

Valley Mills Independent School District

District of Innovation Plan

Date of Board Approval: June 15, 2022

Introduction

House Bill 1842, of 84th Legislative Session allows Texas Independent School Districts the opportunity to be designated as a District of Innovation allowing local control and flexibility from state-level regulations similar to those enjoyed by charter schools. These flexibilities adopted by the district are set forth in Texas Education Code Chapter 12A.

The purposes of this chapter are to:

- 1) improve student learning;
- 2) increase the choice of learning opportunities within the public school system;
- 3) create professional opportunities that will attract new teachers to the public school system;
- 4) establish a new form of accountability for public schools; and
- 5) encourage different and innovative learning methods.

Vision

Valley Mills ISD intends to use this opportunity to develop a plan that focuses on the District's vision of, "Soaring for Excellence", and recognizes the unique needs of our students and community.

Term

The five year plan will take effect August 1, 2022 and end July 31, 2027 unless rescinded or terminated by the Board of Trustees. To ensure the success of all VMISD students, the committee is committed to constantly monitoring and making necessary amendments to be presented to the Board of Trustees for approval.

District Advisory Committee

Chris Dowdy	Superintendent
Josh Jones	Director of Student Services
Julie Tidmore	Secondary Principal
Tessa Dowdy	Elementary Principal
Jodi Williams	High School Teacher
Brandy Cooper	Junior High Teacher
Tracy Sexton	Elementary Teacher
Lindsey Cox	Secondary Nurse
Sheri Fisk	Elementary Nurse
Jennifer Boles	Parent
Rhonda Jernigan	Parent
Shannon Cathey	Parent
Lacy Cathey	Business/Community Member

Timeline

- March 22, 2022- Final version of proposed plan posted on District website
- May 9, 2022- Superintendent notifies commissioner of intention to vote on adoption of plan
- May 20, 2022- DAC public hearing to consider final version of proposed plan
- June 15, 2022- Board of trustees votes on final proposed plan
- June 16, 2022- District notifies commissioner of approved plan
- June 16, 2022- District ensures approved plan is posted on the District website
- June 16, 2022- District provides a website link of approved plan to TEA

The requirements imposed by the education code from which Valley Mills ISD seeks exemption:

School Start and End Date

Exemption from: TEC §25.0811; TEC §25.0812 Related Board Policies: EB (LEGAL)

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan:

TEC §25.0811 states that a school district may not begin student instruction before the 4th Monday of August. TEC §25.0812 states that a school district may not schedule the last day of school before May 15. The current process allows no flexibility in the design of annual calendars to fit the needs of the community or the wishes of the local Board of Trustees who represent community interests in this matter.

Previously, districts had the option of applying to TEA for a waiver to start earlier, even as early as the 2nd Monday in August. The Texas tourism groups lobbied to have this stopped because they believed it was hurting their tourism business. Therefore, several years ago the legislature took away all waivers and dictated that districts may not begin until the 4th Monday, with no exceptions.

Innovation Strategies:

- a. Relief from the statute will allow Valley Mills ISD to develop a calendar that addresses student instruction and focused professional development in conjunction with the new instructional minute's requirement, rather than days.
- b. Alignment of the district calendar with local universities, Community Colleges, TSTC, ACT/SAT exams, advanced placement exams, and STAAR timelines.
- c. Provide for increased local control of the instructional calendar in order to be responsive to community needs.

Kindergarten - Grade 4 Class Size Reporting Requirement

Exemption From: TEC§25.112; TEC§25.113 Related Board Policies: EEB (LEGAL/LOCAL)

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan:

TEC §25.112 requires districts to maintain a class size of 22 students or less for Kindergarten - 4th Grade classes. When any class exceeds this limit, the district must complete and file a waiver with the Texas Education Agency. These waivers are never rejected by TEA. This is a bureaucratic step that serves no purpose.

TEC §25.113 requires school districts to notify parents of waivers or exceptions to class size limits. In many cases, the class has returned to a smaller student to teacher ratio before the waiver is even approved, negating the need for this notice.

