

□ The potential new accountability framework, however, is not necessarily a total mystery. In January, we told you IDOE presented its new structural framework plan, ahead of the official rulemaking process to come following session. The four principles of the design include individual student development, transparency aligned with the Indiana GPS performance dashboard, actionable areas to improve upon for schools, and a model based on data analysis and research. Our January 17 issue breaks down the full proposal from the department.

□ The official rulemaking for the state board won't begin until after session. The public drafting of the requirements is set to begin in May with a deadline of December 31. Dr. Jenner said the process taken by the SBOE will include two draft periods along with two public comment periods.

- HB 1102 clears the Senate and is on its way to the Governor's desk. The bill, authored by freshman Rep. **Matt Commons** (R) of Williamsport, removes language from state code restricting school corporations from entering into a contract with a religiously affiliated nonprofit preschool program.

- The House Committee on Education approves SB 358, with a few amendments altering much of the original bill that comes from Senate Committee on Education and Career Development Chair **Jeff Raatz** (R) of Richmond. The measure would now mainly just require the Indiana Department of Education to publish a list of high-quality English language arts curricular materials for school to choose.

□ A sweeping amendment offered by Chair **Bob Behning** (R) of Indianapolis removed several provisions from the original bill. The sections removed include language requiring IDOE to pull out virtual schools from testing data because the department also does this. Another section deleted in the chairman's amendment were requirements for health occupation courses to fulfill science requirements in high school. Language allowing nonpublic schools to correct enrollment mistakes to ensure students are eligible for the Choice Scholarship Program was also taken out because the same provision already exists in HB 1515, which is now moving through the Senate.

□ Rep. Behning also revived language to require school administrators who oversee pre-K-5 students to earn the early literacy endorsement. Similar language was originally in HB 1499, but it was removed to avoid the bill having to be recommitted to the House Committee on Ways and Means during the first half of session. Under the now-amended SB 358, full time school principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches would have to earn the literacy endorsement by July 1, 2027. If you recall our previous reporting, this provision from HB 1499, despite being removed, was supported by groups

representing school administrators, including the Indiana Association of School Principals and the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents.

□ SB 358 next goes before Ways and Means for consideration of its fiscal impact.

- HB 1499 passes 46-1 in the Senate. The bill, proposed by House Committee on Education Chair **Bob Behning** (R) of Indianapolis, would change literacy retention requirements for English Language Learners (ELL), and require certain students have the opportunity to retake the IREAD-3 at least twice in the summer before third grade retention requirements apply. Under the bill, the Indiana Department of Education would have to register schools that have at least 50% ELL students as exempt from third grade reading retention requirements until the beginning of the 2027-28 academic year.

□ As explained by Rep. Behning in his presentation to the Senate Committee on Education and Career Development, the 50% provision is meant to address schools where there is a majority of ELLs, and it does not create a fully immersive environment in English. As he explained, "the kids only hear their native language, many times in Spanish." The students in such an environment then struggle to acquire the skills and learn to be successful on IREAD, so the portion of the bill would allow for a two-year window.

□ Other suggestions by the committee, and mentioned by Behning, were the possibility of using grade levels to determine the percentage, such as focusing on K-5 or K-8. **Chris Lagoni** of the Indiana Small and Rural Schools Association spoke of concern for the determination and how it is decided. For rural districts, the former small school super reported that there is an increasing population of ELL students, which means they would be impacted by the percentage range. Similar concerns were echoed by **Chris Brunson** of the Indiana Non-Public Education Association as well as **Cindy Long** of the Indiana Association of School Principals. In his testimony, Brunson also said home environment is another factor, as students might test out of ELL status but have a non-English home environment, which could impact their experience compared to their peers.

□ Some of those suggestions came to fruition in an amendment by Sen. **Linda Rogers** (R) of Granger to narrow the range for 50% to just third grade, as that is the grade level where students not proficient in reading will be retained under current law. The amendment also removed the provision of the bill related to adding oral language development to the literacy endorsement for those who handle K-5 literacy instruction. According to the Legislative Services Agency fiscal note, the change to just third graders will impact 38 public schools and an estimated total of 797 ELL third

graders. The previous fiscal analysis before the amendment estimated an impact of 25 public schools and an estimated total of 550 ELL third graders.

