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TO: Sue Hildick
FROM: John Tapogna and Tom Souhlas
SUBJECT: BACKGROUND ON INNOVATION ZONES

INTRODUCTION

Innovation Zone (IZ) policies have been implemented in West Virginia and Colorado, and are being considered in other states. An IZ policy allows schools to obtain IZ status enabling them to bypass a subset of district and state regulations thus freeing them to implement innovative administrative strategies and teaching techniques to advance student performance.

Intent of Policy

The intent of an IZ policy is: (1) to improve educational performance by providing more flexibility to principals and teachers through the removal of specific district-level and state-level laws, policies, and regulations, and (2) to provide an environment in which innovative education systems can be developed, implemented, and assessed.

General Background¹

Groups of schools, individual schools, and individual departments within schools may be eligible to apply for IZ status. Public and charter schools may both be eligible to apply. Applicants must submit an Innovation Plan (IP) for approval by the county and/or state education boards, and the state superintendent for education. Applicants must (1) identify the statutory constraints they seek to have waived, and (2) list the innovations and changes they anticipate will occur if status is granted.

Constraints that may be waived include but are not limited to:

- Statutes and other legislative rules filed by the state board of education,
- State/county board policies or rules,
- State/county superintendent interpretations, and
- Collective bargaining agreements.

The IP must be approved by a specific percentage (80 percent in West Virginia) of the applicant's staff prior to submission. Once approved, the IZ may be awarded grant money to fund implementation. The state board will develop a review methodology and conduct annual reviews of IZ participants. These reviews will highlight areas of concern and may lead to removal of IZ status if not addressed appropriately by the subsequent re-evaluation date.

¹ Where specifics are mentioned in this memo, they are referring to the IZ legislation passed in West Virginia earlier this year. Colorado has passed legislation similar to that in West Virginia.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF INNOVATION ZONE POLICY

The changes possible with IZ status include, but are not limited to innovations in:

- School staffing (i.e. student/teacher ratios, online content, site-based services, etc.),
- Curriculum and assessment (i.e. more rigorous and relevant 21st century curriculum components such as personal wellness, fiscal and civil literacy, and global awareness),
- Scheduling (i.e. block schedules, extended school days/years, etc.), and
- Faculty recruitment, employment, evaluation, and compensation.

Anticipated Benefits

Students: The individualized focus likely to be included in many IPs may lead to the development of skill sets more inline with the issues relevant to 21st century society, and will allow student to incorporate a focus on their personal interests.

Teachers: With statutory constraints waived, teachers will be more directly responsible for the improvement of student performance, and will likely enhance their leadership and collaboration in and between schools. This increased flexibility may also increase job satisfaction, which could ultimately save resources currently needed for teacher recruitment.

Systemic: Innovation Zone policies will provide a cohesive testing ground for innovative pilot projects that could be later integrated with non-IZ schools. The implementation of IZ policies may also foster a legislative transition away from streamlined education policy creating a more nuanced approach to education policy in the future.

Demonstration of Success

While there are no assessments yet available on the effectiveness of IZ policies, several assessments have been completed regarding the effectiveness of charter schools which share many similarities with IZs.² Researchers, however, have yet to reach consensus on how charter schools affect student outcomes. This lack of consensus results primarily from methodological challenges to rigorous evaluation and the great variety of charter programs.

A recent study found that in most states studied, charter schools as a group do not significantly outperform traditional public schools, and that school performance can be more variable for charter schools. Other studies have reached similarly neutral conclusions, while others have concluded that charter schools have slightly negative impacts on student performance. A handful of recent, but more geographically limited studies have suggested that charter schools may help close the achievement gap for low-income minority children. These results, however, are still too few to conclude broadly that charter schools “work”, or that IZ policies will necessarily succeed.

² While IZ policies may be similar to charter school policies, states may choose to implement both to provide a larger range of options for schools to consider. West Virginia does not have a charter school policy in place but has recently implemented an IZ policy. Colorado implemented an IZ policy with a charter school policy already in place. Differences between Colorado’s IZ policy and charter school policy include: statutes eligible to be waived, funding issues, and assessment procedures.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN STATE-SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

The specifics of the IZ application, implementation, and assessment processes will almost certainly differ from state to state. Questions to consider when analyzing a specific state's IZ policy include but are not limited to:

- What types of institutions are eligible?
- What are the application requirements?
- What level of staff and community support is required for approval?
- What entity is responsible for reviewing applications and assessing progress?
- What set of statutory restrictions are eligible to be waived?
- How will the success of the IP be assessed?
- What are the funding implications associated with IZ status?
- How is IZ status different from charter school status?
- What legislative hurdles had to be overcome in establishing the IZ?

Issues specific to Oregon that must be considered before IZ legislation is proposed include:

- Constraints imposed by state budgetary allocations for education,
- Eligibility requirements for obtaining IZ status (i.e. all schools, dysfunctional schools only, etc.),
- Extent to which schools or districts in Oregon already implement individual components of typical IPs, and
- Sensitivity to current teacher agreements.

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