

Districts of Innovation Q & A

What is District of Innovation?

In the spring of 2015, the 84th Legislature passed House Bill 1842, providing public school districts with sufficient academic ratings the opportunity to become Districts of Innovation (DOI). This designation allows public school districts to have more local control on certain provisions of the Texas Education Code and more of the same flexibilities allowed to public charter schools. This flexibility comes through exemption from or the ability to modify certain state requirements at the local level to better meet the needs of the district.

The Districts of Innovation Designation provides districts:

- Greater local control in educational decision-making;
- Increased flexibility and autonomy from state mandates; and
- Empowerment to be creative and plan differently for local districts to determine and meet local needs.

How is DOI innovative?

SCUCISD considers DOI to be about local control. Innovation plans allow districts to gain exemptions from a variety of Texas Education Code requirements. This allows districts many of the same flexibilities of open enrollment charter schools. Each district will develop a plan based on local preferences and no two plans may look the same. School districts may choose to include specific innovations in the areas of curriculum, instruction, governance, parent or community involvement, school calendar, and other ideas.

How many districts in Texas are designated as a District of Innovation?

Since 2015, at least 651 school districts have become Districts of Innovation.

What exemptions are included in the plans of other districts?

The following are the top ten exemptions listed in district plans:

1. First day of instruction (TEC 25.811)
2. Teacher certification (TEC 21.003)
3. Class size (TEC 25.112)
4. Class size notification (TEC 25.113)

5. Minimum attendance for class credit or final credit or final grade (TEC 25.092) -
Maximum minutes of instruction
 6. Minimum attendance for class credit or final grade (TEC 25.092) 90% rule
 7. Student-to-teacher ratios (TEC 25.111)
 8. Last day of school year (TEC 25.0812)
 9. Local role in teacher evaluations (TEC 21.352)
 10. Filing of teacher certification (TEC 21.053)
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What exemptions are being considered for SCUC?

Currently the DOI District Advisory Committee is considering the following exemptions:

1. First day of instruction (TEC 25.811)
 2. Teacher certification (TEC 21.003) for hard to fill positions such as Career and Technical Education courses
 3. Last day of school year (TEC 25.0812)
 4. Local role in teacher evaluations (TEC 21.352)
 5. Filing of teacher certification (TEC 21.053)
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If SCUCISD chooses to include exemption from the uniform start date (first and last day of instruction), will it extend the school year?

The intent of this exemption is not to extend the school year. Even without exemptions in the uniform start date, school calendars can vary from year to year. Currently districts that do not have DOI exemption for uniform start date may not start school prior to the fourth Monday in August. This can have impact depending on what day of the week August 1st falls on. Other variances that can impact the calendar include but are not limited to: how holidays fall, state testing dates, and other local considerations. SCUCISD would continue to utilize the District Improvement Committee to provide input on calendar options on an annual basis for board approval. DOI will allow the committee and board to consider various start dates options that were once available to districts through waivers.

This exemption has not been available for several years, but with the passing of House Bill 1842 flexibility with starting school prior to the fourth Monday in August is now available again for districts through a DOI Plan.

Districts/schools must continue to meet the minimum requirements of 75,600 minutes of school day operation per year.

How will a District of Innovation Designation impact employee pay/compensation or contracts?

Although this is allowable under the DOI, district leaders have communicated this provision is not an exemption it wishes the committee to consider under DOI.

Is the K-4 Class Size limits being considered as part of the Innovation plans?

Although this is allowable under the DOI, district leaders have communicated this provision is not an exemption it wishes the committee to consider under DOI.

A district becomes a District of Innovation; can additional exemptions just be added?

Only the exemptions included in the district's DOI plan can be accessed. Upon becoming a District of Innovation, a district can amend their plan, but must follow the same process as approval (committee approval by a majority vote, and 2/3 approval vote of the Board). Neither the DOI Committee or the District itself may just add other exemptions to the approved plan.

Does the Commissioner of Education have to approve a Local Innovation Plan? If so, what is the timeframe required for that approval?

No. Once a district is eligible to become a District of Innovation through Board approval of the Local Innovation Plan, it is submitted to the Commissioner. The Board must notify the Commissioner of its intent to vote on a plan and approval of the plan, but no "permission" is required from the Commissioner.

Will teacher contracts be impacted by a District of Innovation designation?

Although this is allowable under the DOI, district leaders have communicated this provision is not an exemption it wishes the committee to consider under DOI.