that keeps up with inflation and the other demands of our system.

Once again, Raise Your Hand appreciates the countless hours of effort each of you have contributed to this process. We hope the final product adds insight and direction to the policy discussions and debates beginning again in January.

Respectfully,



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