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Trustees Approve District of Innovation Plan

Spring Branch ISD Board of Trustees has approved unanimously a local innovation plan as defined in House Bill 1842. With the approval of this new plan, SBISD becomes a District of Innovation, making the school district one of the first in Texas to gain true local control and autonomy, as well as greater flexibility and freedom in many education related areas.

The 84th Texas Legislature created the new District of Innovation local control option when it approved House Bill 1842 (HB 1842) in June 2015.

The Trustee vote was conducted during its April 25 monthly meeting. It was preceded by a 26-0 vote for the same plan by the SBISD District Improvement Team (DIT) on April 21. Under the law, both DIT and Board of Trustee approvals are required before a District of Innovation status is designated.

As a District of Innovation, SBISD can potentially be exempt from some state education rules. However, Trustees have included a two-thirds affirmative Board vote for policy changes that activate any exemption.

Unfortunately, the District of Innovation status doesn’t change SBISD’s state funding formula, including an increasingly onerous “Robin Hood” recapture system siphoning millions of dollars from SBISD classrooms to the state’s spending budget. However, it is possible that the district may be able to control some of its state funding now in new ways under local use options.

SBISD must still meet state academic and financial accountability standards, and the district is held to requirements such as STAAR assessments, curriculum and graduation requirements, bilingual and special education rules, and the public records and open meetings laws now in effect.

Dr. Scott Muri, who became SBISD Superintendent in July 2015, called for leveraging HB 1842 benefits as he led a full review to identify the district’s strengths and priority areas for improvement. SBISD’s highly supportive community and dedicated employees were identified as key district assets in his review. The district continues its commitment to continual improvement for Every Child, one of SBISD’s Core Values, and to its families and employees.

“With the challenges facing Spring Branch ISD, it is imperative we take advantage of every opportunity to improve student achievement,” Board of Trustees President Chris Vierra said. “We look forward to local control afforded through the District of Innovation law that can benefit our schools.”
SBISD’s T-2-4 goal was foundational in pursuing District of Innovation status. Under T-2-4, the district aims for all its graduates to complete either military training, a technical certificate, or two- or four-year college degrees.

Superintendent Muri said that the April Board Meeting with its recognition of students and teachers, principals and schools, public testimony and District of Innovation vote reflected the great learner’s journey ahead.

“[The Strategic Plan] is an opportunity for our community to take control over the education we provide our 35,358 children and improve their experiences so that Every Child has an opportunity to achieve success, to achieve their aspiration, to achieve the life appropriate for them, and fulfill their dreams whatever they may be,” Dr. Muri said.

He said the next steps would include creation and design of a plan “roadmap” with clear and measurable objectives and tactics.

SBISD’s Board of Trustees adopted a resolution on Sept. 28, 2015, allowing the district to initiate the state designation under HB 1842. In the months since, the Board of Trustees has:

- Held a public hearing to consider development of a Strategic Plan (Local Innovation Plan) for designation of as a “District of Innovation.”
- Approved a 90-member Strategic Planning Committee composed of students, parents, teachers, administrators and community residents to develop a Strategic Plan (Local Innovation Plan). Starting in November, the Strategic Planning Committee met five times to develop a Strategic Plan (Local Innovation Plan).
- Voted March 28 to notify the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Commissioner of its intention to consider and vote on a Strategic Plan.

The community-based DIT met monthly from October through April to conduct regular business, which often included a Strategic Planning update and discussion.

Board of Trustees Vice President Karen Peck thanked the community for its depth of engagement and involvement with the plan, and Wayne Schaper, Sr., talked about community pride.

“Our goal is still T-2-4, but with this Strategic Plan we will be able to tailor our instructional styles to individual students, and be advocates for each PreK-12 student,” said Board Secretary Schaper. He has known seven superintendents and is celebrating 56 years in the district. “It’s going to be great. Everybody will be coming to look to see what Spring Branch is doing next.”

Board Member Katherine Dawson, who served as the DIT Board Liaison, said “approving the Strategic Plan provides the direction and expectations for the district, charging us to tactically move along a path built on a solid foundation, void of barriers and full of flexibility and potential.”

For many years, Trustee Pam Goodson has advocated for local control with the Legislature. “Now we have the freedom and flexibility we wanted. This is a huge win for our kids as we decide what’s best for our kids,” she said.
Local control means that teachers and principals have the ability to make the best decisions possible for students and families, Trustee Chris Gonzalez said. “We will be able to put the control back where it belongs, with the family and the school,” she said of the plan.

Retiring Board Member Bob Stevenson said the District of Innovation will be for a greater good, for the entire district. “This is about staff and families doing what’s best for children. We’re handing you the ball . . . now run for the end zone!”

SBISD joins several other Texas school districts in approving District of Innovation plans, and more than two dozen other districts are reportedly reviewing the option.