

A photograph of a grand, classical-style state capitol building with a large, ornate dome, set against a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The building features many columns and windows.

# Innovation Zones: Creating Policy Flexibility for Personalized Learning

WRITTEN BY:

Susan Patrick and Susan Gentz

## What Are Innovation Zones?

There is a new state education policy concept termed either **innovation zones** or **districts of innovation**. State education agencies interested in shifting their role from enforcing compliance to one of supporting innovation and building capacity in districts are working to spur new innovative instructional models and create space for competency-based pathways in student-centered learning models. States set up an innovation zone by passing enabling legislation to set up a program and/or offering certain waivers or exemptions from administrative regulations and statutory provisions.

**Innovation zones** help state policy leaders identify outdated policies and regulations that may get in the way of educators designing innovative models.

Innovation zones help state policy leaders identify outdated policies and regulations that may get in the way of educators designing innovative models. School leaders creating new, personalized learning models may run into policy barriers or outdated regulations, and the innovation zone allows for a waiver process to identify and remove these barriers. The terms innovation zones and districts of innovation both refer to this idea of creating space for districts and schools to innovate, identify policy barriers and remove them through waivers (the concept name varies from state to state).

## Why Are Innovation Zones Important?

Policy makers establish innovation zone authority or programs through legislation or rulemaking to catalyze the development of new learning models. The innovation zone authority provides increased flexibility for a state to waive certain regulations and requirements for schools and systems beginning to plan, design and implement personalized, competency-based education models.

Innovation zones offer state education policy waivers in order to support practitioners in the process of developing and implementing new learning models. As practitioners implement their models, any rules or regulations that impede the model development are brought to light and can be addressed through waivers in a state which has provided such innovation zones. This shifts the role of the state agency from one of compliance enforcement to support in enabling new model development to occur in districts.

## Legislative Language

There are many examples of what legislation can look like. Here are some examples of statewide innovation zones and the regulatory framework.

### Innovation Zone Legislative Language

STATE	POLICY FOR INNOVATION ZONE
Arkansas	Allows a school district to petition the State Board of Education for all or some of the same waivers granted to an open-enrollment public charter school.  <a href="#">AR Code § 6-23-304 (2012)</a> .
Colorado	Provides that upon designation of a district of innovation, the state board shall waive any statutes or rules specified in the school district's innovation plan as they pertain to the innovation schools or innovation school zones of the district of innovation.  <a href="#">C.R.S. 22-32.5-101</a> .
Kentucky	Provides Kentucky Public School Districts the opportunity to apply to the Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) to be exempt from certain administrative regulations and statutory provisions, as well as waiving local board policy, in an effort to improve the learning of students.  <a href="#">KY Rev Stat § 160.107 (2013)</a> .
Mississippi	Allows the State Board of Education to authorize and approve public school districts of innovation for the purposes of improving students' educational performance. Districts of innovation shall be provided flexibility from selected board regulations.  <a href="#">SB 2191 (2015) Amends Title 37 of the Mississippi Code of 1972</a> .
New York	Created the iZone, issued by the New York Department of Education, for the purposes of a community of schools using innovative approaches to improve outcomes using flexibility from many standard regulations.  <a href="#">iLearnNYC regulations</a> .

## Learn More

- [iNACOL State Policy Frameworks 2015: 5 Critical Issues to Transform Education](#)
- [State Policy: Resources for Getting Started](#)
- Commonwealth of Kentucky [Districts of Innovation Policy](#)
- State of Colorado [Guidance for Implementation of the Innovation Zones Act](#)



The mission of the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to catalyze the transformation of K-12 education policy and practice to advance powerful, personalized, learner-centered experiences through competency-based, blended and online learning. iNACOL is a non-profit organization focusing on research, developing policy for student-centered education to ensure equity and access, developing quality standards for emerging learning models using competency-based, blended and online education, and supporting the ongoing professional development of classroom, school, and district leaders for new learning models. Learn more at [www.inacol.org](http://www.inacol.org).