



**Rockdale**  
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

EMPOWER • CHALLENGE • ACHIEVE

# **District of Innovation Plan**

**Term: June 1, 2026 - May 31, 2031**

**School Board Approval**

**May 18, 2026**

# ROCKDALE ISD

## DISTRICT OF INNOVATION PLAN

### INTRODUCTION

The 84<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session passed House Bill 1842, allowing Texas public school districts to become Districts of Innovation and thus permitting exemption from certain provisions of the Texas Education Code. On March 27, 2017, the Rockdale ISD Board of Trustees elected to come a District of Innovation in an effort to promote systematic improvement and allow for more local control.

**Initial Innovation Plan:** July 1, 2017 - June 30, 2022

**1st Innovation Plan Renewal:** July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2026  
(Renewed on March 22, 2021; Revisions approved on March 20, 2023, March 17, 2025)

**2nd Innovation Plan Renewal:** May 18, 2026

A designated District of Innovation may choose to amend or renew its plan at any time pursuant to the applicable Texas Education and Texas Administration Codes which includes a majority vote of the District Education Council and two-thirds majority vote of the board of trustees. The term of the designation as a District of Innovation may not exceed 5 years.

### DISTRICT OF INNOVATION RENEWAL TIMELINE

February 2026	District level personnel will review and update the current District of Innovation plan.
March 2026	The Rockdale ISD District Education Council will hold a public meeting to review the current plan and vote to renew. The DEC must pass the District of Innovation renewal plan by a majority vote.
March 2026	The Rockdale ISD District of Innovation renewal plan will be posted on the district’s webpage for 30 days.
May 2026	The Rockdale ISD Board of Trustees must approve the District of Innovation Renewal plan by a 2/3 majority vote.

## DISTRICT EDUCATION COUNCIL

	RES	RIS	RJH	RHS
<i>District Representative</i>	Lindsey Lillard	Rachael Barker	Kayleigh Whitsel	Dell Giles
<i>Teacher Representatives</i>	Shelby Evans Celeste Gibson Cheyenne Giffen Shelby Lara	Ashley Evans Taylor Grayson Jenice Mead Peyton O'Campo	Kaitlin Brinkley Paul Heintze Morgan Moore	Deanna Caffey Marilyn Rasmussen Kinley Stancik Cheryl Swiech
<i>Non-Teaching Representative</i>	Eric Dennis	Kim Ransom	Rebecca Ingram	Heather Vargas
<i>Parent Representatives</i>	Donashia Allen Amy Caffey	Erin Burges Lynsey Taylor	Rebekah Hall Camille Miles	James McQuinn Jessica Muston
<i>Community Representatives</i>	Margie Dunkel Olivia Harris	Pam Kaufmann Shelly Sanders	Brent Hasslebach Nancy Zenner	Ken Ansell Lucita Rodriguez
<i>Business Representatives</i>	Susan McKenzie Cynthia Zimdars	Rita Quinn	Kaitlyn Hendrick Kayla Schnell	Jim Gibson Daniel Willie
<i>Campus Administrators</i>	Shannon Pourmanafzadeh	Monica Elizondo	<i>Michael Young</i>	<i>Wendy Mahan</i>
<i>Board Member Representative</i>	Julia Cardona			

## PROCESS

On March 25, 2026, the District Education Council met to review the updated District of Innovation plan and discuss any possible revisions. Upon review, the committee determined that the current plan met all the district needs and revisions were not necessary. The council voted unanimously to recommend approval of the plan as presented.

Below you will find the DEC members who were present to vote to approve the amendment to the local innovation plan:

	RES	RIS	RJH	RHS
<i>District Representative</i>		Rachael Barker	Kayleigh Whitsel	Dell Giles
<i>Teacher Representatives</i>		Jenice Mead Peyton O'Campo		Cheryl Swiech
<i>Non-Teaching Representative</i>	Eric Dennis	Kim Ransom	Rebecca Ingram	Heather Vargas
<i>Parent Representatives</i>			Rebekah Hall	
<i>Community Representatives</i>	Margie Dunkel	Pam Kaufmann Shelly Sanders		Ken Ansell
<i>Business Representatives</i>	Cynthia Zimdars			
<i>Campus Administrators</i>	Shannon Pourmanafzadeh	Monica Elizondo	Michael Young	Wendy Mahan
<i>Board Member Representative</i>	Julia Cardona			

The renewal plan was posted on the Rockdale ISD website for review on March 27, 2026. It was presented to the Rockdale ISD Board of Trustees on May 18, 2026 and was approved. The plan

is submitted to the Texas Education Agency for posting and posted to the district website.

## **TERM**

The term of the renewal plan is for five years, beginning June 1, 2026, and ending May 31, 2031 unless terminated, amended or renewed by the Board of Trustees in accordance with the law. The District Education Council and the Board of Trustees will review the plan annually. If, within the term of this Plan, other areas are to be considered for flexibility as part of HB 1842, the Board of Trustees will appoint a committee to consider and propose additional exemptions in the form of an amendment. Any amendment approved by the District Education Council and adopted by the Board will adhere to the same term as the original plan.

