

Creating Innovation Zones to Advance the Promise of Competency-Based Pathways



Achieve



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INTRODUCTION

For decades, education leaders in states and districts have considered exploring competency-based pathways (CBP), which focus on ensuring that all students demonstrate proficiency on all essential knowledge and skills at their own pace rather than traditional time bound systems. Although a handful of states pioneered efforts to transition to such a system, others held back. The ideal of moving from the traditional system to one based on competency was hampered by a lack of clear, coherent standards that articulated the knowledge and skills students need to demonstrate readiness for their next steps along the path to college and career. Policy and other institutional barriers also proved challenging. Now, given widespread adoption and implementation of college- and career-ready (CCR) standards, states that are committed to transforming from time-based to CBP systems can start to make real progress toward college and career readiness for all students. Yet, there is still much to learn before taking these reforms to scale. Interested and committed states can take on pieces of a competency agenda to pilot and learn from these innovations.

This brief explores the state's role in creating and supporting district innovation zones. A significant part of the state's role is ensuring that the CBP system is fully aligned to the state's CCR expectations and that determinations of mastery/proficiency of these standards are at a level of rigor correlated to college and career readiness. The advancement of CBP holds great promise in meeting the central aims of the standards-based reform movement: to ensure that all students meet or exceed specific outcomes by high school graduation and that students have equitable access and exposure to rich instruction and strong supports to learn and demonstrate their learning. How can a state create the right conditions and parameters for districts committed to advancing CBP to actually do so in such

Defining CBP

The following description, adopted by Achieve's Competency-Based Pathways Working Group¹, is based on the working definition of CBP²:

- Students advance upon demonstrated mastery.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
- Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge.
- The process of reaching learning outcomes encourages students to develop skills and dispositions important for success in college, careers, and citizenship.

¹ Achieve's Competency-Based Pathways Working Group met between August 2012 and November 2013 to develop the state policy framework. It comprised representatives from 11 states (Colorado, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Rhode Island, Washington and Wisconsin) and 11 national and state organizations (Advance Illinois, Alliance for Excellent Education, Business Education Compact, Council of Chief State School Officers, Data Quality Campaign, Digital Learning Now, iNACOL, MetisNet, National Center for Time and Learning, National Governors Association and Western Governors University).

² In an effort to reach a shared understanding across the nation, Susan Patrick, president of iNACOL, and Chris Sturgis, principal of MetisNet, developed a working definition of CBP.

a way that helps more students reach college and career readiness? A major (and difficult) part of the answer is to make significant shifts in state student assessment and school accountability requirements by aligning them with the CBP approach, and to do so without sacrificing equity for all students and ensuring public transparency.

In a CBP system, every child taking the same test at the same time will not work. In fact, it is contrary to the whole notion of a student-centered, competency-based system. In CBP, students will use assessments to demonstrate their learning when they are ready to move ahead, not during a state-set testing window. In a CBP system, there is an opportunity to move toward a vision where teachers have larger roles in designing, creating, using, and scoring assessments; grounding those assessments in local curriculum; and working with other educators to ensure they are aligned to the state's CCR standards. School accountability, meanwhile, could include metrics that illuminate the progress students are making – or not making – through the CBP system and that disaggregate student performance by race/ethnicity, income, and special education and English learner status. These metrics need to be developed, tested, and refined. The structures, protocols, and guidance to create and deploy flexible, on-demand, curriculum-embedded, performance-based assessments need further work. Finally, the field still needs to learn what should be done to ensure that the assessments and accountability changes add up to a whole that advances equity and improves transparency rather than the other way around.

Principles of Innovation

States should keep three principles of innovation in mind as they design their CBP innovation zone strategy:

First, Achieve strongly encourages states to collaborate with innovation zone districts to create a **comprehensive strategic plan** and timeline. CBP innovation zones should not be seen as simply another program layered onto an array of options or as a siloed initiative, but rather as a coherent approach to teaching and learning. The plan ought to be anchored in a clearly articulated vision explaining why the state is pursuing CBP innovation zones.

Second, states need to **infuse a learning agenda** throughout their plans, ensuring that as districts test new approaches and evaluate results, the state has the information and relationships that allow them to adjust the state strategy and their support. This learning mindset is important to not only help the state adjust what it does to ensure the success of the innovation zone, but to help get the right balance in the state-district relationship so the district sees the state as a true thought – and action – partner that is serious about innovation and continuous improvement. Each state's own learning agenda could follow from the state's vision for CBP, with a clear culture and set of structures for state education agency leaders; other state education policy leaders; local leaders; and key education, business, and community partners to learn together.

Third, states should elevate – and communicate – the benefit of **leading with small-scale pilot efforts**. States can use innovation zones to carve out space for trial, study, and refinement of promising ideas to understand what needs to occur within the current K-12 context before a new strategy can be successfully implemented and to build acceptance of a new idea before it becomes more widespread.

Finally, Achieve recommends that states have a plan in place for **knowing if or when and how to scale up**. States can identify processes for evaluating the design and impact of small-scale pilots to determine what aspects of the innovations are working, under what conditions, and for which students. Conversely, the evaluation could also be designed to identify innovations that do not meet their promise, even after adequate time to adjust implementation to improve results. In addition, Achieve encourages states to plan for how results from the innovation zone will be reported, how to make the case for taking the innovations to a broader scale, and how to strengthen the overall commitment to transparency.

Achieve recommends that states create and learn from CBP district innovation zones. Not all districts and schools – perhaps very few of them – will be willing to go down this path. Not all need to do so, nor do all have the vision or the capacity. With this paper, Achieve provides guidance to state leaders and districts that are committed to advancing CBP on how they can create a **CBP innovation zone** strategy that puts theory into practice. States have a critical role in protecting equity, never wavering in their attention from identifying and closing disparities among student groups. They must also protect transparency to the public about student results. This paper outlines “guardrails” that states should put in place to protect this bottom line, discusses several design considerations for states in building an innovation zone strategy, and illustrates an example of how it might play out in practice.

