



Innovation Zones

Policy Flexibility to Reimagine and Modernize K-12 Education Post-COVID-19

BY FRED A. JONES, JR. AND ALEXIS CHAMBERS

While the United States is simultaneously recovering from a global pandemic and facing a national reckoning of racial injustice, the effects of COVID-19 continue to exacerbate academic and opportunity gaps that were decades in the making in K-12 systems. Most students are performing worse than before the pandemic. For students of color, there is a growing learning gap that is disproportionately impacting Black, Brown, and Indigenous students.¹

It would be unjust for the American education system to simply return to its pre-COVID form. The entire ecosystem of learning needs transformative change. Merely tweaking or tinkering with the current system will not generate the necessary change to ensure the success of all students.

Innovation, working in concert with more than \$190 billion of K-12 federal relief, can be a method to improve outcomes and tailor whole-child efforts to support learners without any system constraints. In particular, state-constructed innovation zones can provide school districts with a mechanism to identify policy barriers and improve flexibility from state regulations and statutes that impede implementation of new instructional models for the 21st-century learner.

This policy brief provides an overview of the concept of innovation zones, how states are using them, and why the time is ripe for innovation zones to catalyze large-scale systems change for all students.

What Are Innovation Zones?

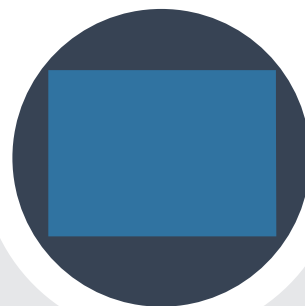
Innovation zones offer certain flexibilities or exemptions from administrative regulations and statutory provisions that help remove barriers to modernizing education delivery. The term *innovation zone*, also known as *districts of innovation*, refers to the idea of creating space for districts and schools to innovate by identifying constraints from current laws and regulations and providing flexibility. In exchange for added flexibility, schools and districts commit to innovating to improve curriculum, instructional approaches, professional development, use of time and talent, and other strategies that meet the unique needs of students and teachers.

State Examples



Arkansas

In 2013, **Arkansas** created a program to support districts of innovation in which a school district may petition the Arkansas State Board of Education for all or some of the same flexibility granted to an open-enrollment public charter school. The authorizing [legislation](#) states, “The Commissioner of Education may approve a public school as a school of innovation for the purpose of transforming and improving the teaching and learning under § 6-15-2803.”



Colorado

In 2008, **Colorado**’s Innovative Schools Act enabled the creation of innovation schools and innovation school zones within school districts. Upon designation as a district of innovation, the Colorado State School Board may waive any statutes or rules specified in a school district’s innovation plan. These may include policies related to school staffing, curriculum and assessment, and class scheduling. Specifically, the Innovation Schools Act of 2008 [states](#): “Each local school board may seek for its school district designation by the State Board as a District of Innovation...A local school board that seeks designation as a District of Innovation shall submit one or more innovation plans or plans for creating an innovation school zone to the Commissioner for review and comment by the Commissioner and the State Board.”

State Examples



Georgia

The [Georgia Innovation Fund](#), an initiative started by the governor's office in 2012, offers a pipeline of grants that fund innovation in a variety of stages. The grant offerings include: (1) the Innovation Fund Accelerator – the Governor's Office of Student Achievement's first capacity-building grant program, which challenges and supports schools and districts in doing school differently; (2) the Discover, Design, Develop (D3) Schools Project, which helps participating schools identify their most urgent need and develop and pilot a program to address it; and (3) Community Partnership Grants, which prioritizes funding for students' nonacademic needs and wraparound services through its coordinated community service and school culture priority areas.



Idaho

In 2016, the [Idaho](#) State Department of Education was authorized to approve 10 innovation schools per year, over a five-year period. The state department funded each innovation school team with a \$10,000 planning grant. Idaho [code](#) of law says, "Participating schools and districts will evaluate existing laws and administrative rules to receive flexibility from laws and policies that impede local autonomy, allowing them to be agile, innovative and empowered to adapt to local circumstances."



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State Examples



Kentucky

The **Kentucky** Board of Education has been authorized to approve districts of innovation since 2012. Kentucky public school districts may apply to be exempt from certain administrative regulations and statutory provisions, as well as waiving local board policy, to improve the learning of students. Some of the policies that were waived for the innovation zones include those on seat-time and the average daily attendance calculation. The 2012 [law](#) states: “The Kentucky Board of Education is hereby authorized to approve districts of innovation for the purposes of improving students’ educational performance. Districts of innovation shall be provided flexibility from selected Kentucky Administrative Regulations, Kentucky Revised Statutes, and local board of education policies for school administrators, teachers, and staff to meet the diverse needs of students.”