Innovation Strategies:

- a. Valley Mills ISD believes in a low student to teacher ratio in all of its classrooms. The District has a goal of 18/1 in K-4 and 20/1 in 5-12. Valley Mills ISD will begin each school year with enough teachers to establish a student to teacher ratio of at least 22:1 or less in each K-4 homeroom class. In the event that any class size exceeds this ratio during the school year, the superintendent will report this information to the Board of Trustees. Decisions regarding appropriate student to teacher ratios will be made at the local level, taking into consideration the age and grade level of the students, the subject matter of the class, the needs of individual teachers and student groups, and the availability of additional instructional staff members.
- b. A TEA waiver request will not be filed when a K-4 classroom exceeds the 22:1 ratio.

Teacher Certification

Exemption from: TEC §21.003; TEC §21.053; TEC §21.057

Relevant Board Policies: DBA (LEGAL/LOCAL); DK (LEGAL/LOCAL)

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan

TEC §21.003 states that a person may not be employed as a teacher, teacher intern or trainee, librarian, educational aide, administrator, educational diagnostician, or school counselor by a school district unless the person holds an appropriate certificate or permit issued by the appropriate state agency.

In the event a district cannot locate a certified teacher for a position or a teacher is teaching a subject outside of their certification, the district must request emergency certification from the Texas Education Agency and/or State Board for Educator Certification. This system is burdensome and does not take into account the unique financial and/or instructional needs of the district.

TEC §21.053 requires a teacher to present his or her certificate to the District before their employment contract will be binding, and prohibits the District from paying an educator for teaching if the educator does not hold a valid certificate at the time.

TEC §21.057 requires that the District provide written notice to parents if an inappropriately certified or uncertified teacher is assigned to a classroom for more than 20 consecutive instructional days.

Innovation Strategies:

a. Valley Mills ISD is a small rural district that continually has problems finding certified teachers in some content areas. Valley Mills ISD will maintain its current expectations for employee certification. The District will make every attempt to hire individuals with appropriate certification for the position in question; however, where that is not reasonably possible, the District will have the flexibility to hire individuals who are knowledgeable in the area and equipped to effectively perform the duties of the position in question.

b. For grades 5-12, the campus principal may submit to the superintendent a request for local certification that will allow an already certified teacher to teach a course or grade level for which he/she is not certified. The principal must specify in writing the reason for the request and document what credentials or life experience the teacher possesses that would qualify this individual to teach the proposed subject.

c. An individual with experience in the content of an elective course could be eligible to teach a vocational skill, CTE, STEM, or elective course through a local teaching certificate. The principal must specify in writing the reason for the request and document what credentials or life experience the teacher possesses that would qualify this individual to teach the proposed subject. Examples: an experienced homebuilder teaching a building trades course, a licensed welder teaching a welding course, or a District RN teaching health science course.

d. Whenever possible, instructional planning for the uncertified teacher's course will be created in partnership with certified teachers in the same field. Uncertified teachers will be provided teacher mentoring, increased observations and feedback, professional development or instructional resources, or other supports.

e. The superintendent will report this action to the Board of Trustees at the first board meeting following the assignment.

f. Teacher certification waiver requests, state permit applications, or other paperwork will not be submitted to the Texas Education Agency. The District will ensure that all individuals assigned to teach have the knowledge and resources necessary to be successful.

g. **Note:** special education and bilingual/ESL teachers must continue to be SBEC certified.

Probationary Contracts

Exemption from: TEC §21.102(b) Relevant Board Policies: 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. A one year probationary period is not sufficient to evaluate the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom since teacher contract renewal timelines demand that employment decisions be made prior to District receipt of state assessment results.

Innovation Strategies:

For experienced teachers, counselors, or nurses new to the district that have been employed as a teacher in public education for at least five of the eight previous years, a probationary contract may be issued for up to two years. All other teachers hired in the District may remain on probationary status for three years, and may be issued a fourth year of probation in accordance with TEC §21.102(c).

Professional Development / Mentor Teachers

Exemption from: TEC §21.451; TEC §21.458 Relevant Board Policies: DEAA (LEGAL)

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan:

TEC §21.451 prescribes staff development requirements for educators. These requirements impede the District's ability to provide timely professional development to employees based on newly emerging issues, data, and student needs.