## **INNOVATIONS**

Rockdale ISD proposes flexibility and seeks an exemption in the following areas related to:

### **RENEWED INNOVATIONS:**

- A. First Day of Instruction
- B. Teacher Employment Contracts
- C. Retire/Rehire Minimum Salary
- D. Contract Service Days
- E. Class Size and Student/Teacher Ratio
- F. Teacher Appraisal

### **NEW INNOVATIONS:**

- G. Planning and Preparation Time
- H. Teacher Certification
- I. Reading and Mathematics Training for Kindergarten – 3rd Grade

## A. First Day of Instruction

Board Policy: EB(Legal)

### *TEC §25.0811*

A school district may not begin instruction before the 4th Monday in August.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- More professional development opportunities during the school year for teachers
- Flexibility with the first week of school; possibility for students to have a shorter first week
- The calendar would be more aligned with college schedules, providing our students with opportunities to start summer college classes in June
- More instructional days prior to State Assessment
- Increase of instructional days in the first semester to provide more balanced semesters

Innovation:

- RISD will no longer be required to delay the start of school to the fourth Monday in August. The district will determine annually an appropriate start day for students that does not occur before the third Monday.
- RISD will continue to seek stakeholder input as required by Board Policy EB(Local) as part of the yearly calendar development.

Note:

- Changing the first day of instruction does not alter the University Interscholastic League (UIL) restrictions for the first day of practice for athletic and fine arts programs. RISD will continue to comply with the UIL calendar for summer practices.

## B. Teacher Employment Contracts

Board Policy: DCA

### *TEC §21.102(b)*

States that a probationary contract may not exceed one year for a person who has been employed as a teacher in public education for at least five of the eight years preceding employment with the District. In this statute, “teacher” means a principal, supervisor, classroom teacher, school counselor, nurse, or other full-time professional employee. This statute in the TEC provides a three-year probationary period for newly hired teachers and only a one-year probationary period for teachers who have been in public education for at least five of the previous eight years.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- This limited period of time may not be sufficient to evaluate the employee’s effectiveness since contract timelines demand that employment decisions must be made prior to the end of the school year.

Innovation:

- Experienced teachers new to the District that have been employed in public education for at least five of the previous eight years may be issued a probationary contract for up to two years from the date of District employment.

## C. Retire/Rehire Minimum Salary

Board Policy: DEA

*TEC §21.402*

Currently all districts, when hiring a retired teacher must pay their salary based upon TEA minimum salary pay scale; in addition, the districts are required to pay a TRS surcharge. “Teacher” refers to classroom teacher, full-time speech pathologist, full-time librarian, full-time school counselor, full-time school nurse.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- RISD believes that by hiring an eligible retired teacher our students, campuses, and district will reap the reward of having a veteran educator who is still involved and passionate in the education process.
- The district will be able to have an experienced educator at a significantly lower cost than paying the minimum plus the TRS surcharge.
- Besides adding value to our schools, this would be a sound fiscal decision for our district’s stakeholders.

Innovation:

- Rockdale ISD would like the opportunity to hire an eligible retired teacher and pay them a negotiated salary which may drop below the TEA minimum pay scale while also paying the required TRS surcharge.

## D. Contract Service Days

Board Policy: DC, DEA

*TEC §21.401*

Currently, Section 21.401, of the Texas Education Code defines “A teacher contract as a ten-month contract equivalent to 187 days.”

Rationale for the Exemption:

- The district would be able to create a work service calendar for teachers that better aligns to the 75,600 minutes required for students.

- RISD believes that reducing teacher contract days from 187 to a decreased length with no effect on teacher salary would enhance teacher recruitment and retention allowing the district to fill positions with highly qualified teachers.

Innovation:

- Rockdale ISD would like the opportunity to evaluate the number of contract days needed for certified staff in that school year to meet district objectives. The minimum service for 10-month contract employees will not exceed 187 days nor will it be less than 180 days.

## E. Class Size and Student/Teacher Ratio

Board Policy: EEB

*TEC §25.112* sets a limit of 22:1 student/teacher ratio for grades K-4.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- The District will begin the school year with staff based on projections of student enrollment.
- Due to fluctuating enrollment during the school year, teachers and/or students must be moved from class to class to meet the 22:1 requirement. This exemption would give the District flexibility with the inflexible 22:1 requirement and allow students to remain with the teacher and classmates that they began the year with, fostering continuity and stability that will support increased student achievement.
- Class sizes can be organized so that student groups who need specialized assistance, such as English Language Learners and those with IEP's, can have a reduced student/teacher ratio while remaining classrooms could accommodate the other students.
- The District will not be forced to hire new teachers not accounted for in the Boards adopted budget; also negating the need to apply for a state waiver with the Texas Education Agency.

Innovation:

- The District will continue to strive to keep class sizes at or below 22:1, with the flexibility to go above 22:1 if needed.
- Should the student/teacher ratio in a single class need to exceed 23:1, the Superintendent will meet with both administrator and the teacher to discuss.
- The student/teacher ratio in a single class will not exceed 24:1.
- The District will consider in the decision-making process: the makeup and chemistry of the classroom, the potential for disruption to student learning from splitting a class, the expertise and opinion of the teacher and the approval from the campus administrator.
- The Board of Trustees will be informed each time a class exceeds 22:1.

