

WEST VIRGINIA CODE: §18-5B-13

§18-5B-13. Innovation school district Act; legislative findings, intent and purpose; eligibility; application; innovation plan and plan approval; designation; waiver of statutes, policies, rules or interpretations; exceptions; progress reviews and annual reports; state board rule.

(a) Legislative findings:

(1) High school completion is an essential milestone for all West Virginia students and impacts the future success of the individual, community and state as well as providing the pathway to and appreciation for life-long learning endeavors;

(2) There are significant correlations between educational attainment and labor market outcomes, greater labor force participation rate, increased employment rates, improved health, and decreased levels of poverty and crime. The negative impact on these linkages is most evident in the absence of high school completion;

(3) West Virginia as a state must improve in areas of student achievement, graduation rate, attendance, the college going rate and other indicators of academic success in public schools;

(4) Research identifies a number of effective strategies for engaging students that have the most positive impact on improving student success and high school graduation. Some of these strategies are school-community collaboration, safe learning environments, family engagement, early literacy development, mentoring and tutoring services, service learning opportunities, alternative and nontraditional schooling, offering multiple pathways and settings for attaining high school diplomas, after-school opportunities, individualized instruction and career and technical education;

(5) Among the major issues raised by the Efficiency Audit of West Virginia's Primary and Secondary Education System conducted by Public Works, LLC, is a description of West Virginia's system of schools as heavily regulated. The report expresses the advantages of more local autonomy to better meet the needs of students, elevate their aspirations, and prepare them for post-secondary education and careers. Among its general conclusions is the need to drive more educational decision-making to the level closest to the students, to the classroom and building level - allowing principals to lead and teachers to deliver the most effective curriculum for their students - and then holding them accountable for student success;

(6) The Goals for Education, Vision 2020: An Education Blueprint for Two Thousand Twenty include policy-oriented objectives for restoring the autonomy, authority, flexibility, and capacity of local schools and county boards to improve student learning to meet or exceed the expectations established by the state board and Legislature;

(7) Allowing exceptions from certain statutes, policies, rules and interpretations through the creation of innovation school districts will restore the autonomy, authority, flexibility, and capacity of local schools and county boards to enable greater local autonomy and encourage innovation over the important factors that impact student achievement and the delivery of educational services to improve student learning; and

(8) When educators, parents, elected officials, business leaders, faith-based leaders, human service personnel, judicial personnel and civic leaders collectively work together, they are often able to find innovative solutions to address school and community problems and implement a variety of innovative improvements that increase student engagement, develop more flexible schedules, enhance student and teacher ownership of the learning process and increase student achievement.

(b) Legislative intent and purpose of section:

In light of the foregoing findings, it is the intent of the Legislature through this section to create a special category of innovation zones entitled "Innovation School Districts" to provide an additional tool for school systems in collaboration with community and business partners to plan and implement new approaches to improve the performance and progress of the students, schools and school system. This section is intended to establish a process that includes:

(1) Broad participation and collaboration in the establishment of an innovation school district plan that includes approaches to build the capacity of the district to improve the performance and progress of its students, schools and school system; and

(2) Provides multiple opportunities over a period of five years for a school system designated as an innovation school district to seek and receive exceptions to certain statutes, policies, rules and interpretations applicable throughout the county or at certain schools within the county as needed to best meet the needs of its students as the system moves forward with its partners toward fulfillment of its innovation school district plan.

(c) School System Eligibility:

All county boards are eligible to apply for designation as an innovation school district: Provided, That a district that has expended funds or incurred obligations in violation of section twenty-six, article eight, chapter eleven of this code is not eligible to apply for designation as an innovation school district, unless otherwise determined by the state board. The applications shall be taken in four categories: Sparse Density County; Low Density County; Medium Density County; and High Density County, as those terms are defined in section two, article nine-a of this chapter. The state board is authorized to designate no more than one county from each category as an innovation school district beginning July 1, 2015: Provided, That the State Board, after July 1, 2016, may designate one additional county from each category as an innovation school district as long as the number of counties designated at any one time does not exceed two counties from each category as innovation school

districts, subject to other considerations included herein. The designation of counties as innovation school districts shall be on a competitive basis.