TEC §21.458 sets eligibility requirements for teacher mentors and mentees. This provision states that the district may only assign a mentor to a teacher with less than two years of teaching experience, despite the fact that a teacher at any level of experience may benefit from a mentor-mentee relationship. The District needs the flexibility to assign mentors to more experienced teachers in need of assistance. The statute also sets eligibility requirements for mentor teachers, which limits the available pool of mentor teachers.

Innovation Strategies:

a. The District will exercise local discretion in determining the areas of need, content, duration, and frequency for professional development for its instructional and non-instructional staff.

b. The District will exercise local discretion in assigning teachers to serve as mentors based on a variety of factors, including experience, knowledge, and areas of instruction targeted for improvement or innovation.

Site-Based Decision Making

Exemption from: TEC §11.251, TEC §11.252

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan:

The VMISD seeks exemption from the site-based decision making process and the convening of the school health advisory committee and the many accompanying requirements falling under the governance of those two bodies. The statutory requirements as set forth by Texas Education Code in Chapter 11 and 28 are burdensome, time consuming, and ultimately cause a misdirection of resources from the primary focus of schools: the education of students. Stakeholders will continue to be involved in the process, but a District Advisory Council that meets the needs of this district, schools and community as opposed to the one based on a broad brush and "one size fits all" model of statutory requirements detailed in TEC §11.251. This will consolidate the number of meetings and the number of committees required by law and will better serve this community.

Innovation Strategies:

In place of a Site-based Decision Making Committee and the School Health Advisory Council, a District Advisory Council (DAC) will be established to meet, review, analyze, and respond to both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the District's success and most importantly, students' success. This Council will convene at least two times per year to guide the general direction of district resources and efforts. This consolidation of committees will yield an opportunity for one council to address multiple needs of the students served by the District as opposed to having multiple committees addressing a more narrow focus of needs. VMISD views this Council as a more efficient and effective way to serve our students, parents, and community.

Interdistrict Transfer students

Exemption from: TEC §25.036

Relevant Board Policies: FDA (LOCAL)

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan:

TEC 25.036 states that students attending a district through an interdistrict transfer may apply for transfer annually. This is interpreted that the interdistrict transfer must be for a term of one school year. On rare occasions, student behavior warrants suspension (in or out of school), placement in a disciplinary alternative program, or expulsion. In addition, student attendance may fall below the TEA truancy standard. In these cases, Valley Mills ISD seeks exemption from the one year transfer commitment.

Innovation Strategies:

- a. Valley Mills ISD will continue to accept transfers in accordance with local policy.
- b. An interdistrict transfer student may have such transfer status revoked by the Superintendent at any time during the year if the student is assigned discipline consequences of suspension (in or out of school), placement in a disciplinary alternative program, or expulsion.
- c. In addition, students not meeting the State's 90% attendance standard may also be subject to immediate revocation of the transfer status.

Behavior Management with Students Below Third Grade

Exemption from: TEC 37.005

Manner in which statute inhibits the goals of the plan:

Current law states that a student who is enrolled in a grade level below grade three may not be placed in out-of-school suspension unless while on school property or while attending a school-sponsored or school-related activity on or off of school property, the student engages in:

- conduct that contains the elements of an offense related to weapons under Section 46.02 (Unlawful Carrying Weapons) or 46.05 (Prohibited Weapons), Penal Code;
- conduct that contains the elements of a violent offense under Section 22.01 (Assault), 22.011 (Sexual Assault), 22.02 (Aggravated Assault), or 22.021 (Aggravated Sexual Assault), Penal Code; or
- selling, giving, or delivering to another person or possessing, using, or being under the influence of any amount of:
 - marijuana or a controlled substance, as defined by Chapter 481 (Texas Controlled Substances Act), Health and Safety Code, or by 21 U.S.C. Section 801 et seq.;
 - a dangerous drug, as defined by Chapter 483 (Dangerous Drugs), Health and Safety Code; or
 - an alcoholic beverage, as defined by Section 1.04 (Definitions), Alcoholic Beverage Code.

Innovation Strategies:

Relief from this statute would allow Valley Mills ISD administrators to suspend a student below the third grade-level in extreme circumstances. The principal must submit to the superintendent in writing the request to suspend, and he/she must specify the reason for the request and how it aligns with the goals of VMISD. The principal will be required to follow the behavior management plan that has been established. This plan will provide a safe learning environment for the students and staff of Valley Mills ISD.