PROTECTING EQUITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Without attention paid to risks to equity, CBP could have negligible effects on persistent disparities in performance among students by race/ethnicity, income, and special education and English learner status. Far worse, it also could open up new achievement gaps – ones not based on different levels of performance, but on the time it takes to reach standards – if different groups are moving at disproportionately slower paces through the content. States need to be vigilant in policy adoption and implementation to ensure that a shift to CBP promotes equity in opportunity and outcomes.

This section outlines three major areas that states need to address to ensure there are sufficient equity and transparency “guardrails” in an innovation zone strategy to advance CBP toward college and career readiness for **all students**. The first area is for states to determine the specific roles they will play in ensuring alignment, consistency, and quality for the system. The second is for states to make decisions about the design of CBP assessments to ensure alignment, consistency, and quality across districts and schools. The third area is for states to determine a set of performance indicators that can be used across districts and schools to monitor student progress.

State role

A state undertaking an innovation zone strategy will need to determine what its role will be in ensuring consistency, alignment, and quality across the innovation zone districts, while simultaneously innovating in assessment and accountability that is more aligned to a CBP approach. States can play a variety of roles that best reflect the local context, however, Achieve recommends any state advancing CBP innovation zones maintain consistent and uniform expectations for all students, as much as possible, while simultaneously providing room for innovative approaches to using curriculum-embedded assessments that are comparable in the content and cognitive challenge of the tasks. At a minimum, Achieve strongly recommends that states play a significant role in ensuring consistency of standards or competencies across the district innovation zones.

The State Role in Ensuring Alignment, Consistency, and Quality

- Ensure consistency and transparency of standards or competencies.
- Coordinate or facilitate translations of standards into learning targets, competencies, etc. used in instructional materials or assessments.
- Coordinate or facilitate assessment rubric development, training, and calibrated use.
- Oversee external validity checks and moderation processes to ensure comparability.
- Bolster professional learning to ensure that capacity is being built among educators and instructional leaders.
- Select the performance indicators used to monitor and publicly report student progress toward college and career readiness.

Assessments

States need to determine the type of assessment innovations they are seeking to test and what guardrails need to be in place. The type of innovation or approach states take should be clearly tied to the purpose and intended uses of the assessments in a competency-based system. Although any approach should be designed to validate determinations of student proficiency, it is important for each state to reach an understanding of additional critical purposes and intended uses – such as providing comparable, timely information to keep students on target with their proficiency goals, signaling the kind of rich instruction needed to help students demonstrate proficiency on standards, or encouraging real-world application of knowledge and skills and engagement with postsecondary.

States advancing CBP may utilize or integrate different approaches in their CBP innovation zones:

- **A more traditional, or standardized (“summative”) assessment with flexibility in when the assessment is administered to students.**
- **Curriculum-embedded, performance-based assessments.**
- **Other demonstrations of learning.**

In this context, why would these three approaches need flexibility from current assessment constructs, and thus why should guardrails be in place to protect equity, transparency, and accountability? For the first approach, if the relevant assessment is the statewide summative assessment used for federal and state accountability, districts would need flexibility from grade-level assessment requirements. For example, a 12-year old student might take a 6th grade English language arts (ELA) assessment in December, when her class work and formative assessments signal that she is likely to score at a proficient level. She might then take a 7th grade mathematics assessment in March to validate that she is ready to move ahead to 8th grade mathematics content. She will still take all required, annual statewide assessments, but not at the same time as her peers. If pursuing the second and third approaches, given the extraordinary time and effort involved in ramping up and transitioning to high-quality performance assessments and demonstrations of learning, innovation zone districts likely will seek waivers or other flexibility from administering all of the statewide assessments to all students every year.

States that are seeking to pilot more flexible pacing of a traditional, standardized assessment have a few options to consider. States might explore the timing of administering statewide, end-of-course or end-of-grade summative assessments. They might also explore a new model of **modularized summative assessment** that districts could deploy in a more flexible way. The advantage of the former approach is that it would allow states to deploy an existing, and familiar, assessment design. Perhaps the most considerable challenge is the very limited capacity of typical statewide assessments to be provided outside of established testing windows, without significant costs incurred for additional items and forms to ensure security.

The primary advantage of the modularized summative assessment approach is that it would serve a more robust function within the CBP system because it would validate “move ahead” decisions for students more frequently throughout the year (e.g., from one unit to another unit). States could develop such a modularized system on their own or provide support and guidance to districts as they do so – and in either case, it could inform the future direction of the statewide assessment. Challenges and trade-offs, of course, are also present in this approach. Unless accompanied by comparable reductions in other tests (such as if this system replaced a district-wide benchmark assessment and/or was “rolled up” to an end-of-course/end-of-grade score to replace a statewide assessment), this approach could lead to overburdening students with assessments. It would also require considerable resources and psychometric expertise, likely from outside the school district or state, to develop assessment modules with a high degree of test security, alignment, and quality that could be administered on demand. Regardless of the approach, states will need to ensure that performance indicators can effectively illuminate student progress – or lack of sufficient progress – through the system.

States focused on testing the use of **curriculum-embedded, performance-based assessments** through a CBP innovation zone strategy will need to address the resources and processes required to ensure alignment, consistency, and quality. They will also need to identify potential external measures to validate the information the assessments are providing and clarify how the results will be used.

In terms of resources and processes, states should take steps to ensure the alignment, consistency, and quality of locally-developed instructional units and performance tasks. States should consider working with local educators to develop or curate exemplar units and tasks; develop rubrics and criteria; and provide access to training and other materials that can be applied locally in the development process. States could also facilitate the training, certification, and/or badging of educators who will play these roles, building capacity in the process. States should consider how it will work to support consistent scoring of tasks. In addition to describing scoring expectations within exemplar units and tasks, states should consider providing technical assistance to schools and educators, facilitating cross-district moderation processes, and supporting districts in carrying out auditing systems. It should have plans in place to address inconsistencies in scoring in certain districts, schools, and classrooms.

