

6 Innovation for Successful Schools

The Urban Education Task Force recommends that RIDE, the urban districts that are the focus of the Task Force, charter school leaders, including the League of Charter Schools, the mayoral academies and charter school directors, work collaboratively to develop the infrastructure and policies that will support innovative practices in our schools. We describe here both a Center for Innovation and a Zone of Innovation as starting points for catalyzing and spreading educational innovations.

Introduction

The call for innovation in public education has grown steadily louder in recent years as determined efforts to improve schools have had minimal success. Innovation is a fundamentally different way of doing things that results in considerably better, and usually different, outcomes. Both “better” and “different” require change that is meaningful and substantial.

Recommendations, Action Steps, and Partner Responsibilities

Believing that innovation is critical to the improvement of education in Rhode Island, the Task Force is recommending a plan to disseminate innovations already under way in Rhode Island from one school to others and to create new and innovative schools in Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

A Supportive Infrastructure

Innovative practices are occurring in many of our urban schools in Rhode Island – in public school districts, in independent schools, and in the charter system. Unfortunately, they occur in isolation, with very little support for sharing them with other schools and classrooms. We cannot expect innovation to spread like a fad; rather, we must be intentional about creating opportunities for educators to learn from each other and providing the supports to incubate reform.

RECOMMENDATION Develop a Center for Innovation led by RIDE, which would help identify, develop, support, and spread innovative educational efforts in Rhode Island's urban districts and throughout the state.

RIDE, in collaboration with state leaders, school district and school board leadership, charter school leaders, educators, and other partners should develop the Center for Innovation, which would serve the following purposes:

- Monitor innovative educational efforts throughout both the state and the country and communicate them widely to schools, community-based organizations, and the public. The Center would disseminate information about successful programs and practices through the media, through convening, and through publishing. In addition, the Center would facilitate cooperative efforts among institutions of higher education, government agencies, community-based organizations, and school districts to evaluate and disseminate programs and practices in the new, innovative schools.

- Reach out to educators, community groups, and innovative school models (in-state and national) to help stimulate proposals for new, fundamentally different schools.
- Commission research to identify high-priority unmet student learning needs.
- Ensure that high-quality technical assistance and other public and nongovernmental support is available to assist districts and new-schools developers create high-quality proposals, while providing appropriate oversight to ensure high-quality schools.
- Continually review and make recommendations for both legislative and non-legislative improvements in the state's new-schools initiatives, including recommendations for changes in the provisions for self-governed district schools.

Action Steps

- ▶ The Center for Innovation would not require a significant state appropriation, but some start-up funding would be needed. Longer term, the Center would be expected to raise a significant share of its budget from the private sector and relevant federal sources.
- ▶ The Commissioner for Elementary and Secondary Education would direct this effort under the direction and governance of the Board of Regents, thereby providing experience and continuity in achieving the Center's mission and carrying out its principal activities.

A Zone of Innovation

The process of innovation is most fruitful when it takes place in an environment that supports challenges to key assumptions about the world and the way it operates.

RECOMMENDATION Enact legislation as soon as possible to create a Rhode Island "Zone of Innovation" – which would initially include Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket – that provides a policy environment in which school districts and educational entrepreneurs are encouraged to create new, different schools.

The creation of new, innovative schools is more than an end in itself. In addition to providing a diversity of educational opportunities to students, the new legislation is intended to promote innovation and change throughout the five urban districts and beyond. New schools can exert positive influence on existing schools; they can be a much-needed research and development arm for the conventional system. Innovation means trial and error, risk and reward. Either way, it provides lessons to existing schools. Its successes, especially, have the potential to serve as powerful examples of ideas, policies, and practices that influence student learning.

The heightened awareness in foundations and the federal government of the importance of innovation in education bodes well for obtaining grants to fund a Zone of Innovation. But swift and dramatic action will be essential in competing for those dollars.

The new schools would be of two types: newly created charter schools and self-governing district schools.

NEWLY CREATED CHARTER SCHOOLS

Thirteen charter schools have been opened under Rhode Island's charter law. Additional charter schools in the urban districts can provide models for self-governing district schools and provide an incentive for school administrators and school committees to create new district schools.

Action Steps

- ◆ As soon as possible, the existing charter law should be amended to remove the cap on the number of new charter schools that can be created in these districts and statewide. In addition, the state should provide start-up funding, technical assistance, and, when possible, physical facilities.
- ◆ Rhode Island charter school students are funded separately from other public schools. Because the state lacks a funding formula based on student enrollment, additional state funding must be provided to charter schools, on top of what is already allocated to traditional schools and districts. As the state builds a funding formula for all students, legislative leaders should consider a base state allocation that goes to the school or district that a student attends.

SELF-GOVERNING DISTRICT SCHOOLS

Most charter schools in Rhode Island are independent of the school districts in which they operate. New, self-governing schools could be created by the districts themselves.

School districts already have the authority to close poorly performing schools and replace them with new, innovative schools, but there has been little incentive or public support for such action. The new legislation recommended here would include incentives to

encourage districts to create new schools that would have the same privileges enjoyed by charter schools and would be part of the Zone of Innovation.

Action Steps

- ◆ Creation of self-governing district schools would require the collaboration and approval of school committees, district superintendents, and teacher unions.
- ◆ Self-governing district schools could be created new or by converting poorly performing schools.
- ◆ The district would request proposals from various sponsors to create or convert schools. The district would set the terms of the agreement in a contract with the school sponsors, and that contract could be terminated for cause.

KEY SUPPORTS FOR INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS

Action Steps

- ◆ **Role of Center for Innovation** Just as an organization's application for a charter to start a new school must be approved by RIDE, applications for a self-governing school would require the approval of the state. The Center for Innovation could screen and evaluate applications for charter or self-governing schools and make recommendations to the Board of Regents. Additionally, the Center for Innovation could support schools in the Zone of Innovation to attract new teachers.
- ◆ **Open Enrollment** The new legislation should provide that students in the five urban districts would be free to attend any charter or self-governing school in the Zone of Innovation where space is available. Where applications exceed available seats, the school would be required to admit by lottery.