□ Another separate provision of the bill includes a decrease in the minimum hours required for the EARN program, which would be reduced from 12 hours to 10 hours. **Jeff Brantley** of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce testified in support of the reduction, stating that employers had difficulty meeting the 12-hour requirement while working with students and the original minimum was also deterring qualified students from participating at all. Chair **Jeff Raatz** (R) of Richmond pushed back in a follow-up question asking if schools were blocking out periods for students to complete the work-based learning. He said students need to spend more than just an hour in the role to make it worth the time of the employer and student to experience immersion in the field.

- HB 1660, which would require school boards to authorize absences for certain events for FFA and 4-H Club, not to exceed six excused absences per school year, passes the Senate Committee on Education and Career Development.

□ Bill author Rep. **Beau Baird** (R) of Greencastle informed the Senate committee that he spoke with several students in FFA at the State House recently, who informed him sometimes they have difficulty being granted excused absences for FFA-related activities.

□ During testimony, Dr. **Bob Taylor**, executive director of the Indiana Association of Public School Principals, supported the overall bill but he cautions lawmakers on continuing efforts to require some absences be recognized as excused through different laws. He mentioned last year's legislation requiring students to be released for outside religious instruction during school if they requested. For example, he details, if a student in FFA also leaves school each week for religious instruction on top of FFA-related absences, they're bordering the chronically absent definition. "Now, these are excused absences, but they are out of school," Dr. Taylor notes. "As we move forward with legislation, we really want to pay attention to how many excused absences are we allowing?"

- SB 255 faced scrutiny from Democrats on the House Committee on Education, who questioned a provision amending the law passed last session regarding release-time religious instruction during the school day. The provision in the bill, authored by Sen. **Spencer Deery** (R) of West Lafayette, would amend the current law to allow high school students to leave for up to the time for an elective class period, versus the 120 hours per week limit in the current law for all students. Sen. Deery has argued the change is a better metric to follow for high school students because of how their school day works.

□ Reps. **Vernon Smith** (D) of Gary and **Tonya Pfaff** (D) of Terre Haute, who are both educators, questioned how that will not cause high school students to miss a lot of necessary school time. Rep. Smith pointed out that a student who leaves for religious instruction for all four years could miss up to eight credit hours. "There are so many requirements. I don't think a school would have that many electives," Rep. Smith asserts.

□ There was a bit of confusion over the true intent of the Deery measure, and debate often spilled over into general questions about requiring schools to grant off-campus religious instruction, which is already allowed under Indiana law. Sen. Deery contended his proposal simply attempted to fix the current law to stop high school students from missing too much school, as the current law would allow that.

□ Discussion over the bill language got to the point where Chair **Bob Behning** (R) of Indianapolis opted to hold it another week for amendments to perhaps clean up the language. The following week in committee on Wednesday, Rep. Pfaff attempted to remove all of the religious instruction language, but the move was rejected by Republicans. Rep. **Michelle Davis** (R) of Whiteland, SB 255's House sponsor, explained she and Sen. Deery felt that language needed to stay because "At this point, the law we currently have is a little wonky on how kids leave school during the day, so we would like to leave the language as it is."

□ SB 255 passed the committee on a 9-4 vote.

IN School Health & Safety . . .

- Northwest Allen County Schools probe a report that a student might have had a gun on a school bus on March 12, but after further investigation, police found the student did not have a weapon. The bus driver had heard of the threat of a gun on board, stopped the bus, and notified police and school administrators.

- Indianapolis Public Schools is taking proactive measures to protect students and staff from measles as cases rise in the U.S. Although there are no known cases in Indiana, the district officials say they are being vigilant, especially with spring break approaching. IPS Health Services is monitoring the situation, and vaccine coordinators will inform families about the outbreak and the importance of immunization. Students without the required MMR vaccine will be excluded for 21 days if a case is confirmed at any IPS school. The district is hosting several vaccination clinics this month to ensure students are protected.

- **Shau-Ri Rose**, 23, was arrested after voluntarily turning herself in for charges of criminal recklessness for driving around a Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation school