

**124F.01 INNOVATION RESEARCH ZONES PILOT PROGRAM.**

Subdivision 1. **Establishment; requirements for participation; research zone plans.** (a) The innovation research zone pilot program is established to improve student and school outcomes consistent with the comprehensive achievement and civic readiness requirements under section 120B.11. Innovation zone partnerships allow school districts and charter schools to research and implement innovative education programming models designed to better prepare students for the world of the 21st century.

(b) One or more school districts or charter schools may join together to form an innovation zone partnership. The partnership may include other nonschool partners, including postsecondary institutions, other units of local government, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit organizations. An innovation zone plan must be collaboratively developed in concert with the school's instructional staff.

(c) An innovation research zone partnership must research and implement innovative education programs and models that are based on proposed hypotheses. An innovation zone plan may include an emerging practice not yet supported by peer-reviewed research. Examples of innovation zone research may include, but are not limited to:

(1) personalized learning, allowing students to excel at their own pace and according to their interests, aspirations, and unique needs;

(2) the use of competency outcomes rather than seat time and course completion to fulfill standards, credits, and other graduation requirements;

(3) multidisciplinary, real-world, inquiry-based, and student-directed models designed to make learning more engaging and relevant, including documenting and validating learning that takes place beyond the school day and school walls;

(4) models of instruction designed to close the achievement gap, including new models for age three to grade 3 models, English as a second language models, early identification and prevention of mental health issues, and others;

(5) new partnerships between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions, employers, or career training institutions enabling students to complete industry certifications, postsecondary education credits, and other credentials;

(6) new methods of collaborative leadership including the expansion of schools where teachers have larger professional roles;

(7) new ways to enhance parental and community involvement in learning;

(8) new models of professional development for educators, including embedded professional development;  
or

(9) new models in other areas such as whole child instruction, social-emotional skill development, technology-based or blended learning, parent and community involvement, professional development and mentoring, and models that increase the return on investment.

(d) An innovation zone plan submitted to the commissioner must describe:

(1) how the plan will improve student and school outcomes consistent with the comprehensive achievement and civic readiness requirements under section 120B.11;

- (2) the role of each partner in the zone;
- (3) the research methodology used for each proposed action in the plan;
- (4) the exemptions from statutes and rules in subdivision 2 that the research zone partnership will use;
- (5) a description of how teachers and other educational staff from the affected school sites will be included in the planning and implementation process;
- (6) a detailed description of expected outcomes and graduation standards;
- (7) a timeline for implementing the plan and assessing the outcomes; and
- (8) how results of the plan will be disseminated.

The governing board for each partner must approve the innovation zone plan.

(e) Upon unanimous approval of the initial innovation zone partners and approval of the commissioner of education, the innovation zone partnership may extend membership to other partners. A new partner's membership is effective 30 days after the innovation zone partnership notifies the commissioner of the proposed change in membership unless the commissioner disapproves the new partner's membership.

(f) Notwithstanding any other law to the contrary, a school district or charter school participating in an innovation zone partnership under this section continues to receive all revenue and maintains its taxation authority in the same manner as before its participation in the innovation zone partnership. The innovation zone school district and charter school partners remain organized and governed by their respective school boards with general powers under chapter 123B or 124E and remain subject to any employment agreements under chapters 122A and 179A. School district and charter school employees participating in an innovation zone partnership remain employees of their respective school district or charter school.

(g) An innovation zone partnership may submit its plan at any time to the commissioner in the form and manner specified by the commissioner. The commissioner must approve or reject the plan after reviewing the recommendation of the Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel. An initial innovation zone plan that has been rejected by the commissioner may be resubmitted to the commissioner after the innovation zone partnership has modified the plan to meet each individually identified objection.

**Subd. 2. Exemptions from laws and rules.** (a) Notwithstanding any other law to the contrary, an innovation zone partner with an approved plan is exempt from each of the following state education laws and rules specifically identified in its plan:

- (1) any law or rule from which a district-created, site-governed school under section 123B.045 is exempt;
- (2) any statute or rule from which the commissioner has exempted another district or charter school, as identified in the list published on the Department of Education's website under subdivision 4, paragraph (b);
- (3) online learning program approval under section 124D.095, subdivision 7, if the school district or charter school offers a course or program online combined with direct access to a teacher for a portion of that course or program;
- (4) restrictions on extended time revenue under section 126C.10, subdivision 2a, for a student who meets the criteria of section 124D.68, subdivision 2; and
- (5) any required hours of instruction in any class or subject area for a student who is meeting all competencies consistent with the graduation standards described in the innovation zone plan.

(b) The exemptions under this subdivision must not be construed as exempting an innovation zone partner from the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments.

**Subd. 3. Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel.** (a) The commissioner must establish and convene an Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel to review all innovation zone plans submitted for approval.

(b) The panel must be composed of nine members. One member must be appointed by each of the following organizations: Educators for Excellence, Education Minnesota, Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals, Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association, Minnesota Association of School Administrators, Minnesota School Boards Association, Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, and the Office of Higher Education. The commissioner must appoint one member with expertise in evaluation and research.

**Subd. 4. Commissioner approval.** (a) Upon recommendation of the Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel, the commissioner may approve up to three innovation zone plans in the seven-county metropolitan area and up to three in greater Minnesota. If an innovation zone partnership fails to implement its innovation zone plan as described in its application and according to the stated timeline, upon recommendation of the Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel, the commissioner must alert the partnership members and provide the opportunity to remediate. If implementation continues to fail, the commissioner must suspend or terminate the innovation zone plan.

(b) The commissioner must publish a list of the exemptions the commissioner has granted to a district or charter school on the Department of Education's website by July 1, 2017. The list must be updated annually.

**Subd. 5. Project evaluation, dissemination, and report to legislature.** Each research zone partnership must submit project data to the commissioner in the form and manner provided for in the approved application. At least once every two years, the commissioner must analyze each innovation zone's progress in realizing the objectives of the innovation zone partnership's plan. The commissioner must summarize and categorize innovation zone plans and submit a report to the legislative committees having jurisdiction over education by February 1 of each odd-numbered year in accordance with section 3.195.

**History:** *1Sp2017 c 5 art 2 s 52; 2024 c 109 art 2 s 32; 1Sp2025 c 10 art 2 s 25*