Mississippi

The **Mississippi** State Board of Education is authorized to approve public school districts of innovation for the purposes of improving students’ educational performance. Districts of innovation are provided flexibility from selected board regulations. The 2015 [law](#) states, “The State Board of Education is authorized to approve districts of innovation for the purposes of improving students’ educational performance. Districts of innovation shall be provided flexibility from selected board regulations... and local school board policies for school administrators, teachers and staff to meet the diverse needs of students.”



Districts of innovation shall be provided flexibility from selected board regulations... and local school board policies for school administrators, teachers and staff to meet the diverse needs of students.

Mississippi Districts of
Innovation Legislation

State Examples



Montana

In 2019, **Montana's** Transformational Learning Program began allowing districts flexibility from current laws and regulations. The program also provides transitional funding to assist with planning and implementation. In addition, the legislation directs districts to develop a definition of student success that does not require seat-time as a condition of operation. Montana's [legislation](#) states, "A school district... that satisfies the conditions... and is qualified by the board of public education... is eligible for a 4-consecutive-year provision of the transitional funding and flexibilities... A school district may be qualified by the board of public education for no more than one 4-consecutive-year provision of transitional funding and flexibilities in any 8-year period."



New Hampshire

In 2021, New Hampshire passed [legislation](#) that allows multiple schools in a district or an individual district to become an innovation school or innovation zone, respectively, with approval from the state board of education. The legislation allows flexibility on policies such as the length of the school day or school year, student promotion, and graduation policies. The new law also encourages schools to engage students and families and solicit their support to become an innovation school. For example, the innovation plan can include, "A statement of the level of support for designation as an innovation school or school zone demonstrated by students and parents of students enrolled in the public school, and the community surrounding the public school."



State Examples



South Carolina

South Carolina allows a school board to apply to the State Board of Education to allow multiple schools in a district to be designated as a School of Innovation. A designation of “school of innovation” allows districts to have exemptions from specific statutes and regulations, but a district may not designate all schools in the district as schools of innovation. The 2021 [legislation](#) reads, “A local school district board of trustees of this State desirous of creating an avenue for new, innovative, and more flexible ways of educating children within their district, may create one or more schools of innovation within the district that are exempt from applicable state statutes and regulations which govern other schools in the district.”



Virginia

A local school board may apply to the **Virginia** State Board to be designated as a School Division of Innovation (SDI). School divisions may be exempt from selected regulatory provisions and permitted to adopt alternative policies for school administrators, teachers, and staff to meet the diverse needs of students. Virginia’s 2017 School Divisions of Innovation [legislation](#) states, “Any local school board may apply to the board for the local school division to be designated as an SDI. Pursuant to a plan of innovation, an SDI shall be exempted from selected regulatory provisions and permitted to adopt alternative policies for school administrators, teachers, and staff to meet the diverse needs of students.”



Now is the time to provide flexibility so that all learners can gain access to educational experiences and build skills needed to be successful over a lifetime.

New 2021 Innovation Zone Legislative Proposals

Many other states have introduced legislation that creates districts or schools of innovation to apply for flexibilities from certain statutes and regulations. Some of these states include [Florida](#) and [Missouri](#).

Why Are Innovation Zones Essential?

Innovation zones offer school districts flexibility from state education policy to support practitioners in developing and implementing new learning models. Any rules or regulations that intentionally or unintentionally impede new learning models can be addressed by fostering flexibility and innovation. The state department of education shifts the role of the state agency from one of compliance enforcement to one that supports innovation and enables student-centered learning.

States can also pilot new student-centered learning pathways, such as competency-based education or borderless learning that fosters a future-focused delivery of education. Scaling and replicating new evidence-based practices through innovation zones can improve instructional delivery and learning systems, such as hybrid learning, and lead to the development

of mastery-based diplomas and alternative graduation pathways that better meet the needs of students at this moment.

Innovation also allows states and local school districts the opportunity to address inequity, in particular racial and economic inequity. Implementing new learning models allowed through innovation zones offer schools the chance to target new evidence-based and student-centered learning practices in locations with the highest needs. It can serve as an equitable school improvement strategy for the nation's youth, especially if states offer new funding to implement innovative practices.