States will need to consider how they bring in external measures to enhance the validity of the system overall and of the performance tasks specifically. The overall assessment system should not rely solely on curriculum-embedded, performance-based assessments for all students in all grades. States will also need to think about a transition strategy for CBP innovation zones to move toward this vision. Given the resources and time needed to transition

State Example

New Hampshire has been engaged in a transition to competency-based education for more than a decade. State leaders believe that locally-designed assessments will more effectively transform educators' practice and foster the deep learning that students need to be college and career ready. Most recently, New Hampshire has engaged four districts to pilot a new accountability system that provides additional space for competency-based education to take hold. The Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) districts will administer the Smarter Balanced assessment to all students in one grade level per grade span (elementary, middle, and high), and will use a combination of local and shared performance assessment in other years. Shared performance assessments will help calibrate performance expectations across participating districts. The New Hampshire Department of Education has supported districts in the transition to competency-based education by providing New Hampshire State Model Competencies and the New Hampshire Task Bank. To be eligible for the PACE pilot, districts must meet the following expectations:

- **Adoption of state-model competencies** aligned with CCR standards and a build out of K-12 competency trajectories in English language arts, mathematics, and science.
- **An instructional system** to support student learning of the competencies, including strategies to personalize learning.
- Educator team participation in performance assessment **training**.
- **A start on building performance assessments** to occupy a visible place in the local assessment system.
- **Administration of the Smarter Balanced** assessment in English language arts/literacy and mathematics at least **once** in elementary, middle, and high school.

The PACE districts are being watched as pioneers in the quest to change accountability systems and assessment systems. New Hampshire has created a small-scale effort that will allow a new model of assessment and accountability to be studied. The four districts involved have also done extensive work internally to increase local capacity to develop and deploy performance assessments, which are vetted externally for validity, reliability, rigor, and fairness. The state has developed a system to facilitate scoring and calibration across districts to ensure consistency. New Hampshire's effort offers an example of starting small, in just a few districts, with an intention to set the stage for wide-scale change. With this expectation in mind, the PACE district professional learning community now includes representatives from all New Hampshire districts.

to high-quality, curriculum-embedded, performance-based assessments, local districts in the innovation zone likely will have a strong interest in waivers or other flexibility from administering an annual statewide summative assessment to all students in all grades and in all subjects. Yet, it is important for states to continue administering the statewide summative assessment to some subset of students to provide information that can be used for external validity of the performance tasks to ensure equity, as well as to ensure transparency of results for the public. Evidence is needed at the student level to help parents understand their child's progress or needs for support, as well as for schools and districts at a student subgroup level to show how the impact of the transition to CBP – and associated changes in assessment and accountability – is influencing student performance.

States may also consider the administration of **state-developed and scored "anchor tasks"** in combination with the administration of the traditional statewide assessment. States, for example, may decide to test all students in the innovation zone at select grade levels and in select subject areas and administer anchor tasks to all students in the innovation zone in other grades and subject areas. They may also decide to administer anchor tasks to students outside the innovation zone to provide further information for validation. Yet another approach may be to provide anchor tasks for all students in the innovation zone and administer the statewide assessment to a sample of students in all grade levels – oversampling smaller groups of students (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners) to ensure sufficient information is available to draw conclusions about the progress of students in these groups.

States need to then compile all of this information – from locally-developed performance task scores, anchor task scores, and statewide summative assessment scores – and use the information to make judgments about the validity of certain measures overall and in specific districts and schools. This information should then be used to take actions to ensure the validity of all measures in all districts and schools – for example, to spark monitoring/auditing and support to certain districts to improve fidelity with rubrics, criteria, and exemplar units and tasks. It can also be used to inform mid-course evaluations and adjustments – for instance, some states may determine that even at an early transition stage, a lack of evidence for validity might trigger a re-examination of the strategy. The information should also be combined, according to methods common across the innovation zone districts, into school-level and district-level performance ratings that are made public and communicated directly to families. States should consider what questions key stakeholders (e.g., state board of education members, legislative committee members, postsecondary leaders, families, and educators) will have and communicate this information in the appropriate way to answer their questions.

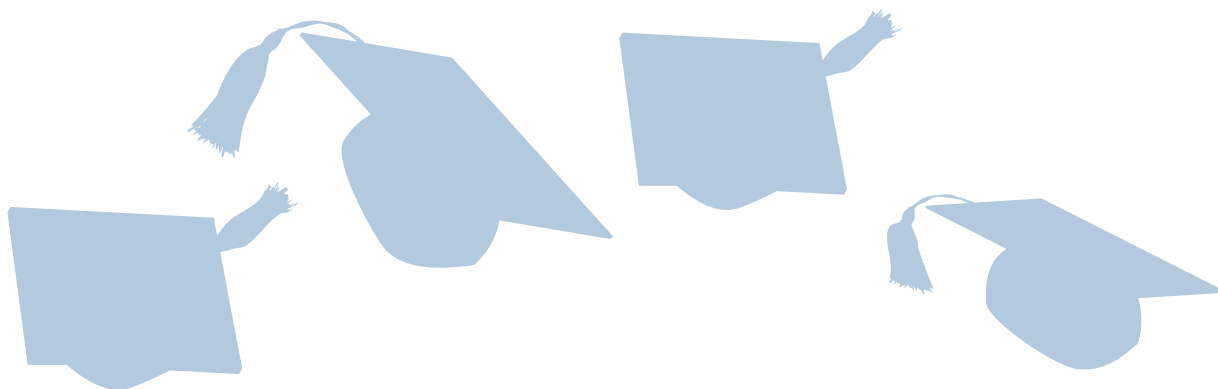
Some states may seek to encourage and test the use of **broader demonstrations of learning** tied to high school graduation (e.g., for a diploma distinction) or other transition points through a student's course of study in a CBP innovation zone. These demonstrations of learning may be tied to a student's postsecondary education plans or career pathway and may involve applying knowledge and skills to hands-on experiences in the school or broader community. As such, this strategy provides a strong opportunity for the state education agency, districts, and schools to engage partners in business, postsecondary education, and beyond. States interested in this form of assessment should be prepared to support innovation zone districts – individually and collectively – in developing guidelines, protocols, and criteria to ensure that all students who complete the demonstration of learning have met a rigorous threshold of performance that is meaningful to postsecondary leaders and employers. This requires the involvement of postsecondary leaders and employers in the development of these resources and evaluation of student demonstrations. States and CBP innovation zone districts may also want to explore ways to integrate work-based learning into their CBP vision.