(d) Application for designation as Innovation School District:

The rule promulgated by the state board to implement this section shall include an application and approval process for innovation school district plans that includes, but is not limited to, the following provisions:

(1) The manner, time and process for the submission of innovation school district applications. The initial application deadline may not be prior to January 2015. If after consideration of the applications submitted to it during an application period, the state board in its sole discretion does not designate the allotted number of school systems in each density category as innovation school districts, the state board may establish another application period to permit county boards in a density category not filled to reapply. In addition, at any time the number of designated innovation school districts in a density category is less than the maximum number allowed by subsection (c) of this section due to the revocation or expiration of a designation, the state board may establish an application period and may select on a competitive basis new school systems to achieve the maximum number allowed by subsection (c) of this section per density category;

(2) The contents of the application, which must include:

(A) The innovation school district plan approved in accordance with subsection (f) of this section; and

(B) A general description of the innovations the school district seeks to institute as proposed in its innovation school district plan;

(3) Factors to be considered by the state board when evaluating an application, which shall include, but are not limited to, the following factors:

(A) Support from teachers, staff, parents, students, the county board of education, the local school improvement council and school business partners; and

(B) The potential for an applicant to be successful in raising student achievement as an innovation school district;

(4) Standards for the state board to review applications for designation as an innovation school district and to make determinations on the designation of a school system as an innovation school district; and

(5) An innovation zone application review committee and recommendation process which shall be the same committee and process as used for all other innovation zones under this article.

(e) Innovation School District Plan:

The innovation school district plan is intended to serve as the basis for the innovative activities of the school system and to provide a vision for the school improvement goals it will work to accomplish in collaboration with its school and community partners. The plan is not intended as a limit on the normal school improvement activities that all school systems are expected to pursue, nor is the plan intended as a restriction on the ability of the school system or its schools to pursue other innovative strategies in accordance with the other provisions of this article. The innovation school district plan may include, but are not limited to, the following proposals:

(1) Methods for providing schools and communities with opportunities for greater collaboration to plan and implement systemic approaches that include evidence-based solutions for increasing graduation rates, increasing achievement and educational outcomes and reducing the number of dropouts;

(2) Innovative approaches to revitalize vocational and technical education, an essential mission of county boards;

(3) Increased collaborative site-based decision-making powers over the budgeting for and spending on programs and services for students;

(4) Increased collaborative site-based decision-making powers over teacher recruitment;

(5) Improved site-based mentoring, collaboration and support for strengthening the professional practices of new and emerging teachers, including recognizing and supporting school-based teacher leaders that perform these duties;

(6) Allowing a collaborative process which ensures accountability and transparency to all stakeholders, provides information and additional measures of the effects of specific innovations upon which the success of the plan may be judged, and documents student, school and school system success;

(7) Allows input and demonstrative buy-in from education personnel regarding appropriate professional development, supports, resources and working conditions.

(8) Allowing a collaborative site-based process to reduce certain requirements to allow staff to meet the school's mission;

(9) Allowing, through a collaborative site-based process, flexibility to the alternative teacher certification programs;

(10) Utilizing virtual school courses aligned with the Southern Regional Education Board's Standards for Quality Online Courses;

(11) Providing for greater autonomy for county board, and through the board's innovation's,

for local schools; and

(12) Other innovation zone plans approved under the provisions of this article and being implemented in other schools and school systems throughout the state.

The innovation school district plan shall include a general description of the innovations the county school district seeks to institute, a proposed time line for implementation and measures for judging the success of the innovation school district plan.

