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Schools of Innovation

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Summary Points

- Senate Bill 66 (now Act 601) was passed in April 2013, allowing for the creation of “schools of innovation.”
- Schools of innovation receive waivers from certain regulations in order to facilitate the use of innovative approaches to teaching and learning.
- The research on the effectiveness of more autonomous schools has shown mixed results. However, many of these models are new and have not yet been evaluated.
- Schools of innovation are similar in concept to district conversion charter schools, but these two models vary in their application process, approval process, funding, and waivers.
- Out of over one hundred proposals, eleven schools were chosen as the first schools of innovation. Several of these schools have a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math) focus.
- The Office of Innovation for Education provides support to schools interested in becoming schools of innovation.

Schools of Innovation

Act 601, passed in April 2013, allows for schools to apply to become “schools of innovation.” Accepted schools receive flexibility from certain regulations in order to facilitate the use of innovative approaches to teaching and learning. In this policy brief, we discuss the history of Act 601, similar models in other states and their results, the application and approval process, the 2014-15 schools of innovation, and the role of the Office of Innovation for Education in supporting schools of innovation.

History of Act 601

In 2013, Senator Joyce Elliot (D-Little Rock) filed SB66 (now Act 601), which allows for the creation of “schools of innovation.”¹ Elliot indicated that the intention of this bill is to boost student engagement by providing districts with the latitude to “depart from specific laws, rules or regulations governing public school districts” in designing their instructional environments.² In order to be granted this special status, schools must submit innovation plans to the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) and be approved by the Commissioner of Education. Senator Elliot stated that she was hopeful that this bill would provide public school students the opportunity to obtain an advanced education that will prepare them for an increasingly competitive economy.¹

Similar Programs

Senator Elliot may have been inspired by similar programs in other states. In the 1990s, autonomous, in-district “innovation

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zones” (schools) were introduced in several states to raise student achievement levels.³

More recently, a second wave of more autonomous schools has been initiated across the nation, with states and districts adopting policies that grant waivers from certain requirements in the hope that the increased flexibility would lead to both higher levels of achievement and allow for competition with charter schools. According to *Education Week*, at least six states have recently created innovation zones.³

Massachusetts

In 1994, the Boston Public School District established pilot schools, intended to increase academic performance by granting schools autonomy by allowing them to opt out of certain regulations and policies. These schools have autonomy over five areas: staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment, governance and policies, and the school calendar. Boston’s pilot and open-enrollment charter schools used lotteries for admission, allowing researchers to conduct a rigorous “gold-standard” random assignment study, comparing pilot school students to their peers who were not admitted to pilot schools only due to random chance.

found mixed results, with some positive results at the elementary and high school levels but null results at the middle school level.⁴ In contrast, researchers found positive results for charter schools at both the middle and high school levels (there were no charter elementary schools in the study).

Colorado

In 2008, Colorado passed the “Innovation Schools Act” allowing for schools of innovation to be created. In October 2013, the University of Colorado-Denver released a study evaluating the innovation schools within Denver Public Schools. According to the report, there were no statistically-significant differences between the proficiency levels of innovation schools and comparison schools.⁵

Kentucky

In 2012, Kentucky enacted a bill similar to Act 601, allowing for public schools to apply to become Districts of Innovation. However, it is too soon to know anything about these districts’ effectiveness. Since

Kentucky does not allow charter schools, this move appeared to some as a replacement for charter legislation.⁶

In summary, there is very little evidence on the effectiveness of more autonomous schools, but the research that does exist shows mixed results.

Application & Approval Process

For schools interested in becoming a “school of innovation,” the first step is to create a “School Council of Innovation,” composed of teachers and classified employees (elected by the school), the principal (or an administrative appointee), parents, community members, at least two students, and other stakeholders. The council will draft a “School of Innovation Plan,” which will demonstrate how their proposal will increase academic performance by improving teaching and learning. Next, all eligible school employees vote on the plan; a minimum of 60% of eligible employees must approve it in order to move forward. If approved, the plan is then sent to the local school board for approval. If the plan clears this final step, it then must be submitted to the Arkansas Department of Education by the deadline.²