Conclusion

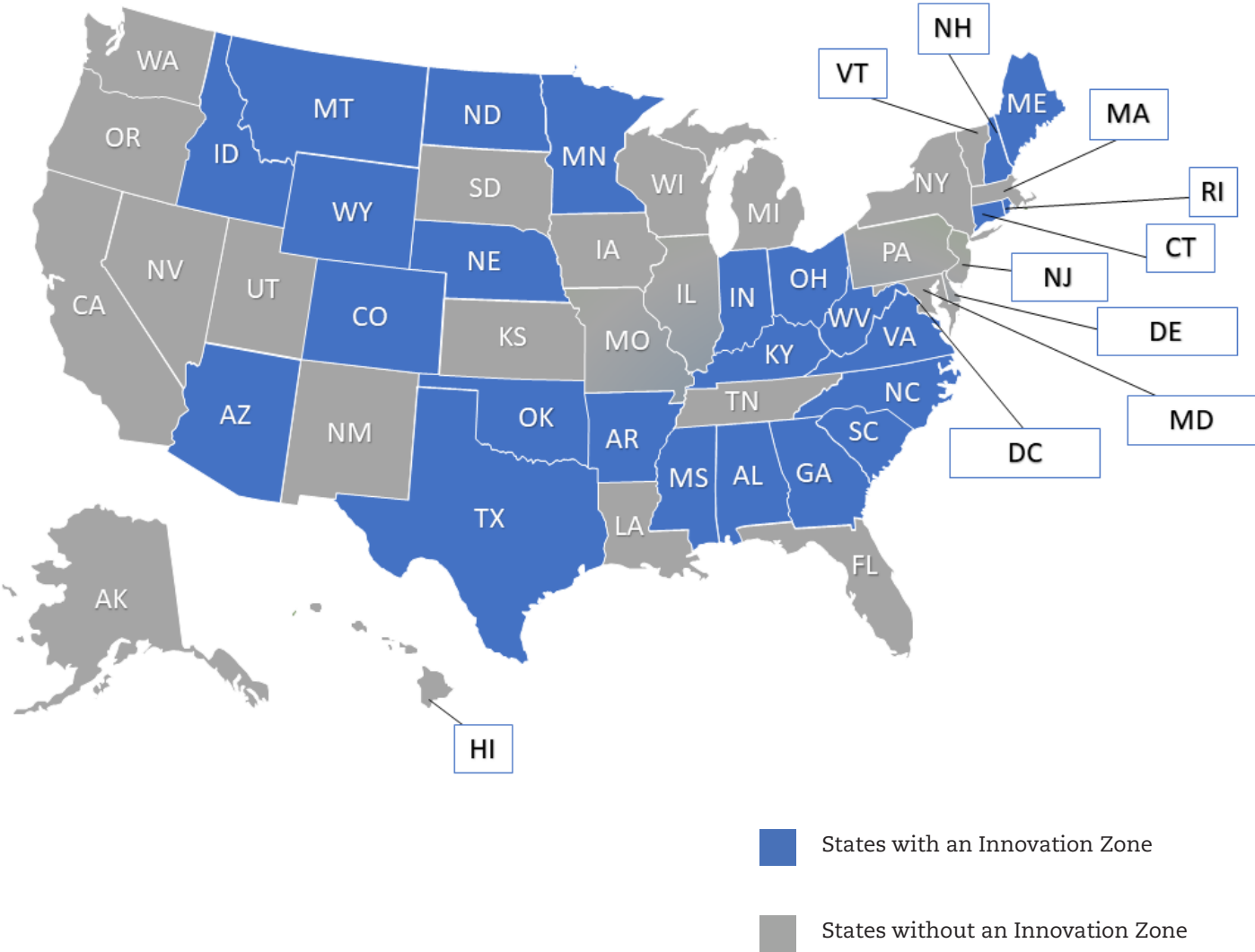
In the past year, America was abruptly confronted with entrenched systemic injustice and inequity, especially the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on students of color and low-income populations. This devastating pandemic, however, generated increased interest in innovation, both as a concept and a strategy to rethink systems that inhibit access to future-focused learning for students who have been historically underserved. Now is the time to provide flexibility so that all learners can gain access to educational experiences and build skills needed to be successful over a lifetime.

Endnote

1. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help. McKinsey & Company Public and Social Sector. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help>.

National Landscape Analysis of States with K-12 Innovation Zones

Current as of June 2021



Innovation Zones Frequently Asked Questions

What are Innovation Zones?

