

The following is my response to the West Virginia "Innovation Zone Draft 2" document. The continued discussion in WV shows a willingness to explore ideas and reach consensus and that is a positive sign. In general however, I would caution against trying to put too much "standard organization" around this process. By this I mean that it is tempting to require the innovator to clearly demonstrate that the innovation is "best practice," that an overwhelming majority of the current folks at the location want the innovation, that before current rules are lifted, a heavy "burden of proof" on the innovator be required, state level teams to assist, authority removed from the local board to the state board/commissioner, etc. That is not how innovation frequently works best...and I would hope the procedures for the Innovation Zones would be such that the "Innovation Zones" would have less oversight....not more. They indeed must be accountable for results...but they have to have room to work, to make mistakes, to grow.

My comments are as follows and undoubtedly, some comments/questions are out of a lack of understanding of the climate and organization in WV. My apologies.

A. Purpose:

a. The Innovation Zone should be open to sound new ideas regardless as to whether these models of schools are currently "restrained and/or restricted by WVBE policy or West Virginia code." The zone should be open to new models of schools...including those "restrained and restricted...." The response might be..."Well, then what's stopping these schools from being developed now?" The response is..."Read the Christensen/Johnson book." "Change" is difficult even when not prohibited.

b. Might want to make clear that the focus is on creating new school models...which is different than "schools sites." These can be schools within schools.

B. Theory of Change:

a. A lot of sound insight here...

b. Might want to emphasize that where the organization (school site) has a clear vision/model, where the teachers understand and strongly support that model, where they have a significant role in the decision-making process over staffing, budget, curriculum, etc., they will also accept accountability for student growth.

c. The notion that every school can "meet the individual needs of each child and help them to succeed to the maximum capability" (which is a common statement in every "Student Handbook" is simply not true....never was. Students have individual needs...aspirations....strengths, etc....and the school needs to be designed to address the individualized needs of students. Therefore, a "one size school" cannot meet the needs of all students. The Innovation Zone requires individualization...a focus on each student...not on "the class" of students.

d. Key to each school will be improved evaluation...of the growth of students...different models of evaluation...that evaluate not just the students...but also the implementation (fidelity) of the implementation of the model of schooling.

C. Benefits:

This is an important section...maybe the most important.

a. Certainly the most significant benefit will be improved student performance...for more students. With innovative schools focused on individualization of learning...improved student attainment will result...for more students.

b. The profession of teaching will be enhanced...with empowered teachers will come greater satisfaction with their work...which will result in fewer teachers leaving the profession after a few years...which is a huge savings of resources, etc.

c. But the most significant benefit is the recognition that we cannot put "answers" into law...because the answers are constantly changing...faster in the flat world of the 21st century than ever before. What the Innovation Zones does is put a process into law that enables innovation to develop....to grow.

D. Essential Conditions:

a. "Critical Mass of Support"... sounds like the proposal is a current school. I would suggest that the probability of getting 80% of teachers to agree on significantly changing their school is problematic. It is far likely that an innovative new and different school will be formed by a group of teachers that want to start that particular model of school? It could be a "school within a school" or perhaps an "on-line school" or a school on the college campus, etc. Perhaps another way to describe the "Critical Mass of Support" is to say that all of the teachers that will work at the school will agree that they want to be at the school. The teachers should be able to select and deselect the teachers that will practice their profession at the school...That is the way to assure a professional practice environment and to assure that only the teachers that want to work in that school will be required to do so.

b. Items 3-5 have a sound basis.

c. It is important that the school have the authority to control its own destiny so to speak. It is clearly under the direction of the local board...but the board should have an "innovative" relationship with these schools. The specifics of the school in terms of expected results, authority delegated to the site, work rules, etc. should be specified in a contract with the site and agreed to by the teachers and principal. The central office then lets the site operate. The site may purchase assistance from the central office...or from outside the district...at the discretion of the site.

d. #5, Student/Parent/Community Engagement might be a bit stronger. The site should have a "Site Council" which includes teachers, parents, community and students if appropriate. This Site Council would have decision-making authority over the budget for the site, etc.

C. Management Support (I think this should be "E")

a. The innovative school is part of the system of public education under the direction and leadership of the local board and the proposal should be careful not to change that relationship to somehow make these schools appear as "state entities."

b. Support to the innovation zone schools is a crucial aspect to the success of new schools...but it needs to be carefully constructed. No question that the schools will need expert level assistance to aid in the design, implementation, coaching, problem-solving, etc. A generic "Support Committee" may or may not have the expertise (and I mean a recognized expert in the school model) to be of much help to an innovative school. What might work better is to have a "state support group" whose role is to arrange for assistance from anywhere in the state/nation/world for the innovative school. In other words, the "Support Committee" is a broker...not a provider.

D. Local Board of Education (Perhaps is "F")

a. Might the local board identify the kinds of schools it wants to have for the students and ask sites for proposals to create those models of new schools? Of course, sites or groups of teachers could also propose other models as well.

b. Good to see that "taking things off their plate" is recognized.

E. Process/Timeline (Likely this is "G")

a. Phase 1 seems to suggest that the WVDE will have a key background role and that is an appropriate role. This phase needs to be cautious not to engage primarily in "best practice" rather than "innovation." Clearly, "best practice" should be implemented in our schools right now. I would expect that WV is like most states where numerous folks at the local level are earning EdD degrees regularly. Surely as part of

their doctoral programs, they have become familiar with best practices and instructional research. This Phase should be cautious about restricting the possible innovations. A key function of this phase is discussion with foundations that will likely provide the primary financial support for this.

b. Phase II...again, caution as to the restriction of grants only to what can be "scaled-up." The world of technology is growing so rapidly that in 2009, we cannot predict what will be available in 2010 or 2011. If in 2006, a project would have been submitted that students could use their cell phones as their computer...it likely would not have been approved. Now, the libraries of the world are accessible through our cell phones. My point...don't be restrictive.

c. Phase III. Perhaps another approach would be for the state to define what the minimum codes and rules are and then waive everything else. Those likely would be: health and safety rules; learning standards; special education (federal law applies anyway so if any WV codes exceed the federal special ed law...those could be waived), licensure of teachers; etc.) This is what the final section is getting at perhaps....but then just require these provisions and waive everything else.

Conclusions:

Lots of good work going on in WV....as evidenced by this planning. The above are intended to be supportive of this work. Innovation is sometimes a bit messy...and when we try to force it to follow the usual "planning rules" it ends up not being innovative. WV wants to avoid that. The state likely spends several billion dollars on education...and does not have anywhere near the oversight, evaluation, etc. for this expenditure that is being proposed for the sites in the Innovation Zones. The word of caution is not to over-regulate innovation.