May 25, 2018

The Honorable Mike Morath
Commissioner, Texas Education Agency
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Commissioner Morath,

Thank you for your hard work on behalf of our schools impacted by Hurricane Harvey. As state lawmakers representing children directly affected by the storm, we appreciate the flexibility you have already provided to districts in relaxing certain accountability requirements, most notably in the areas of 5th and 8th grade reading and math exams.

We understand the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is currently in the process of drafting a proposed rule on a “not rated” designation for campuses within the Governor’s declared disaster area. We also know TEA plans to make the proposed rule public in June 2018.

The purpose of this letter is to once again urge you to provide a “not rated” designation for all schools within the Governor’s declared disaster area. We also urge you to pause all state sanctions associated with HB 1842 for one year to allow our communities to recover from Hurricane Harvey without the undue pressure and fear of losing local control of their school boards or their campuses to state closure.

We are troubled by certain comments made during your testimony in the House Public Education Committee on April 18, 2018. Specifically, you mentioned TEA was in the process of collecting information on a “campus-by-campus level.” This statement implies TEA is drafting the proposed rule for certain campuses within the Governor’s declared disaster area. As you know, due to the catastrophic damage caused by Hurricane Harvey, a state of disaster continues to exist in all of this area.
We applaud your work on assessing the physical damage and disruption at each campus. However, it is much more difficult to assess the emotional and psychological impact of this unique storm. For this reason, it is only right that all campuses be provided a “not rated” designation under the proposed rule.

Additionally, the provisions of HB 1842 (84R) trigger sanctions this year for HISD and other districts across Texas. The law’s intent was to motivate adults to take charge of student outcomes. The legislative intent was never to impose state-authorized school closures or takeovers in the aftermath of America’s worst flood.

Simply put, Hurricane Harvey hit these campuses at the worst possible time.

We all know this is not a normal school year. In Houston ISD, Hurricane Harvey displaced over 23,000 students and over 1,000 teachers. Over 200 Houston ISD schools had water intrusion, and 75 schools had major or extensive damage. Harvey did not discriminate on the basis of race or zip code. School communities in wealthy and low-income communities were damaged. Our constituents are still in recovery mode. Students, teachers, and other school staff were displaced from their homes for an extended amount of time. This level of disruption and trauma must be factored into your decision.

We are continuing to work with and urge Houston ISD leadership to identify the solutions required to turn around its struggling campuses. Some of this work is already underway under the District’s Achieve 180 Initiative. We fear this hard work and continued hurricane recovery work within the district will be interrupted, hindered, and delayed if the state imposes “death penalty” sanctions on the district.

Now is not the time for strict compliance of severe sanctions. Now is the time for a heartfelt and generous response for our children and their schools. Let’s continue to work together for our children.

Sincerely,

Alma C. Allen
Representative Alma Allen – HD 131

Garnet Coleman
Representative Garnet F. Coleman – HD 147

Carol Alvarado
Representative Carol Alvarado – HD 145

Jessica Farrar
Representative Jessica Farrar – HD 148
Representative Ana Hernandez – HD 143

Representative Jarvis Johnson – HD 139

Senator Borris Miles – SD 13

Representative Shawn Thierry – HD 146

Representative Senfronia Thompson – HD 141

Representative Armando Walle – HD 140

Cc: Governor Greg Abbott
Lt. Governor Dan Patrick
Speaker Joe Straus
Chairman Larry Taylor
Chairman Dan Huberty
Houston ISD Board of Education