The term innovation zone, also known as districts of innovation, refers to the idea of states creating space for districts and schools to innovate by identifying constraints from current laws and regulations and providing flexibility to implement evidence-based practices. In return for receiving additional flexibility, innovation zone designees implement new effective approaches to teaching and learning, such as adopting a new curriculum, instructional models, professional development practices, mastery-based use of time and talent, and other strategies that meet the unique needs of learners and educators.

How do Innovation Zones support flexibility?

Outside of explicit federal requirements outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), any state rules, regulations, or outdated laws that impede access to high-quality learning, especially for historically underserved students, can be addressed through flexibility allowed in existing innovation zones. States often use innovation zones as a legal mechanism to provide flexible and innovative approaches to adopt student-centered policies, such as moving away from seat-time requirements, providing flexibility in use of talent, and modernizing educator professional development.

What should be a state's first step in developing an Innovation Zone?

Examine case studies of other state's innovation zones and work with your legislature to authorize an

innovation zone; collect information from educators, schools, and district leaders who are dissatisfied with laws and regulations that inhibit their ability to implement student-centered instruction; and garner bipartisan, bicameral, and state executive support for flexibility.

In concert with authorizing an innovation zone, state leaders should consider developing a [Profile of a Graduate](#) to help redefine success and build a vision for the K-12 education system. With clear, comprehensive updated definitions of success, states can transform their education systems, and do so in a coherent manner, so that everyone is working together to help students succeed. Any rules or regulations that impede the model development are brought to light and can be addressed through flexibility from administrative regulations and statutory provisions.

How do states develop an Innovation Zone?

Most states develop innovation zones through legislation. Legislation not only provides the legal pathway to the authorization of innovation zones but also establishes guidance on the application and selection process, eligibility, allowed flexibility, and the evaluation process. State leaders may also consider developing a legislative [task force](#), where diverse education decision-makers can study and identify outdated rules and regulations that are barriers to student-centered learning, often impeding effective instruction for the whole child in the 21st century. Typically, innovation zone task force members engage a diverse group of stakeholders who study an issue

by interviewing state experts, researching ineffective policies, determining needs for building educator capacity, and offering initial recommendations.

How do Innovation Zones support an equity agenda?

Innovation zones provide a space for districts to reimagine how the K-12 education system can serve all students, but especially Black, Brown, and students living in low-income households. Despite dramatic improvements in the delivery of education over the last century, the one-size-fits-all, time-based system does not work as well as necessary to ensure that all student subgroups succeed. Innovation zones provide an opportunity to pilot and target innovative new practices and supports that serve the unique needs of student subgroups who have been disproportionately affected by an education system that was not explicitly designed for their academic and emotional health in the first place.

How should a state engage stakeholders?

State leaders should engage with educators, administrators, families, students, postsecondary education leaders, and the business community to articulate the vision and purpose for an innovation zone. This process should both encourage and allow public comments on draft proposals. Policymakers may consider targeted engagements with educators and district leadership to determine barriers they face on the day-to-day in the classroom. Policymakers may find value in more formal ways of soliciting input from various stakeholders through listening tours and town hall meetings with both virtual and in-person options. Genuine dialogue between multiple stakeholders provides an opportunity for state leaders to articulate the purpose of flexibility and the expected outcomes due to the implementation of an innovation zone.

What funding should be included?

Repurposing funding or allocating new dollars to the initiative can be worthwhile, especially if a state wants to address economic and racial equity. Many states offer planning grants to districts to increase the effectiveness of innovation zones, and as an incentive for districts to apply for flexibility to address systemic educational challenges and other state priorities.

When should states evaluate innovation zones?

State leaders should determine an appropriate evaluation cycle for districts or schools participating in an innovation zone, with the understanding that widescale results will take time. State leaders should work closely with participating districts and schools to ensure that there is transparency in the application and implementation process, and an understanding of what “success” in providing flexibility for innovation looks like. State leaders should also be cognizant of the support that districts may need as they implement new innovations, including the need to connect with and learn from other districts that have innovation zone flexibility. States could create innovation networks or communities of innovative practice that provide a forum for innovation districts and schools to share their experiences, network, and provide valuable learning opportunities and feedback to the state.

About the Authors

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Aurora's mission is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning for more than 14 million students through its work in policy advocacy, research, and field-building/convening. We work on systems change in K-12 education, promote best practices, examine policy barriers, and make recommendations for change. Aurora has a national and global view of education innovation and lifts up promising policies and practices that yield improved outcomes for students. Aurora envisions a world in which all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

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