

SENATE BILL 999

By Yager

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49,
Chapter 6, relative to education.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. This act is known and may be cited as the "Rural Schools Innovation Act."

SECTION 2. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 6, Part 3, is amended by adding the following as a new section:

(a) As used in this section:

(1) "Department" means the department of education;

(2) "Rural area" means a geographic area that is not an urban area;

(3) "Rural district" means an LEA that serves students residing in a rural area; and

(4) "Urban area" means a geographic area delineated as an urban area by the United States census bureau following the 2020 decennial census.

(b) The department shall establish a two-year pilot program for rural districts to partner together to expand access to high-quality, robust college and career pathways.

(c) The department shall select at least six (6) rural districts to participate in the program. Each rural district selected to participate in the program must partner with at least one (1) other rural district participating in the program to establish a partnership.

(d)

(1) Each partnership must be evidenced by a written partnership agreement that includes, at a minimum, the following:

(A) The roles and responsibilities of each partnering rural district;

(B) The partnership's goals, which must include, at a minimum:

(i) Improving student outcomes and sustaining any improvements for the long term; and

(ii) Expanding access to high-quality, robust college and career pathways that are aligned with regional labor market projections for high-wage, high-demand careers and that are supported by partnerships with regional higher education and workforce organizations to align systems, smooth transitions, and facilitate early college credit and work-based learning opportunities for students;

(C) How the partnership intends to achieve each of the goals identified in the partnership agreement; and

(D) Ambitious and measurable performance goals that are aligned with college and career readiness measures, as well as longitudinal postsecondary participation and employment outcomes. The performance goals established in the partnership agreement must allow for a coordinating intermediary to optimize the value of each college or career pathway by initiating and encouraging collaboration in matters related to scheduling, the addition or removal of certain pathways, and the hiring or budgeting required for advancement of certain pathways.

(2) Each partnership must be overseen by an intermediary organization that is authorized to contract and employ staff in this state. The governing body of the intermediary organization selected by the department to oversee a partnership for purposes of the pilot program must include members representing

kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) education, higher education, and workforce leaders in this state to encourage collaboration across systems.

(e) Subject to appropriation, the department shall award competitive grants to partnerships. The department shall determine the amount of grant funds awarded to a partnership based, in part, on the strength of the partnership agreement, the resources available to each partnering rural district, and the needs of the student population served by each partnering rural district to ensure grant funds are awarded to partnerships in a manner that allows each partnership to achieve the goals of the pilot program and of its partnership agreement in the most cost-effective and efficient manner possible.

(f) Each partnership must submit its written partnership agreement to the department along with the partnership's application to receive grant funding. The department shall begin accepting grant applications no later than September 1, 2023, and shall distribute grants to partnerships no later than December 1, 2023.

(g) Grant applications must outline the partnership's goals and how grant funds will be used to increase the number of high school graduates on track to achieve their college or career goals.

(h)

(1) Partnerships shall not use more than seventy percent (70%) of the grant funds it receives to implement its partnership agreement for purposes of the pilot program, which includes making the preparations necessary to increase student opportunities, establishing a coordinating intermediary, and executing the terms of the partnership agreement to allow the partnering rural districts to share resources and best practices to improve student outcomes.

(2) Partnerships shall use at least thirty percent (30%) of the grant funds it receives to provide the technical assistance necessary to enable the design

and launch of effective partnerships, which includes project management, support in convening stakeholders, planning and facilitating key meetings, analyzing local labor market conditions, and increasing capacity to ensure teams are aligned and focused on a vision for the partnership. Technical assistance must be provided by a nonprofit experienced with similar programs in other states.

(i) By December 1, 2025, the department shall submit a report to the chairs of the education committee of the senate, the education administration committee of the house of representatives, and the education instruction committee of the house of representatives evaluating the successes and challenges of the pilot program.

(j) This section is repealed on December 1, 2025.

SECTION 3. This act is not an appropriation of funds, and funds must not be obligated or expended pursuant to this act unless the funds are specifically appropriated by the general appropriations act.

SECTION 4. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.