

SUMMARY POINTS: A DISTRICT PLAN FOR INNOVATION & LOCAL CONTROL

“Innovation is generated by thinking outside the box.”

Districts of Innovation may be exempt from state statutes to:

- The 84th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 1842 in spring 2015, providing public school districts the opportunity to become *Districts of Innovation*. To qualify, an eligible school district must adopt a five-year innovation plan according to the Texas Education Code.
- Take greater local control in decision-making about the educational and instructional model for students;
- Have increased autonomy from state mandates that govern educational programming; and
- Be empowered to innovate and plan differently-to think and dream outside the box.

Why is Lindale ISD seeking the state’s official designation as a District of Innovation?

- The Lindale ISD Board of Trustees resolved in December 2016 to seek designation as a District of Innovation.
- The plan supports exemplary practices and local decision-making processes to improve student learning.
- The board appointed a District of Innovation Committee to represent teachers, parents, campus administrators and local community members. The committee drafted this plan on Thursday, February 16, 2017.

Under this plan, what might innovation look like in Lindale ISD?

- In this case, innovation does not necessarily mean ambitious new initiatives beyond the school district’s current strategic plan. Instead, it would signify Lindale ISD has achieved the privilege and flexibility to exercise more creative local control over existing quality programs without some statutory constraints.

This plan will:

- **Maintain reasonable class sizes in grades K-4.** Except in unique and extenuating circumstances and only with the Board of Trustees’ consent, Lindale ISD will make every effort to begin each school year with enough teachers to preserve an important student-to-teacher ratio of 22:1 per K-4 homeroom class.
- **Determine a flexible school start date.** Lindale ISD will determine on an annual basis its own local starting date for the first semester, not to precede the second Monday in August of any given year, instead of the Texas statute that requires districts to begin a new school year on or after the fourth Monday of August.

- **Allow alternatives to educator certification.** When a certified educator is not found, the school district may allow a non-certified, degreed professional to teach OR a certified educator to teach a subject in a related field without the traditional state credentials.
- **Adjust instructional minutes and school day length.** Lindale ISD will make every effort to meet the goal of 75,600 instructional minutes per year, but may want to approach this total more creatively without being confined to either 420 minutes or seven hours of instruction every day.
- **Probationary contracts.** Lindale ISD will issue probationary contracts to new experienced teachers for at least two years. This will give administrators ample time to properly evaluate and provide the professional training and growth opportunities.
- **Teacher planning periods.** Flexibility given to the local campus to have planning meetings during conference periods instead of meeting after school hours.

The first District of Innovation Plan for Lindale ISD was approved by the Texas Education Agency in 2017. The plan was approved for five years. Lindale ISD is seeking approval of the same plan for another five-year period.

LINDALE ISD DISTRICT OF INNOVATION PLAN 2022 - 2027

1. MAINTAIN REASONABLE CLASS SIZES IN GRADES K-4

(TEC 25.112a-g) (TEC 25.113a-b) (EEB LEGAL)

Manner in which the statute inhibits the plan:

The Texas Education Code requires districts to maintain 22 students or less in kindergarten through 4th grade classes. A school district must complete and file a waiver with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for each class that exceeds this limit. These waivers are rarely rejected by TEA, making the process primarily for awareness purposes and to preserve a more personal instructional environment.

State law also requires districts to notify parents of waivers or exceptions to class size limits. Sometimes during the course of a school year, due to shifting enrollments, a class may return to a smaller student-to-teacher ratio before or after the waiver is formally granted, thus negating the notice or causing parents and staff unnecessary concern.

Lindale ISD certainly recognizes reasonable class size plays a positive role in the classroom, and acknowledges the intent of the state requirements. However, class size must be balanced with the logistics and timing of adding staff, available campus resources or space, and the optimal teacher-to-student ratio given the total number, age and needs of students. Often, it is not the number of the students but the makeup and chemistry of the classroom which create a more personal instructional environment. Most importantly, research shows the teacher in the classroom has the greatest impact on student learning, not absolute class size. This exemption does not disregard the intent of class size ratio requirements, but rather, allows Lindale ISD the local control to determine class size.

Local Innovation Strategies:

- A. In compliance with the TEC 25.112, Lindale ISD will make every effort to begin each school year with enough teachers to establish a student-to-teacher ratio of 22:1 per K-4 homeroom class. Also, consistent with TEC 25.113, if, after consideration of the factors outlined below, any class size exceeds this ratio during the school year, the superintendent will inform and obtain consent from the Board of Trustees – in accordance with district policy, procedure and practice – AND will notify parents of affected students.

- B. If, during the school year, a K-4 homeroom exceeds 22:1, the administration will have 30 school days to consider:
1. The subject/age to be taught, the teaching methodology to be used and any need for individual instruction in the class;
 2. Available space and resources;
 3. Whether another teacher should be hired (thus creating a new classroom);
 4. Whether a teaching assistant could be added to the homeroom class; or
 5. Whether keeping the class intact is more advantageous than separating students, in which case the class size may slightly exceed 22:1.
- C. Consistent with TEC 25.112, TEC 25.114 and TEA guidance, the 22:1 ratio does not apply to physical education or fine arts classes. In such subjects, Lindale ISD will consider student/teacher ratios appropriate to carry out the curriculum and ensure student and staff safety.
- D. Additionally, consistent with TEC 25.112, Lindale ISD will not be required to seek consent from the Board of Trustees for a homeroom classroom that may exceed 22:1 during the last 12 weeks of the school year.
- E. A TEA waiver will no longer be filed when a K-4 classroom exceeds the 22:1 ratio, although the Lindale ISD Board of Trustees must still consent – in accordance with district policy, procedure and practice- AND parents must still be notified.