Accountability

Traditionally, state accountability and public reporting systems have relied on student performance metrics – both status and growth – largely derived from annual, grade-level, end-of-year summative assessments designed to capture student performance across a wide spectrum. In a fully-realized competency-based system, however, students take assessments at their point of readiness for the primary purpose of validating decisions that they can move ahead through their courses of study. As such, the major indicators of student progress would capture the extent to which students are on track to meeting or exceeding college and career readiness by high school graduation – whether they are on pace to demonstrating proficiency on the full set of state CCR standards; the rate at which they are demonstrating proficiency on standards within a specified time frame; whether they are exceeding expectations by demonstrating deep mastery of standards; and whether they are demonstrating their learning beyond high school graduation requirements (e.g., through earning college credits in high school).

Few examples, however, currently exist of states – or even pioneering CBP districts – developing aggregate measures of student progress in a competency-based learning environment. Thus, there are few data to answer legitimate concerns that in a competency-based system, some students may not receive the extra, timely support they need to stay on pace and may lag behind their peers – leading to a new kind of achievement gap based not on student performance, but on the time it takes to ultimately earn credentials such as a high school diploma and beyond.

This is a critical, emerging area for states and their innovation zone districts to get right. With the wealth of fine-grained data that should be available at the student level in a competency-based learning environment, states and districts should work together to develop actionable indicators that can be reported to the public to spark important conversations with stakeholders and to answer critical questions about student progress. Newly identified indicators should be examined and disaggregated by student race/ethnicity, income, and special education and English learner status to determine if there are particular equity issues that need to be addressed. States and CBP innovation zone districts should be vigilant in designing and executing pilot efforts to ensure that a shift to CBP promotes equity in opportunity and outcomes.



CREATING A CBP INNOVATION ZONE

In constructing an innovation zone program, state leaders must make a series of decisions about design elements that influence which districts participate, requirements that must be met, and how the innovation zone effort will be evaluated to determine its potential as a more widely used strategy. The overarching challenge of innovation zone design is determining what to let loose in the form of flexibility and what to hold tight through accountability. States will need to address this balance explicitly in the program's design through:

- **The state's goal and theory of change.**
- **State leadership and management.**
- **Stakeholder engagement and communication.**
- **Selection and support of initial districts.**
- **Evaluation, learning, and scaling up.**

The state's goal and theory of change

A CBP innovation zone should be designed to meet an explicit goal, backed by a clear rationale for pursuing it. State leaders, representing support from multiple sectors, will need to be clear about their specific goal for pursuing change through the innovation zone and how the innovation zone will be designed to meet the goal. The state must articulate the goal to be achieved through the innovation zone and how the innovation zone strategy fits into the state's overall vision and strategy for achieving college and career readiness for all students. This articulation not only will benefit the program as a whole and help stakeholders understand the rationale for the innovation zone, but also will help potential innovation zone districts understand what the state is hoping to achieve through the strategy and how it relates to the districts' own theories of action for pursuing CBP as a strategy to improve college and career readiness.

State leadership and management

The state education agency will need to address a common tension for initiatives that aim to eventually achieve statewide scale: the positioning of the initiative within or apart from existing structures and processes. If set up as a separate office that reports to the chief state school officer, the initiative gains prominence that serves a symbolic and operational purpose. The state is signaling that it is carving out space for innovation and will dedicate staff to oversee and support those efforts. The new office is also substantively freed from the standard state education agency oversight structure.

The tension arises when the innovation zone office needs to engage or mobilize other divisions within the state education agency, such as offices focused on assessment, accountability, or teaching and learning. In this way, separation can be a liability that results in innovation zone districts having to patch together different relationships with the state education agency as they develop and implement their new strategies. One solution could be to form the separate innovation zone office with strong leadership from the chief state school officer that conveys the importance of the effort to the rest of the state education agency and charges the wider organization to help the effort succeed. The chief state school officer could bolster that directive with a cross-division task force that aides the innovation zone office.

Is a CBP Innovation Zone the right strategy for your state?

These questions may help your state determine if an innovation zone is a good strategy to pursue in advancing CBP:

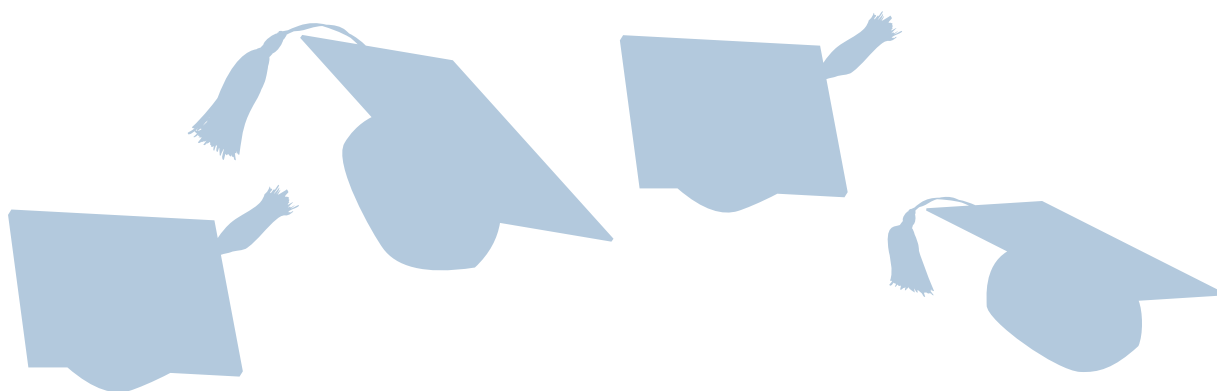
1. Does your state have a shared vision for, and commitment to, advancing CBP in select districts?
2. Can your state articulate a shared goal for a CBP innovation zone – such as to answer specific questions or identify conditions needed to expand CBP to other districts or statewide?
3. Is your state willing to provide flexibility to districts on assessment and accountability?
4. Can your state play a significant role in overseeing and supporting innovation zone districts on assessment and accountability in a CBP system, in addition to the traditional system?
5. Is your state willing to take a learning mindset in working with districts?
6. Is your state willing to commit to ensuring quality, equity, and transparency throughout the innovation zone?