(f) Innovation School District Plan - District Level Approval:

Prior to submitting an innovation school district plan to the state board, the county board shall:

(1) Form a broad based innovation school district stakeholders committee which may include, but is not limited to, educators, parents, elected officials, business leaders, faith-based leaders, human service personnel, judicial personnel and civic leaders, but at a minimum shall include the principals employed within the county, the chairs of the faculty senates of each school in the county, employee organization representatives, a school service person from each work site and parent representatives. The stakeholder committee shall compose a conceptual proposal for the purpose of soliciting input on a variety of approaches that may be undertaken within the county if designated as an innovation school district and to guide development of an innovation school district plan;

(2) Direct the county superintendent to hold a meeting of all regularly employed school employees to provide them an opportunity to examine and discuss the conceptual proposal. The superintendent shall direct that a vote of all regularly employed school employees in the county be conducted within fifteen days of the meeting to determine the level of school employee support for the conceptual proposal. The vote shall be by secret ballot administered by the panels created in subsection (c), section six of this article for each school and shall be administered in accordance with that subsection. For the vote to be valid, ballots must be cast by at least fifty percent of all regularly employed school employees in the county. Before proceeding with the succeeding subdivisions of this subsection, the conceptual proposal must be approved by at least two-thirds ballots cast voting to approve it. If not approved, the stakeholder committee may revise the conceptual proposal and, subject to direction of the county board, the superintendent shall repeat the steps set forth in this subdivision for a revote;

(3) Make its conceptual proposal for an innovation school district available to the public at least 20 days prior to the public town hall meetings required under subdivision (4) of this subsection. In order to comply with this public notice requirement, the proposed plan shall be posted on the county board's web site, as well as hard copies of the proposed plan being made available at all county school sites and the county's central office, for public viewing and copying;

(4) After the closure of the 20 day public review period, conduct public town hall meetings in at least three schools in the county, including at least one each at schools with separate secondary, middle and elementary programmatic levels, or as near as possible considering the county's facility infrastructure, for the purpose of soliciting input from those in attendance on the challenges affecting the quality of education in the county and the potential strategies and priorities for addressing them;

(5) Direct the county superintendent to hold a meeting of the innovation school district stakeholders committee following the public town hall meetings for the purpose of reviewing the input gathered at the meetings and developing an innovation school district plan;

(6) Direct the county superintendent to hold a meeting of all regularly employed school employees to provide them an opportunity to examine and discuss the innovation school district plan. The superintendent shall direct that a vote of all regularly employed school employees in the county be conducted within fifteen days of the meeting to determine the level of school employee support for the innovation school district plan. The vote shall be conducted as provided in subdivision (2) of this subsection, except that for the vote to be valid, ballots must be cast by at least sixty percent of all regularly employed school employees in the county and the innovation school district plan must be approved by at least two-thirds of the ballots cast voting to approve it. If not approved, the stakeholder committee may revise the plan and, subject to direction of the county board, the superintendent shall repeat the steps set forth in this subdivision for a revote; and

(7) The plan may then be submitted by the county superintendent to the county board for a vote to submit the plan to the state board. The authority of a county board to vote to submit an innovation school district plan and the right to submit the plan and be designated as an innovation school district, if selected, in accordance with this section are not subject to or affected by the approval status of the school system or intervention in the authority of county board for school system operation pursuant to section five, article two-e of this chapter.

(g) State Board Designation of Innovation School Districts:

The state board shall review the innovation school district applications in accordance with the standards adopted by the board, shall determine the highest rated applicants in each category and shall determine whether to designate those applicants as innovation school districts. The designation of an applicant as an innovation school district is at the sole discretion of the state board. The state board shall notify each applicant of the board's determination within thirty days of the final determinations.