## F. Teacher Appraisal

Board Policy: DNA

*TAC §150.1003(g)*

*TEC §21.352*

By written mutual consent of the teacher and the certified appraiser, the required minimum of 45 minutes of observations may be conducted in shorter time segments. The time segments must total at least 45 minutes.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- T-TESS is at least one 45-minute observation period.
- The Commissioner's Rules issued for T-Tess require mutual written agreement between the educator and appraiser to conduct the 45-minute observation period in two or more shorter sessions that aggregate to 45 minutes.
- Some RISD campuses, primarily elementary and intermediate, have classes that are less than 45 minutes in length. The schedules were developed to best meet the instructional needs of students.
- Other instructional areas, such as electives, interventions and special education may not provide 45 minutes of continuous instruction.
- A split observation could result in a technical, procedural error in the observation process, even though the overall minutes of the observation period were conducted.

Innovation:

- RISD will continue to follow the Commissioner's Rules for teacher appraisal that provide for a single 45-minute observation for most educators.
- For teachers whose instructional assignment does not allow for a meaningful observation period of 45 minutes, the appraiser may use his/her discretion to conduct the required observation in two or more shortened periods without written agreement from the educator.
- During the preconference, the appraiser will notify the educator if the 45-minute observation period will be conducted in two or more time periods.
- This innovation applies to the 45-minute observation and does not alter the expectation that each appraiser also conducts frequent walk-through observations.

## G. Planning and Preparation Time

Board Policy: DL

*TEC §21.404*

Each classroom teacher is entitled to at least 450 minutes within each two-week period for instructional preparation, including parent-teacher conferences, evaluating students' work, and planning. A planning and preparation period under this section may not be less than 45 minutes within the instructional day. During a planning and preparation period, a classroom teacher

may not be required to participate in any other activity.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- Flexibility in planning and preparation time will allow for opportunities for increased collaboration between educators in the district. Scheduling is a critical component in allowing for vertical, horizontal, and cross campus collaboration.
- All educators will have quality planning time each month, however, flexibility is requested for instructional planning allotments.

Innovation:

- The District is seeking flexibility in the 45-minute daily planning period requirement to better align with our four-day instructional week and innovative master scheduling practices.
- While teachers may not accumulate 450 minutes within a ten-day period due to the four-day schedule, additional planning time is built into each six weeks to ensure adequate preparation time.
- This flexibility allows the district to maintain innovative scheduling practices while ensuring teachers have meaningful, structured time for planning, collaboration, and preparation.

## H. Teacher Certification

Board Policy DBA, DK

*TEC §21.003(a)*

States a person may not be employed as a teacher, teacher intern or teacher trainee, librarian, education aide, administrator, educational diagnostician, or school counselor by a school district unless the person holds an appropriate certificate or permit issued as provided by Subchapter B.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- Rockdale is committed to providing an excellent learning experience and values the need for certified teachers. However, the district experiences difficulty in hiring certified educators in certain areas.
- Teachers with industry certification and native Spanish speakers with qualified experience could be eligible to teach a course through a local teaching certificate.
- Flexibility could also allow a certified teacher to teach outside their field in order to avoid the disruption of an instructional path for students allowing RISD to reduce scheduling conflicts.

Innovation:

- Rockdale ISD will ensure a comprehensive personal plan for year-to-year reductions in uncertified Teachers assigned to foundation curriculum courses until full compliance is achieved by the 2029–2030 school year.

- The district will track all candidates aligned to their certification plan and timeline.
- Rockdale ISD will plan for “just in time” resources to support any struggling teacher from internal staff, external partners, or third-party vendors to ensure teachers are on track for completion of certification.
- Dashboard audits will be conducted monthly to ensure teachers are not getting off track in the degree, certification course, or test preparation.
- The district will utilize this exemption in the areas of Career and Technical Education, Languages other than English, dual credit, and hard to fill electives.
- A currently certified teacher being asked to teach outside their certified field will be informed as soon as possible in order to plan accordingly.
- Principals will submit candidates to the superintendent who will then determine whether it is in the best interest of the District to certify the individual. The School Board will be notified prior to beginning employment.
- Teachers employed under this exemption will receive extra training in classroom management and pedagogy.

## I. Reading and Mathematics Training for Kindergarten – 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade

Board Policy DMA

*TEC §28.0062(a)(2), TEC§21.4552, TEC§28.0071, TEC§21.4553*

Each classroom teacher and principal newly assigned to a campus or grade level (K–3) is required to attend a teacher literacy achievement and/or mathematics academy, as developed under Section 21.4552 and 21.4453, by the end of their first year of employment in that role.

Rationale for the Exemption:

- The district will ensure that teachers will complete the academies within 2 years of being hired or within 3 years in extenuating circumstances.
- This statute creates overwhelming requirements in the employee's first year.

Innovation:

- Provides the district Kindergarten - 3rd grade employees an extended period of time to complete the required reading and math academy training.