Is participating in a CBP Innovation Zone the right strategy for your district?

These questions may help your district determine if participating in a CBP innovation zone is a good strategy to pursue in advancing CBP:

1. Does your district have a clear rationale, or theory of action, for how CBP will help all students toward and beyond college and career readiness?
2. Is this rationale broadly shared by local stakeholders, including educators, families, school board members, business, postsecondary leaders, and community partners?
3. Does your district have strong and steady leadership at the district and school levels?
4. Does your district have strong capacity and infrastructure in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and data systems?
5. Is your district willing to take advantage of flexibility afforded by the state in assessment and accountability?
6. Is your district willing to commit to ensuring quality, equity, and transparency, including through sharing data, information, and expertise with the state and other innovation zone districts, families and students?

A state may set a goal of scaling CBP statewide, beginning with an innovation zone pilot – or multiple pilots – to develop and test different approaches. It is possible that the state will purposefully create pilots specific to certain approaches it wants to test and that each pilot within the innovation zone could look different.



Stakeholder engagement and communication

The state education agency will need to establish a thoughtful communication effort to ensure district leaders, school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders understand the changes being sought by the innovation zone and are given meaningful opportunities to provide input and ask questions. Innovation zones are meant to learn about approaches to advancing CBP toward college and career readiness for all students and the communications strategy should make it easy for individuals within and outside of the innovation zone to learn from it.

Strong communication efforts will include four areas of information:

- **Case making.** Stakeholders, individually, but particularly those who are part of a broader coalition to drive change, need to understand the state's reason for developing the innovation zone. This is an opportunity for state leaders to highlight ways that the innovation zone program responds to feedback received from teachers, parents, students, or administrators. The case for pursuing innovation is strengthened if the state education agency is able to ground the innovation zone's objective in available research or case studies.
- **Rationale for program design.** The state education agency also needs to communicate the benefits of this effort for participating districts, as well as other benefits or learning that might accrue, and inform non-participating districts. The agency also needs to articulate the reason particular districts are targeted or selected for the innovation zone. There is potential for leaders and educators in non-participating states and/or districts to become adversaries of the innovation zone effort if the program is perceived to unfairly give selected districts freedom from constraints that other districts must operate within.
- **Timeline.** If the state's intention is for the innovation zone to test and refine a strategy that will later be implemented statewide, the state education agency should give non-participating districts a timeline to help them track progress and understand when they will be required or encouraged to undertake similar efforts. In New Hampshire, the state announced its Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) program as a strategy to test and refine statewide performance-based assessments that would be built into the state's new school accountability model. In spring 2013, the state education agency communicated intended outcomes for a series of district cohorts to achieve from fall of that year through summer 2016, including the development and validation of performance tasks, construction of an item bank, and professional development for local educators.
- **Knowledge capture.** Innovation zones create space for pioneer districts to test new strategies, which may inform other districts or a statewide shift. The state education agency should seek to capture knowledge about innovation zone efforts for the benefit of other districts, as described in the section below – **Evaluation, Learning, and Scaling Up**. Transparent communication about outcomes and lessons learned could also help the state education agency sustain a shared understanding and confidence in the innovation zone program among policymakers, local educators, and the public.

A designated web portal can be an effective mechanism to provide stakeholders with information, to gather input, and to communicate progress and changes to the program over time. The Kentucky Department of Education has collected such resources on its website, communicating the state education agency's vision for innovation, activity related to approved Districts of Innovation, and resources for districts that aim to enter innovation zone status in the future.

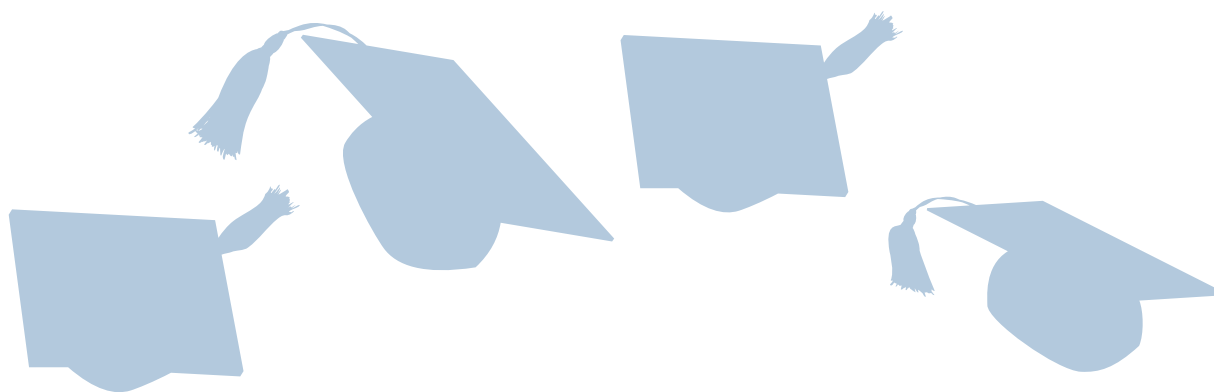
Selection and support of initial districts

District Eligibility

Innovation zones can be structured as an all-call, giving every district a chance to request and receive flexibility in designated categories if they meet minimum program criteria. An all-call strategy can be paired with a high bar for selection. In this selection scheme, all districts are eligible to apply for innovation zone status, but they will need to meet somewhat challenging criteria to be selected into the innovation zone. Kentucky's Districts of Innovation program provides a good example of an all-call with a high bar for selection. Before beginning the process, all districts are invited to evaluate their readiness for change using a self-assessment instrument, signaling to districts key characteristics and conditions needed to become a District of Innovation. Districts must put forth a well-designed plan with documentation of stakeholder buy-in to be competitive for consideration.

