

Michigan Zone of Innovation

Eleven states currently have created zones of innovation to provide space for incubation of new best practices in an environment free from doing constant work arounds on existing regulations. In Michigan, school districts must navigate through the layers established with the School Code, the School Aid Act, Administrative Regulations and MDE rules, in particular, those spelled out in the Pupil Accounting Manual. These rules were written based upon long held assumptions that learning would be judged based upon time spent in classes, and that students would advance through the system in a cohort group determined by student age. Quality measures for teachers rely heavily on certifications and standardized tests which favor visual and auditory learners. The system is designed to funnel students into a college track.

Standardization of educational experience is measured in testing situations. Students and programs are told what to learn, when to learn it, and then are examined to assess whether the standards are met. Rarely are students asked to demonstrate that their learning has reached a level of mastery that students can show by application in new contexts other than the school setting.

Innovative districts are committed to replacing seat time with measures of competency. Basing learning on competency leads in turn to a personalized learning track, where the pace of learning is based upon mastery, rather than task completion during the time frame allowed for the short to move through a set curriculum. Personalized pacing results in some students completing coursework at an accelerated pace. Currently, a student who completes a course such as Geometry in four months is restricted from starting a new course as students cannot be funded for more than 1.0 FTE per year.

Preparing students for their future involves exposing them to career studies such as internships and apprenticeship. It often involves learning and practicing skills in the community from practitioners of the trade. These professionals are often not certified teachers. The ability to guide a student through a personalized learning plan where the most important factor is whether a student gains the necessary competencies is more important than when or where or how those skill levels were obtained is the key element in the desire to have the freedom to design programs without constantly having to ask permission to be excused from rules designed for factory model schools.

Innovative districts desire to have the chance to demonstrate what can happen when the focus is on the student instead of navigating through layers of interconnected statutes and regulations. The school would be fit to the student rather than trying to fit the student to the school.