The state’s Education Commissioner reviews the submissions and makes the final decision about which schools will be named schools of innovation. A school of innovation will be approved for up to four years and then can apply for renewal for another four-year period. The Commissioner makes the decision regarding renewal and can revoke the school of innovation designation at any time if a school fails to substantially fulfill the school’s innovation plan, meet its goals and performance targets, or comply with applicable laws or rules.⁷

Schools of Innovation vs. District Conversion Charter Schools

Schools of innovation are similar in concept to district conversion charter schools; both allow school districts to apply for waivers from certain rules and regulations that govern traditional public schools in order to achieve specified goals and in exchange for greater accountability.⁷ Currently, there are 18 district conversion charter schools (run by their local school district) across Arkansas.⁸ There are, however, some differences between the two types of schools, which are detailed below:

A Comparison of Schools of Innovation & District Conversion Charter Schools⁷

	Schools of Innovation	District Conversion Charters
Application Process	Schools establish a council that creates a “School of Innovation Plan”; the plan must be approved by at least 60% of eligible employees and the school board before being submitted to the Commissioner of Education .	Districts complete a letter of intent and an application; the application must be broadcast in a public hearing and approved by the school board, then submitted to the ADE Charter Authorizing Panel .
Approval Process	Approved by Commissioner for a 4-year period ; school can then apply for renewal	Granted an initial charter for 3-5 years (varies) ; school can then apply for renewal
Funding	Funding matrix, no extra funding	Funding matrix; may receive federal grant funds for planning and implementation that are distributed by the state
Waivers	Cannot apply for a Teacher Fair Dismissal waiver	Can apply for a Teacher Fair Dismissal waiver

First Year of Proposals

Proposals for schools hoping to become schools of innovation were due this year on May 1, 2014. For each subsequent year, the proposals will instead be due on March 1st. In our interview with Denise Airola of the Office of Innovation for Education, she stated that, because the rules for schools of innovation were finalized on February 13, 2014, the timeline this year was particularly brief, and many schools would have benefited from more time to craft their proposals.

Regardless, the ADE received 129 applications, an indication that many schools are interested in receiving flexibility from regulations. According to former Assistant Commissioner Megan Witonski, one of the most common requirements schools sought to waive was the 180 day school calendar.⁸ Many of these requests seemed to be motivated by the large number of snow days several districts had in early 2014;

schools sought flexibility to adapt the calendar to make up future snow days.

In the end, eleven schools were chosen, less than ten percent of the schools that applied. and some patterns emerged among them: several of the chosen schools have a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), arts, or language acquisition component. Eight of the eleven schools of innovation are located in Northwest Arkansas, and the majority of schools are at the secondary level, with eight junior high or high schools and three elementary schools.

There is no official cap on the number of schools chosen each year; the number of schools of innovation depends on the quality of the proposals that are received. One potential resource for schools seeking to improve their application to become a school of innovation is the Office of Innovation for Education.

Office of Innovation for Education

In 2013, the Office of Innovation for Education (OIE) was opened by the ADE in partnership with the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions. The origins of this office can be traced to the 2011 U.S. Department of Education's decision to grant states flexibility in how they will meet the requirements of No

Arkansas Schools of Innovation for 2014-15 School Year⁹

School	District	Focus
Leverett Elementary School	Fayetteville	STEM focus Language acquisition Blended learning
Weiner Elementary School	Harrisburg	Spanish language classes Digital communication skills Character education Building connections to careers, particularly STEM Integration of music/visual arts into the core curriculum
Westwood Elementary School	Springdale	Integration of music/physical education/fine arts Gifted and talented program standards included in curriculum units Student-led parent-teacher conferences
Russellville High School	Russellville	Incorporation of career curriculum and art concepts into STEM classes 8th grade students with two elective classes can enroll in STEM courses instead of fine arts, career development, and physical education classes
Central Junior High School George Junior High School Lakeside Junior High School Southwest Junior High School Har-Ber High School Springdale High School	Springdale	Students from Springdale's junior highs and high schools can enroll in Springdale's School of Innovation. Components include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to earn associate degrees and/or industry-level certifications, in addition to high school diplomas, by the end of 12th grade. • STEM focus • Project-based learning • Course credit awarded based on demonstrated competency, measured using rubrics, rather than "seat time"
Flippin High School	Flippin	Juniors/seniors who are on track to graduate and have a 3.0 GPA can participate in the following off-campus activities, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolling in postsecondary classes • Participating in a community project • Job shadowing and working with a mentor • Working in a paid employment position • Participating in a school service organization

use that flexibility and chose Dr. Denise Airola to serve as director of the OIE.¹⁰

The Office of Innovation for Education serves two main functions. First, the OIE seeks to identify innovative practices in education that promote increased student achievement. OIE staff travel to schools across the country that are experimenting with new, potentially impactful practices, such as blended learning, competency-based learning, and incorporating real-world experiences, such as internships, into the school day.