2. DETERMINE A FLEXIBLE SCHOOL START DATE

(Tec 25.0811a) (EB LEGAL)

Manner in which the statute inhibits the plan:

The Texas Education Code states a school district may not begin student instruction before the fourth Monday of August. For many years this was the rule; however, districts had the option of applying for a waiver to begin earlier, even as early as the second Monday in August.

The start-date waiver was eventually removed when the legislature determined school districts should begin the first semester no earlier than the fourth Monday of August, with no exceptions. The current process allows no flexibility in the design and balancing of instructional semesters to meet the needs of students or the wishes of the local Board of Trustees, who represent community interests in this matter.

Local Innovation Strategy

- A. Lindale ISD will determine on an annual basis the local start date of the first semester, not to precede the second Monday in August of any given year.
- B. The annual calendar will be submitted by the District Leadership Team and approved by the Board of Trustees – in accordance with district policy, procedure and practice.

3. ALLOW ALTERNATIVES TO EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION FOR DISTINCTIVE SUBJECTS

(TEC 21.003a) (TEC 21.057a-e) (DK LEGAL)

Manner in which the statute inhibits the plan:

Texas Education Code states a person may not be employed as an educator by a school district unless the individual holds an appropriate certificate or permit issued by the appropriate state agency. In the event a school district cannot locate a certified teacher for a position, or a teacher is teaching a subject outside her or his certification, the district must request emergency certification from the Texas Education Agency and/or the State Board of Educator Certification. This system is burdensome and does not take into account the unique financial and/or instructional needs of the district, especially for innovative classes where certifications may not exist or educators with those credentials may not be readily available.

Local Innovation Strategies:

- A. In exceptional circumstances, when a certified educator is not found for a unique or innovative class, the campus principal may submit to the superintendent a request for *local* certification that will allow a non-certified but degreed professional to teach OR a certified educator to teach a subject in a related field for which she or he is not credentialed by the state.
- B. The principal must specify in writing the reason for the request and document what qualifications the individual possesses to teach the proposed subject. Emergency or financial situations creating the need for this assignment should also be noted.
- C. A teacher certification waiver, state permit applications or other paperwork will not be submitted to the Texas Education Agency.

4. ADJUST INSTRUCTIONAL MINUTES AND SCHOOL DAY LENGTH

(TEC 25.081) (TEC 25.082) (EB LEGAL)

The Texas Education Codes define the length of the instructional day as “420 minutes of instruction” or “seven hours each day including intermissions and recesses.” The intent of this code is to standardize across all districts the amount of time students engage in classroom learning. The school code also allows school districts and charter schools to add minutes as necessary to compensate for minutes of instruction lost due to school closures caused by disaster, flood, extreme weather conditions, fuel curtailment or another calamity.

Lindale ISD believes flexibility in use of minutes as well as the length of the school day will support teachers and staff who participate in Professional Learning Communities, perfecting their craft, deepening their content knowledge and analyzing student data. In addition - particularly at the elementary level – flexibility in both instructional minutes and the length of the school day will protect all-important parent-teacher conferences especially in the event of inclement weather days, which may impact cumulative instructional minutes allocated over the course of a school year.

Local Innovation Strategies:

- A. Lindale ISD will make an effort to maintain the total of 75,600 minutes of instruction per year, but seeks an exemption from these statutes as necessary so it may approach the 75,600-minute goal in a more creative manner without being confined to either 420 minutes or seven hours of instruction every day.
- B. The flexibility to adjust minutes of instruction can reinforce personalized learning through the increasing use of advanced instructional technology, and will better meet individual student needs.
- C. This exemption will also allow Lindale ISD to alter the length of a school day or a school year, which could include additional professional development or collaboration opportunities for educators, social-emotional benefits for students, and will allow for accommodations during parent-teacher conferences or in case of inclement weather.

5. Probationary Contracts

(TEC 21.102) (DCA LEGAL)

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan

For experienced teachers new to the district, the probationary period may not exceed one year if the person has been employed as a teacher in public education for at least five of the previous eight years. This time period is not sufficient to evaluate the teacher’s effectiveness in the classroom since teacher contract timelines demand that employment decisions must be made prior to state assessment results.

Local Innovation Strategies

- A. For experienced teachers, counselors, or nurses new to the district that have been employed as a teacher, counselor or nurse in public education for at least five of the eight previous years, a probationary contract may be issued for up to two years from the last date of district employment.

6. Teacher Planning Periods

(TEC 21.404) (DL LEGAL)

The Texas Education Code states that each classroom teacher is entitled to at least 450 minutes within each two-week period for instructional preparation, including parent-teacher conferences, evaluating students' work, and planning. A planning and preparation period under this section may not be less than 45 minutes within the instructional day. During a planning and preparation period, a classroom teacher may not be required to participate in any other activity.

Local Innovation Strategies

- A. Exemption from this requirement will provide each campus with the local control needed to determine how best to use staff time, especially as it pertains to collaborative planning and best meeting the needs of the students.
- B. Exemption from this statute will reduce the number of after school meetings for teachers.
- C. Campus administration will limit the number of adjustments to a teacher's planning period to no more than two times per week and preferably one or less.

