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Texas School Alliance Statement on Governor Abbott’s Property Tax Policy Plan

The Texas School Alliance welcomes the opportunity to openly and honestly discuss the property tax burden on Texans that Governor Abbott highlighted in his recent policy statement. While this is a complex issue about which reasonable minds can differ, we wholeheartedly endorse the Governor’s statement on page 19:

“The state must therefore be prepared to increase its share to the extent necessary to ensure that public schools have access to the funding they need.”

We are accountable to our communities for educating our students in the manner our elected boards oversee, within state standards and subject to the state’s accountability system. Our boards are accountable to the voters in our communities, who also must approve our local bond issues.

The recent history of state funding shows that, despite the ever-growing student population and the demand to increase the educational attainment level of our students, state funding per student has essentially been stagnant from 2008 to 2016. The state has largely been the beneficiary of rising local property tax bases through the equalizing mechanisms of the Foundation School Program. Virtually all improvements to public education funding have come from increasing local tax revenue. Even then, inflation adjusted total revenue per student in average daily attendance has increased a mere 1.2% from 2008 to 2016.

We have several concerns at this early stage of discussion. The required supermajority vote for bond elections and measures to exceed the revenue cap are more restrictive than the requirements of most other ballot measures, including constitutional amendments that can dedicate billions of dollars of state revenue to limited purposes.

The proposal lacks a straightforward mechanism to make up the revenues to which school districts will no longer have access. There are also no specific details of how spending would be limited when voters approve tax rates that exceed the revenue cap. Many districts that were impacted by recent natural disasters can attest to their needs for flexibility in the use of revenue.

School districts have had tax rate caps for decades through the truth-in-taxation and rollback requirements of the Tax Code. More recently, school districts have been subject to a cap on maintenance and operations revenue of \$1.04, which cannot be exceeded without voter approval. We believe an authentic dialogue regarding the appropriate roles of state and local taxation in funding public education is overdue, and look forward to the coming year as the legislature considers the Governor’s suggestions.