The second purpose of the OIE is to support potential schools of innovation. Within this role, the OIE serves as a resource to schools that are interested in becoming a school of innovation. The services provided depend on the particular needs of a school. For example, the OIE sometimes offers strategic consulting, in which OIE staff ask schools to take a step back and consider why they are trying to innovate and what specific student needs they are trying to meet. According to Airola, OIE staff members have found that among schools there is a “need for concrete guidance and where to start.” Many schools need help setting goals that are measurable and related to the proposed intervention, while others come to the Office of Innovation for Education in search of promising practices to try.

The OIE also tries to connect schools interested in trying a particular

approach to other schools using that approach that are serving similar populations, allowing these schools to discuss implementation issues and share their “lessons learned.”

Finally, the OIE seeks to improve schools’ internal capacity by helping school leaders become better consumers of research on effective educational practices and strategies.

Contact the Office of Innovation for Education



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School of Innovation Spotlight: Leverett Elementary



So, what does a School of Innovation school look like in action? Since eight of the eleven Schools of Innovation have a STEM focus, we decided to profile Leverett Elementary, which has been integrating STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects into instruction since 2012, receiving support from the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas. Principal Cheryl Putnam indicates that a STEM school includes student collaboration, experimentation, problem-solving and reinforced critical thinking. An example of this approach is to give stu-

dents a problem and asked them to find a solution. Last year’s kindergartners performed a “Humpty Dumpty Egg Drop” in which they designed a vessel for an egg to protect it from breaking when it was dropped several feet to the ground. While this is a well-known educational project, it is rarely used in grades as low as kindergarten. In a first grade project, students were given cardboard, straws, paper and a tub of water and asked to build a device to float across the water. The project tied in literacy because students wrote a story about the how, why, and limitations of the exercise. Another first grade class created a lemonade stand to learn about economics. Math was integrated into this project for measuring, science for taste testing, and art and music for designing posters and advertising jingles. The students chose to donate the money from their lemonade stand to tornado-damaged schools in Vilonia. Teachers have stated that units are more challenging to plan and implement, but that students are more engaged and remember the lessons better. “It’s working out for the kids and that’s what it’s about,” teacher Gracen Armendariz stated. Principal Putnam indicates that goals for their first year as a School of Innovation include continuing to integrate STEM in core subjects, improving student engagement in STEM-focused programs, reducing the number of students who need intervention, and increasing the number of students that are working at grade level.¹¹

Office for Education Policy

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Conclusion

Although there is not yet a great deal of research available to support this model, schools of innovation have the potential to be an exciting addition to public education in Arkansas.

In general, though, there are some concerns regarding the sustainability of innovative practices over time. Districts often lack a long-term strategy to retain new programs or practices. Sometimes, a new principal or new teachers come into a school, and the instructional program regresses back to what was in place before.²

One promising element of the schools of innovation program is that the community and school employees must “buy into” the plan from the beginning of the process. It seems much more likely that new strategies will be sustained if teachers and parents are invested in the plan. In addition, the overwhelming response from schools (with over 100 schools applying) shows that there is clearly a desire for the flexibility from regulations that the school of innovation status provides.

According to Dr. Airola, many schools that applied to become Schools of Innovation were already having conversations about unmet needs in their schools and making changes to address them. Act 601 provides schools with an opening to ask for waivers from certain regulations in order to put plans into action with support from the Office of Innovation for Education.

As the 2014-15 school year commences, the eleven new schools of innovation will bear watching. Will these schools receive the support they need from leadership, faculty, the community, and others? Will these “innovative” models lead to increased student achievement? Are schools of innovation sustainable over time? These and other questions are on our minds as schools of innovation make their inaugural debut in Arkansas.

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