(h) Innovation School Districts:

The designation of a school system as an innovation school district authorizes the county board to submit requests to the state board for exceptions to statutes, policies, rules and interpretations that are required to permit implementation of the innovative strategies

contemplated in its innovation school district plan. The designation as an innovation school district authorizes the county board to submit to submit multiple individual requests for exceptions to permit implementation of different strategies contemplated in the plan as the strategies are developed. Each request for an exception shall be submitted and may be approved by the state board subject to the following:

(1) The county board of a school system designated as an innovation school district may request an exception to a statute, policy, rule or interpretation by submitting an application to the state board that contains the following information:

(A) A description of the program or initiative the school system intends to implement at a school, group of schools or district-wide as an innovative strategy to improve student achievement if the request is approved by the state board;

(B) An explanation of the specific exception to a statute, policy, rule or interpretation, in the singular or plural, that the school system has identified as prohibiting or constraining the implementation of the program or initiative and why the exception is necessary;

(C) An explanation of how the program or initiative furthers the activities contemplated in the innovation school district plan;

(D) A certification by the county superintendent that the request for an exception was approved by a vote of the eligible employees in accordance with the process for voting as set forth in section six of this article; and

(E) Any other information the state board requires as set forth in its rule to implement this section.

(2) The state board shall review the request in accordance with the standards in its rule and shall determine whether to approve or disapprove the request. The approval or disapproval of a request is at the sole discretion of the state board in accordance with the requirements of this section.

(3) Except as provided in subdivision (5) of this subsection, the state board shall approve or disapprove the request within sixty days of receipt, subject to the following:

(A) No exceptions to state board policies, rules or interpretations are granted unless the state board approves the request at least conditionally pursuant to subdivisions (2) and (5) of this subsection; and

(B) If the request is disapproved, the state board shall communicate its reasons for the disapproval to the county board and shall make recommendations for improving the request. The county board may amend and resubmit the request.

(4) Upon approval of the request by the state board, all of the exceptions to state board policies, rules and interpretations that were requested are granted;

(5) If a request, or a part thereof, may not be implemented unless an exception to a statute is granted by an Act of the Legislature, the state board may approve the request, or the part thereof, only upon the condition that the Legislature acts to grant the exception. If the state board approves a request on that condition, the state board shall submit the request for an exception to a statute, along with supporting reasons, to the Legislative Oversight Commission of Education Accountability. The commission shall review the request and make a recommendation to the Legislature regarding the exception requested; and

(6) An innovation school district may not request an exception nor may an exception be granted from any of the following:

(A) A required statewide assessment program administered by the West Virginia Department of Education;

(B) Any provision of law or policy required by Public Law 94-142, Public Law No. 107-110 or other federal law;

(C) Sections two and seven, article two, chapter eighteen-a of this code and sections seven-a, seven-b, eight and eight-b, article four, chapter eighteen-a of this code, except that an innovation school district may make a job posting for a teacher vacancy in accordance with the procedures and the approval by a vote of the teachers as provided in section eight of this article; and

(D) Any statute, policy, rule or other requirements of the state board or other agency related to the health and safety of students or employees, any requirements imposed by ethics laws or opinions, any requirements imposed by open records or open meetings laws, any requirements related to financial or academic reporting or transparency, or any requirements designed to protect the civil rights of students or employees.

(i) Revision, Extension and Revocation of Innovation School District Plan:

(1) The county board of a school system designated as an innovation school district pursuant to this section may revise its innovation school district plan and resubmit its plan to the state board for approval after complying with all other applicable plan requirements set forth in this section for initial plan approval.

(2) The designation of a school system as an innovation school district shall be for a period of five years. The state board, upon request of the county board, may extend the designation for an additional two years if the school system has outstanding items in its school system collaborative innovation zone plan that it still wants to pursue and only for the purpose of pursuing those outstanding items.

(3) The state board after periodic review of an established innovation school district may, upon recommendation of the innovation zone application review committee, revoke the school district's designation as an innovation school district for noncompliance or

nonperformance.

(j) Affect of Plan Expiration on Innovations:

The expiration of a school system's designation as an innovation school district does not negate any exceptions to statutes, policies, rules or interpretations granted to the school system unless and until specifically revoked, repealed or modified by the state board or by the Legislature, as applicable.

(k) State Board Rule and Annual Reviews:

The state board shall adopt, in accordance with article three-b, chapter twenty-nine-a of this code, a rule for the implementation of this section. The state board or its designated committee shall perform annual performance reviews and provide annual reports in accordance with section seven of this article.