The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted almost every state. Among those most hurt is my own state of Texas. What is happening here is emblematic of the consequences of government playing politics with health and education.

Allow me to explain.

Texas’ Governor Greg Abbott late last week predicted the obvious about future cases of COVID-19 in the state, declaring that next week things “will look worse.” We must wonder what his first clue was.

On Friday there were less than 1,000 ICU beds available throughout the state of Texas, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). Additionally, there were 9,869 Covid-19 positive patients hospitalized in Texas. The latest DSHS information shows that this was a record number of hospitalizations and that they have steadily increased since mid-June—and likely will continue to increase.

Make no mistake about it: the Governor is partially to blame for the severity of the crisis, having prematurely opened the state prior to meeting CDC health gating criteria. He chose to side with Lt. Gov. Dan
Patrick (a Texas politician who has made absurd and insensitive statements about the pandemic), business interests and political preferences instead of the health of Texans.

And now Abbott may be doubling down on that mistake, threatening to disallow mayors in major urban areas like Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio from issuing new stay at home orders for a set period of time until things are under control and a safe plan can be implemented. Hence, many of the lost lives—past and future—should be on the Governor’s conscience.

To make matters worse, the governor also has refused to suspend the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) standardized test. It makes no sense to spend $90 million this year to administer the Texas STAAR test in the middle of a pandemic.

Texas is in the middle of an alarming spike in Coronavirus cases; Houston, for example, has a 25% COVID-19 test positivity rate and Texas has the highest number of uninsured individuals in the country. Abbott doesn’t seem to realize that continuing high stakes testing is an affront to every homeless student and every poor and vulnerable person who was struggling before this pandemic.

What the governor is doing punishes schools and communities at a time when the state should be promoting safety, racial equity, as well as the academic, social and emotional well-being of students and families. In short, allowing the administration of the STAAR exam further exacerbates what we knew before the pandemic—that high stakes testing measures poverty, not learning.

Moreover, the governor seems unwilling to release the $1.2 billion CARES Act funds to local school districts. Instead Abbott is holding the money hostage at the expense of students, teachers and staff. This not
only sabotages reopening plans at the local level but places the most vulnerable students, for whom school is a safe haven, at increased risk.

My argument, therefore, is that Texas has a governor who is playing a dangerous political game with both health and education of the state’s citizens. This is unacceptable. I hope voters will not forget this when Abbott is up for reelection.

While I respectfully disagree with most of the Governor’s policies on non-pandemic issues, prior to the pandemic I at least thought he was a decent and moral person, and believed his promise that he would allow policies to be based on data. I am no longer certain about that judgment. As a former University of Texas at Austin (UT) faculty member, Abbott is no longer one of our graduates for whom I am proud. UT’s motto is: “What Starts Here Changes the World.” In the case of Abbott, perhaps that change may not be good.

Cherwitz is the Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication, The University of Texas at Austin