Innovation zones can also be limited to districts and schools with particular characteristics, such as turnaround-focused innovation zones for the lowest performing schools or innovation zones that focus on overcoming challenges faced by rural districts. Specific district characteristics are also important to consider when the state's innovation zone is designed to generate a solution that will ultimately be scaled statewide, as the state will need to consider the capacity and context that is best suited for a pilot effort. There are tradeoffs to consider when comparing district options:

- **Small districts vs. large districts.** Smaller districts tend to benefit from simpler lines of communication and buy-in, making them easier settings for pilot efforts. However, larger districts have greater central staff capacity to devote to the planning and management of complicated change efforts. For example, the development and piloting of new forms of assessment require significant capacity at the district level.
- **Low-performing vs. high-performing districts.** Low-performing districts and districts with severe achievement gaps may not be appropriate sites to test out new assessment and accountability approaches, as consistency of measures over time is needed to evaluate progress and ensure transparency. While high-performing districts may bring needed capacity to innovation zones, it is also critical to balance their capacity with the goals and theory of change that the state started with. In other words, if the state is pursuing the CBP innovation zone, and CBP more broadly, to address disparities among students and high rates of students graduating without the needed knowledge and skills, then it is important to not limit the innovation zone to only those districts with current levels of high performance.
- **External partners vs. in-house development.** Some development activities would be difficult to handle within the school district. For example, the creation of new forms of assessment or performance indicators is technical work that will likely require districts to partner with external entities.



Process to Identify Innovation Zone Districts

Some criteria for district applications should apply across state CBP innovation zones. For example, all innovation zone applicants should be able to describe the way their proposed effort fits into their own district's theory of action and timeframe for the transition to CBP. They should also be required to submit evidence of their commitment to the state's requirements for districts (e.g., transparency of information to parents, use of performance goals), articulate their shared understanding of what innovations they will pursue, and define what success will look like for the district's efforts. Every applicant will also need to establish a solid plan for maintaining two-way communication with local stakeholders regarding the innovative practices being pursued. Current state innovation zone programs commonly require districts to demonstrate buy-in of the school board, school leaders and teachers, students, parents, professional organizations, and members of the community.

States can consider varying levels of entry into innovative efforts, such as a commitment to developing a concept or piloting a developed concept. The approval process for innovation zones would look different for each of these levels.

- **Developing a concept.** Innovative ideas take capacity and resources to develop and states could choose to support districts to design a viable plan. West Virginia has implemented an innovation zone application process that begins with an opportunity to apply for funding to do in-depth research and planning to build out a school's idea. Once the idea is fully formed, the state board reviews and determines whether the school should be granted innovation school status to implement the idea. For this type of approval process, essential indicators to evaluate include the commitment of district/school leadership to a clear vision and the district's track record of successfully navigating a change process. West Virginia requires that 80 percent of school faculty demonstrate "support and documented commitment to ensuring the success of the proposal." The state might also look for indicators of capacity to undertake the type of change being proposed, such as a strong human resources team for personnel-related innovation or a strategic partnership with an external organization to provide technical assistance.
- **Piloting a developed concept.** States can use innovation zones to support local districts in piloting strategies that (a) are based on a sound theory, but currently lack evaluative outcomes, or (b) have early outcomes, but need time and space to be refined and evaluated. In either case, district and school applicants should be required to articulate a strong theory of action that explains why the chosen strategy has been selected, any changes or additional resources that will be needed to implement the strategy, and the commitment of district leadership and personnel to implement the plan.

Supports for Districts

The state education agency will need to determine what types of support it will provide for innovation zone districts and schools.

- **Clarify existing flexibility.** At the most basic level of support, a state education agency would make districts aware of existing flexibility that they can use. This support could include interpretation of state statute and regulations related to the most commonly-requested waivers. It may also include sharing exemplars of districts utilizing existing flexibility. This guidance will be helpful to districts within and outside of the innovation zone.
- **Support technical assistance to change local systems and structures.** Districts that seek to make more complicated shifts in systems to advance CBP will likely need technical assistance to help them navigate such planning and change efforts. Technical assistance is often needed during the formation of plans. Massachusetts' innovation zone legislation acknowledges this by requiring the state education agency to provide technical assistance and support to eligible applicants, not just those chosen for innovation zone status.

States can also proactively take stock of the degree of technical assistance that will be needed across districts. In Maine, the state education agency conducted a survey and process evaluating all districts on their readiness to shift to a proficiency-based diploma, including site visits to select districts, and aims to now build a roadmap that will help all districts see what it will take to make the shift to a proficiency-based diploma. Similarly, West Virginia's two-stage process for innovation zone applicants includes interviews and site visits to determine the level of technical assistance the district will need to develop and implement its plan. State education agencies can engage with external partners to provide districts and schools technical assistance. The state could also provide innovation zone districts transition funding to contract with technical assistance providers.

- **Coordinate or seed professional learning.** Innovation will place new demands on local educators, as well as demands on the system to build educator capacity. The state education agency can create resources for local districts to use, such as the professional learning modules that the Kentucky Department of Education is making available to help educators learn about performance-based assessment.
- **Facilitate communities of practice.** The state can play an important role in supporting peer learning by facilitating communities of practice across districts in the innovation zone. For example, Colorado’s Competency-Based Systems (CBS) Study Group has brought together districts interested in pursuing CBP in face-to-face and virtual meetings to learn from each other’s early practice, interact with external experts, and identify areas for cross-district collaboration, such as in curriculum or assessment development. The state may also consider facilitating such communities of practice in a cohort model so that a later cohort may learn from the efforts of an earlier cohort.

