

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## **School Districts Embrace Second Generation of 'Innovation Zones'**

**By Katie Ash**

A second wave of so-called "innovation zones" seems to be sweeping the country, with states and districts adopting policies to grant certain public schools flexibility from some requirements, much like those allowed for charter schools, in the hope that it will lead to new ways of teaching and learning, as well as higher levels of achievement.

Following an initial introduction of these autonomous, in-district schools in the 1990s, this newest crop of innovation schools are embracing technology as a way to solve classroom challenges, leveraging ideas about school design through crowdsourcing techniques, and targeting some of the lowest-performing schools for transformation, among other strategies.

At least six states have created innovation zones, said Robin Lake, the executive director of the Seattle-based Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. The more recent round of so-called iZones, which are typically created by state-level legislation that allows a school or group of schools to apply for innovation status, often include technology integration and student-centered learning principles, said Ms. Lake. Many of the new iZones also target struggling schools using their state-approved flexibility over budget, governance, and scheduling as a turnaround strategy.

However, districts' track records with sustaining innovative strategies over time are spotty, said Ms. Lake, noting that districts often lack a long-term support strategy. "A new principal or new teachers come in, and things just regress to the mean," she said.

Experts say that the introduction of charter schools—and districts' need to compete with them—was one of the major forces behind the creation of the first innovation zones in the 1990s, and that remains among the reasons that districts and states today are embracing the model. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that receive independence from certain school policies and are operated by entities outside the regular district—either by for-profit or nonprofit organizations or community members.

In Kentucky, which currently does not allow charters, the legislature passed a law in 2012 creating innovation zones in part as an alternative to charters.

### **New Conversations**

The Kentucky Department of Education has **chosen four districts**—Danville Independent, Eminence Independent, Jefferson County, and Taylor County schools—to receive innovation status in the 2013-14 school year.

## Tracking Growth

Innovation zones have cropped up in at least six states in recent years. The number of public schools in these largely autonomous zones ranges from as few as seven in Syracuse, N.Y., to 300 in New York City.

The districts are now experimenting with performance-based learning, expanded learning time, and integrating technology, said David Cook, the director of the division of innovation and partner engagement for the Kentucky education department.

He said that granting those districts innovation status has "opened up conversations" about what school should be and what skills students should have upon graduating. "This group [of districts] wants to really think about what [a diploma] really means," he said.

The state's largest school district—the 100,000-student Jefferson County schools, which operates the schools in and around Louisville—is designating 18 of its 160 schools as schools of innovation. Some of the innovation strategies, such as the district's **School of Innovation Design Competition**, will have an impact on the district as a whole, said Jonathan G. Lowe, the director of student assignment in the district.

Mr. Lowe headed up a competition this school year to crowd-source school design proposals from anyone in the Louisville community, including teachers, entrepreneurs, nonprofit groups, and community members.

Panels of trained educators and community members will then narrow down the proposals, select finalists, and, eventually, one or more winners will be chosen to build their designs, pending approval from the district's school board. Proposals include a technology-focused school, a Spanish-immersion school, and a school of sustainability.

"We really wanted thinking that's coming from other places, from people who are outside of the usual decision-makers," said Mr. Lowe.

Interest in the competition was overwhelming, with 82 teams submitting letters of intent and 48 applications, he said. Finalists will be selected by March, and the new school could open by fall 2015.

But beyond the one proposal that is chosen (or multiple proposals fused together to form the new school design), he suspects that many of the ideas submitted will spark changes in the district's pre-existing schools as well.

## Efforts in New York

As part of the **iZone in the New York City school system**, which has one of the most robust innovation zones in the country with about 300 participating schools, local officials also embraced crowdsourcing as a way to spur innovation.

Last year, the iZone, which started in 2010, hosted a software application development competition to solicit apps and games to address the achievement gaps in middle school math. Winners were announced in May with \$104,000 in prizes distributed to nine companies.

The innovation-zone concept dates back to at least 1994 when Boston Public Schools introduced a set of "pilot schools," according to Daniel French, the executive director of the Boston-based Center for Collaborative Education, which was established to help support innovative school models in the 57,000-student district.

Much like the current innovation schools, Boston's pilot schools are granted freedom over their budgets, staffing, governance, curriculum, assessment, and school calendar.

Today, out of 128 total schools, the district has a total of 33 autonomous schools—21 pilot schools, which were created with the teachers' union; six Horace Mann charter schools, which are considered part of the district but must seek state approval to open; and six innovation schools, which were created by state legislation and receive authorization from the local school board.

### **Inspiring Change**

Mr. French said that some of the initiatives of the innovative schools have spread into the wider school district, such as reworking staffing policies to do away with seniority.

"Today there's growing understanding or interest and willingness on the part of many districts to see that, in fact, there's some merit to the principle that you have a better chance of success as a school if you're afforded greater control over your resources and decision-making," he said.

**A 2007 study** that compared the performance of Boston's autonomous schools with those in the rest of the district found that the pilot schools outperformed the district in all areas, including graduation rates, state test performance, and disciplinary referrals.

But that performance has slipped somewhat, said Mr. French, because of cuts to the oversight system for the schools. "Without an accountability system in place and a growing number of schools, there's been more variation" in performance, he said.

In the 21,000-student Syracuse, N.Y., district, federal School Improvement Grants are fueling a **newly created iZone** that is focused on low-performing schools. Seven such schools are in the iZone, which started this school year, said Zheadric Barbra, the executive director of the district's school turnaround office.

The zone was created in collaboration with the Syracuse Teachers' Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, which is providing team-building and classroom-management workshops and other professional development, said Mr. Barbra.

"I'm trying to let people understand that innovation starts, begins, and ends with groups of people that continuously collaborate to bring about changes that are rarely seen or that people don't subscribe to on a regular basis," Mr. Barbra said. "It's people kicking around ideas focused on how do we create something that will totally change the landscape of education for students in an urban environment."