

VERIBEST ISD

District of Innovation Plan

2017-2022

HB 1842, of the 84th Legislative Session, allows Texas district to qualify as a District of Innovation. Districts of Innovation are able to gain local control of certain operations that are currently under the control of the Texas Education Agency. We feel this is a great opportunity for our local district to tailor plans based on the needs of our students and community. Veribest ISD will exercise this authority to exempt itself from certain requirements listed in our following plan for a five-year period.

Texas Education Code Exemptions

The Innovation Committee reviewed the subchapters of the Texas Education Code to determine which permissible exemptions currently inhibit the district from maximizing the educational opportunities of the students who attend Veribest ISD.

1. Uniform Start Date

(EB Legal) (Texas Education Code 25-0811)

Current Law

Students are prohibited from starting school before the 4th Monday of August. For many years, this was strictly a local decision. Districts had the option to apply for a waiver to start earlier, even as early as the 2nd Monday of August. Also, Charter schools are not subject to the 4th Monday of August requirement and may schedule an earlier first school day.

The Texas Tourism group 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 exception.

Rationale for Exemption

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. In addition, this flexibility allows the district to better align its starting date to accommodate the start date of colleges in which the district uses for dual credit courses. Another benefit of exempting this restriction is to allow the school to look at starting classes as a short week which can ease the transition for students entering kindergarten, middle school, and high school. Additionally, the ability to change the school start date can also help to better balance the amount of days in each semester, which will allow teachers to better pace and deliver instruction before and after the winter break.

2. Length of School Day

(Texas Education Code 25.081)

Current Law

State law currently requires that all school days must be 420 minutes long each day in order to count for ADA calculations and funding purpose, and to accumulate instructional minutes toward the 75,600 minutes required annually.

Rationale for Exemption

Exemption from the 420-minute day requirement would allow Veribest ISD the flexibility needed to alter the school day schedule on selected days whenever it was locally determined as necessary or beneficial to the districts 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.

Exempting completely from the 420-minute requirement would give the district a significant amount of local control over scheduling (above and beyond the 6-day maximum as needed) without the fear of diminishing state funding or losing credit for instructional time that might cause the district to fall out of compliance with annual minute requirements. This would allow the district the flexibility to schedule non-instructional days into the schedule to allow for teachers to analyze student data and engage in targeted, relevant professional development.

Veribest ISD does not intend to shorten the school day on a regular basis, or without specific purpose. To the greatest extent possible, “early release” days would be planned ahead of time and noted in the district calendar, which is approved by the Board of Trustees and published/distributed to stakeholders in advance of the school year and continuously published using school media.

3. Teacher Certification

(Texas Education Codes 21.003, 21.044, 21.053, and 21.057)

Current Law

State law states that a person may not be employed as a teacher 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 of Educator Certification. This system is burdensome and does not take into account the unique financial and/or instructional needs of the district.

Rationale for Exemption

The current state teacher certification requirements inhibit the district’s ability to hire teachers to teach hard-to-fill, high demand, dual credit, as well as career and technical courses. Veribest ISD is located in a rural area which limits course offerings and we must utilize creative instructional methods district wide. By obtaining exemption from existing teacher certification requirements, Veribest ISD will 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. This will also apply to content area teachers for hard to fill positions.

4. Class Sizes and Student-Teacher Ratios

(Texas Education Codes 25.111, 25.112, 25.113, 25.114)

Current Law

State law requires districts to maintain an average student-teacher ratio at most of 20 to 1 in average daily attendance. For physical education, the student-teacher ratio cannot be greater than 45 to 1. In kindergarten through fourth grade, the class student-teacher ratio must not exceed 22 to 1.

Rationale for Exemption

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.

5. Contract Service Days

(Texas Education Code 21.401)

Current Law

State law currently requires educators employed on a 10-month contract to provide a minimum of 187 days of service.

Rationale for Exemption

With the passage of Ed. Code 25.081 which changed the required days of instruction to minutes, the law did not address contract days for 10-month contract employees. The determination of how many days are required to fulfill an employee's contract should be a local decision.

6. Probationary Contracts

(Texas Education Code 21.102)

Current Law

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.

Rationale for Exemption

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. Veribest ISD will have the authority to offer a probationary contract for up to two years from the last date of district employment for experienced teachers new to the district that has been employed as a teacher in public education for at least five of the previous eight years.

7. Retire/Rehire

(Texas Education Code 21.002, 21.402(a), 21.415)

Current Law

State law requires that all public school districts, when hiring a retired educator must keep the retired educator on a term or continuing contract and pay them their salary based upon the TEA minimum salary pay scale; in addition, the districts are required to pay a TRS surcharge. By hiring a retired educator, who is already receiving pension payments from the Texas Teacher Retirement System, at a salary that is equivalent to the salary the educator would have received had the educator not retired, and pay a surcharge for health insurance the retired educator receives from TRS, the retired educator is too expensive for the district to hire.

Rationale for Exemption

Veribest ISD would like the opportunity to hire an eligible retired educator without the burden of a term contract and pay them below the TEA minimum pay scale while also paying the required TRS surcharge. The salary for retire/rehire will be negotiable between the district and employee. Veribest ISD believes that by hiring an eligible retired educator our students, campuses, and district will reap the rewards of having a veteran educator who is still involved and passionate in the education process. In addition, the district will be able to have an experienced educator at a significantly less cost than had we paid them based upon the TEA minimum pay scale plus the TRS surcharge. Thus, by hiring an eligible retired educator Veribest ISD will be adding value in the schools and will be making sound fiscal decisions for our district's stakeholders.