Evaluation, learning, and scaling up

There is a clear tension between the time new strategies need to take root and elicit desired student outcomes and the need for the state education agency to identify efforts that are failing to generate a sufficient return on investment. Immediate outcomes might look lackluster as districts wrestle with challenging shifts, putting nascent efforts at risk of reproach. State leaders must strike a balance between evaluating whether an innovation zone effort should be abandoned and providing the district with needed political cover and time to make adjustments in pursuit of the desired change. They can do this by attending to their knowledge management agenda and factors that determine scalability.

To further the state’s knowledge management agenda, state leaders will need to create processes to ensure that the state and other districts are learning from innovation zone efforts – capturing lessons and data and having a plan to act upon that information. State officials will need to establish open communication with innovation zone districts to better understand the challenges faced as districts transition to new tools, practices, and systems.

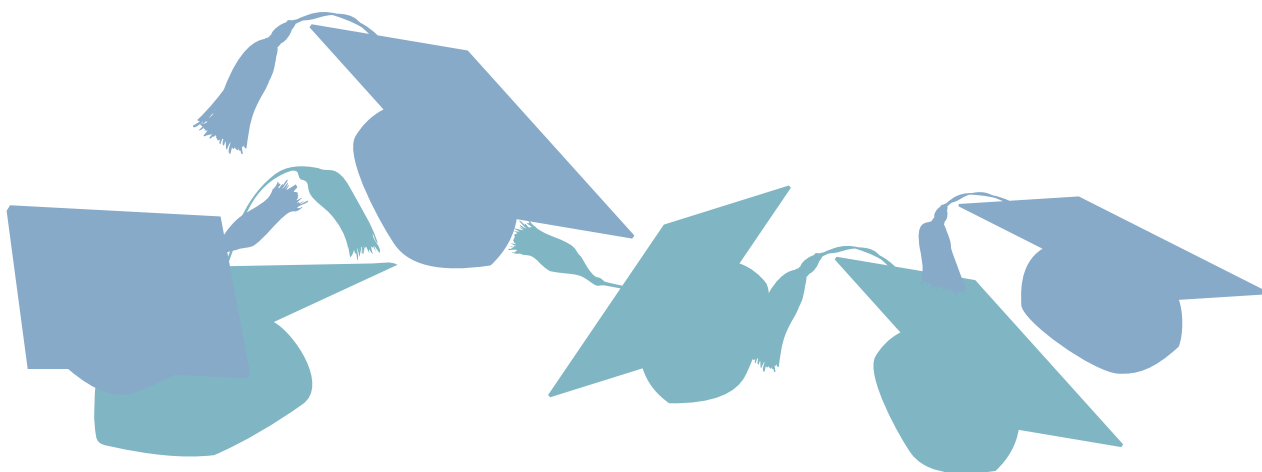
- **Feedback loop.** The state education agency will need to establish and maintain open communication with stakeholders within the innovation zone, such as in the process Kentucky has established to visit District of Innovation sites to collect qualitative data through interviews and observations. Innovation zone districts and schools within them should be required to convey progress against an anticipated trajectory, describing key factors contributing to progress and any mid-course corrections that are needed. Stakeholder feedback can help the state education agency better understand challenges to implementation, such as policies that are impeding effective use of time and resources. It can also be used to suggest real-time mid-course corrections. If the state’s aim for the innovation zone is to generate change that will be expanded to districts across the state, this feedback loop will differ from traditional program monitoring for compliance. The state education agency will need to discover why things are or are not going as planned, what might be done to overcome obstacles, and steps other districts should take to prepare for implementation.
- **Networks.** State education agencies could construct networks to facilitate learning and course adjustment across innovation zone districts. They could even bring non-participating districts into the conversations to infuse different perspectives. These networks could serve as informal opportunities for districts to share lessons learned and promising strategies. They also could serve more formal roles in synthesizing these lessons and strategies to share more broadly or informing recommendations to the state and other partners. For example, a network could develop recommendations for changes to a cross-district performance assessment moderation process. In addition, states can take advantage of cross-state networks, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Innovation Lab Network, to foster strategic learning among districts across state lines. Within New Hampshire’s statewide shift to competency-based education, the state education agency has fostered an innovation network by convening teachers and school and district leaders to discuss the wins and pitfalls being faced in their districts. New Hampshire has also established a voluntary peer review audit system to give participating districts a chance to provide each other with formative feedback to strengthen and improve new performance-based assessments being piloted.

The state must also determine whether the approach or model should be scaled to other districts, on a limited basis for further study, to meet specific district needs, or as a statewide transition. This determination will not be as simple as establishing a level of student outcomes to be achieved. State leaders will need to attend to factors such as applicability across educational settings and populations, cost versus benefit, and tradeoffs required to extend and sustain the program more broadly. Tradeoff assessment should include an evaluation of whether the necessary conditions and capacity are present in districts, as well as an estimate of the time and support that would be needed to build knowledge and personnel structures to support the change.

When state leaders seek to scale a new strategy across districts, they can smooth the road to success by formulating a plan to help districts achieve readiness to implement by identifying and addressing current laws and regulations that hamper implementation at scale and devising a plan to garner the necessary political support for scaling up, at both the state and local levels. The state should also determine whether safeguards used for the innovation zone are sufficient to ensure that the most vulnerable students do not fall through the cracks of a new system as it is scaled.

CONCLUSION

State and district leaders who are eager to collaborate with educators to help all students reach college and career readiness can put an innovation zone strategy to work. Yet, leaders should not expect that a broad call for innovation will suffice. Intentional design of an innovation zone program is needed to focus partner districts on essential questions and strategies that need study or refinement. Design is also essential as state education agencies seek to form active learning partnerships with districts, finding new ground, and establishing support mechanisms for current and future districts.



