

Press Release
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Comfort ISD Unveils Districts of Innovation Plan

House Bill 1842, passed in the 84th Texas Legislative Session, provides an opportunity for Texas public school districts to modify state requirements at the local level to better meet the needs of their unique student populations, in order to prepare them for success and lifelong learning. The Comfort ISD Board of Trustees approved a committee to research and develop an Innovation Plan for the District. As a District of Innovation, Comfort ISD will be able to implement our Strategic Plan with the increased flexibility and freedom necessary to personalize learning experiences. An essential tenet of personalization is that every child experiences school differently. In a way, personalization provides a unique “school” for every child. Thus, we must have the ability to make important educational decisions for our students at the local level.

The District of Innovation Committee met and reviewed the requirements to develop and implement an innovation plan. The group analyzed several innovation plans developed by other school districts and selected six areas to address.

Length of School Day is the first item listed in the plan. State law currently requires that all school days must be 420 minutes long each day in order to count for ADA calculations and funding purposes, and to accumulate instructional minutes towards the 75,600 minutes required annually. Exemption from the 420-minute day requirement would allow Comfort the flexibility needed to alter the school day schedule on selected days whenever it was locally determined as necessary or beneficial to the district and its stakeholders. While there is a waiver process available to request exemption from this requirement, the waiver is limited to a 6-day maximum number for the school year.

Class size and student teacher ratios is the second area addressed in the plan. State law requires districts to maintain an average student-teacher ratio at most of 20 to 1 for average daily attendance. For physical education, the student-teacher ratio cannot be greater than 45 to 1. In Kindergarten through grade four, the class student-teacher ratio must not exceed 22 to 1. While small class sizes play a positive role in the classroom, it must be balanced with the logistics of the timing of adding staff, and the best teacher to student ratio that can be achieved given the total number of students. While it is often cited that smaller class sizes improve academic performance, the decision for what size is the appropriate size should be a local decision. Many times it is not the number of the students but the makeup and chemistry of the classroom which influence the learning environment. Most importantly, research clearly shows it is the teacher in the classroom that has the greatest impact on student learning, not absolute class size.

Student attendance is another identified item in the plan. State law mandates a student may not be given credit or a final grade for a class unless the student is in attendance for at least 90 percent of the days the class is offered. In addition, if a student is in attendance greater than 75 percent and less than 90 percent, the student may be given credit or a final grade for the class if the student completes a plan approved by the campus administrator and meets the instructional requirements for the class. The 90 percent rule is an arbitrary percentage. Districts should have the option to set their own requirement. Local districts need the flexibility to set attendance requirements which reflect their specific situations and expectations. Abstaining from the requirement means the district won't have to penalize students who miss class due to extra/co-curricular activities, academic activities, or other extenuating circumstances. The flexibility can allow for local boards to set higher expectations for attendance while promoting student engagement, as well as social and emotional development, by encouraging more students to participate in extracurricular activities.

Teacher certification requirements were also identified in the plan. The current state teacher certification requirements inhibit the District's ability to hire teachers to teach hard-to-fill, high demand, dual credit and career and technical courses. Comfort ISD is located in a rural area which limits course offerings and creates a need to utilize creative instructional methods district wide. Allowing local district control over certification requirements in order to better enable students to obtain the educational benefits of such course offering, the District seeks to establish its own local qualification requirements and its own requirements for training professionals and experts to teach such courses in lieu of the requirements set forth in law.

The campus principal may submit to the superintendent a request to allow a certified teacher to instruct and supervise students out of their certified field. The principal must specify in writing the reason for the request and document the credentials the certified teacher possesses that would qualify this individual to teach this subject.

An individual with experience in a CTE field could be eligible to teach a vocational skill or course through a local teaching certificate. The principal will submit a request to the superintendent with all the individual's credentials. The superintendent may approve the request. If approved, the superintendent will report the action to the Board of Trustees prior to the individual beginning employment. Local teacher certificates will be issued for one year. The employee will be at-will.

State law currently prohibits school districts from starting class before the fourth Monday in August, unless they are year-round districts. The flexibility of the start date allows the district to determine locally, on an annual basis, what best meets the needs of the students, the school, and the community. Additionally, the ability to change the school start date can also help to better balance the amount of days in each semester and to better align with dual-credit college courses in the Fall, Spring and Summer semesters. Comfort ISD will start school no earlier than the third Monday in August, end the first semester prior to the December break, and will end the second semester prior the first Friday in June.

The current T-TESS evaluation tool is a very effective assessment for teachers who teach in a normal classroom setting. However, the model does not fit all teaching assignments. The exemption would allow the Comfort ISD Administrative Team to develop an alternate evaluation tool for teachers assigned to identified courses. (Examples include but are not limited to: Content Mastery, Life Skills, Gifted and Talented, ELL, and Inclusion.)

This plan is specific to the exemptions as outlined. The district intends to follow the Texas Education Code in all other areas. If at some point it is decided that changes or additional exemptions should be considered, as per the Districts of Innovation Process, the district will reconvene the District of Innovation Planning Committee to explore the request.

The direction provided by this District of Innovation Plan is an important step forward to ensure Comfort ISD develops and supports our students, employees and families in a more personalized, more effective and strategically aligned way. Moving our system toward the more personalized environment our students deserve will enable us to better prepare them according to their individualized needs and their unique passions, gifts, and talents. Through HB 1842, Comfort ISD will be positioned to leverage increased flexibility to make the best decisions for our children because we will be able to make them locally.

The plan may be viewed on the Comfort ISD website: www.comfort.txed.net under the *About Us* tab. Members of the Districts of Innovation Committee are Jacob Geistweidt, Josh Limmer, Donald Love, Billy Klemstein, Katherine Kuentler, Bruce Lott, Kurt Solis, Deanna Brummett, Lilly Edwards, and Leslie Vann.