CBP Innovation Zone Example

Program goal and theory of change

The state wants to promote learning that advances each student along his or her own learning trajectory to graduate from high school college- and career-ready. The state believes that CBP will lift the ceiling for some students to reach and exceed college and career readiness and will ensure that students who are struggling now obtain key knowledge and skills before advancing to more complex coursework. Districts that have demonstrated a strong commitment to CBP have communicated that the focus on aligning students' instruction to the state's grade-level, annual standardized assessment is diverting resources and time that are needed to develop CBP-aligned assessments and creating difficult decisions to give students shallow exposure to content on which they will be tested rather than the content they would be working on in a CBP system. The state has designed an innovation zone to establish a small cohort of districts that will work together to design and pilot instructional units with corresponding assessments that can be used flexibly – regardless of the order in which students tackle them or the amount of time students need to complete the units. The state will study the feasibility of using student outcomes from these instructional units to replace the state summative test for some portion of the state's accountability ratings.

State leadership

The state legislature, with encouragement from the state's chief state school officer, state board of education chairperson, and postsecondary leadership, passed a bill to establish the innovation zone and has allocated three years of funding for the pilot effort. The chief state school officer has communicated to superintendents that this is a true pilot – the state is supportive of CBP but is not certain that a system of instructionally-embedded assessments can generate appropriate data to be used for accountability. The chief state school officer created a separate innovation office to manage the effort, but has established a leadership team that includes officials from the state education agency offices focused on assessment, accountability, communication, and teaching and learning.

Stakeholder engagement and communication

Communication efforts began prior to legislation authorizing and funding the innovation zone. The chief state school officer engaged the heads of the assessment, accountability, and teaching and learning offices to conduct a listening tour across the state, aiming to better understand factors that are preventing districts from shifting to CBP. The individuals involved in the listening tour were later tapped to serve on the innovation zone's inter-office leadership team. An innovation zone website has been created, including materials that help stakeholders understand the origin and goals of the initiative, how and why districts were selected, what is being learned, and the timeline for future activity. This website communicates progress and findings related to the innovation zone's pilot and serves as a central hub of information for districts and schools as they transition to CBP. The site offers districts a chance to connect with each other, access resources, and engage in professional training opportunities.

Guardrails to ensure equity and transparency

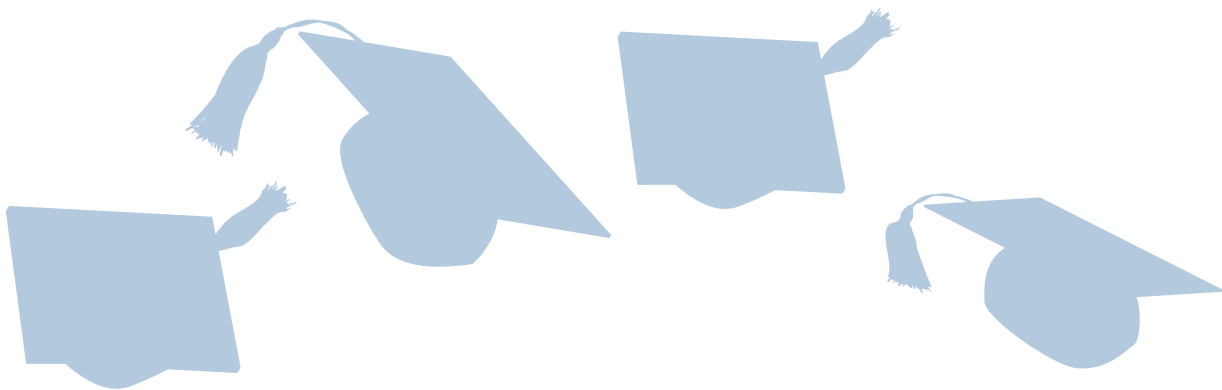
Statewide standardized assessments must be administered to students in the innovation zone in select grade levels, making it possible to continue attending to student outcomes using measures that are familiar to parents and the public and as an established check on equity. Data from these assessments are used to validate locally-developed performance tasks. The state requires all districts to provide student-level information to parents, such as performance on specific tasks, the standards or competencies on which the student has demonstrated proficiency and has yet to demonstrate proficiency, and a link to the full set of standards or competencies on which the student must demonstrate proficiency by high school graduation.

Selection and support of initial districts

The state considered limiting the pilot to top-performing districts to alleviate concern that students might fall through the cracks during the study period. In the end, the state invited all districts to apply for the CBP innovation zone. Selection for the innovation zone was based on a district's commitment to advancing CBP and willingness to work collaboratively with other innovation zone districts and the state education agency to develop model tools and processes that could serve districts across the state. Districts that applied, but were not selected, are invited to participate in periodic meetings designed to help them prepare to become part of the second cohort, should the pilot prove effective.

Evaluation, learning, and scaling up

Districts in this CBP innovation zone needed three years to reach implementation of the new assessments – year one to design, year two to pilot, and year three to operationalize the new tests. The state must study the potential for using these new assessments in lieu of the state's standardized assessments and identify ways that the competency-based tests might be refined to better achieve that objective. A second phase of innovation zone districts will take the combined strategies of new assessments and model support protocol to a wider cohort of school districts to test and confirm that they are effective in a variety of school settings. As the state considers taking this effort to scale, leaders are considering whether the model protocol for identifying floundering or stalled student learning should be required of districts in a second cohort or if the protocol should be optional but encouraged.



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President

Achieve



ABOUT ACHIEVE

Achieve is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to working with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. Created in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders, Achieve is leading the effort to make college and career readiness a priority across the country so that students graduating from high school are academically prepared for postsecondary success. When states want to collaborate on education policy or practice, they come to Achieve. At the direction of 48 states, and partnering with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, Achieve helped develop the Common Core State Standards. Twenty-six states and the National Research Council asked Achieve to manage the process to write the Next Generation Science Standards. Achieve has also served as the project manager for states in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, which are developing next generation assessments. And since 2005, Achieve has worked with state teams, governors, state education officials, postsecondary leaders and business executives to improve postsecondary preparation by aligning key policies with the demands of the real world so that all students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they need to fully reach their promise in college, careers and life. For more information about the work of Achieve, visit www.achieve.org.



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