

PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #8: CREATE A STATE OFFICE OF INNOVATION

CONTEXT

Integrated personalized learning models simultaneously address issues of curriculum, human capital, technology, and student progress. As a result, a wide range of state policies—from school choice to accountability to assessment to teacher licensure—have the potential to create barriers or opportunities for these models. State policies in each of these areas are typically developed in separate silos, however, meaning that schools, districts, and providers may find themselves negotiating a web of multiple offices, programs, and regulations in order to implement personalized learning models. As more schools and districts move toward these models, states must also build their capacity to integrate personalized learning across other education initiatives, such as Common Core State Standards, school improvement, and educator evaluation.

PLAY IN ACTION

States can reduce barriers to personalized learning by creating a single point person or office focused on innovation within the state education agency. This individual or office could serve as a point of contact for innovative schools, districts, and providers, and work across different parts of the agency to eliminate personalized learning obstacles. In addition, they could convene and support groups of schools and districts engaged in cutting-edge work, to help them share best practices and lessons learned and to increase the state's understanding of what schools and districts are doing with personalized learning.

Tennessee’s Office of Personalized Learning oversees online and blended learning models within the state. It recently launched the Innovative Educator Network, a group of 50 high-performing Tennessee educators who will meet with leading practitioners in personalized learning, participate in a structured planning process, and implement personalized learning models in their own schools. Tennessee also intends to establish a Personalized Learning Advisory Council, which will be composed of 10 members working within the state’s public education system. Council participants will learn about national best practices related to personalized learning and support the Office of Personalized Learning in creating a long-term strategic plan. Other states can take a similar approach by creating an office of innovation that works with a wide network of educators, who will implement personalized learning at the local level and disseminate information and best practices across the state.

New Jersey recently reorganized its Department of Education to create new offices and positions, including a Chief Innovation Officer role. The Chief Innovation Officer oversees multiple initiatives, including building a network of innovation partners and identifying strategies to reallocate dollars from existing funds to personalized learning initiatives.

Large districts may also want to consider creating a separate office focused specifically on promoting innovation. In 2010, New

York City established the Innovation Zone (iZone) to support personalized learning at the school, provider, and systems level. The iZone has partnered with many external providers, such as New Classrooms, Achieve3000, and Discovery Education, to create personalized learning experiences for students in nearly 300 schools across the city. It also launched the Blended Learning Institute with Pace University to train teachers in integrating technology into the classroom, and it has supported the education technology sector in New York City through its “Gap App Challenge,” which invites software developers to submit apps, games, and programs that improve math outcomes among middle school students. Although the iZone was created at the district, rather than the state, level, and has received reduced support under the current mayoral administration, it provides an illustrative example of a public sector office that promotes school innovation by partnering with multiple stakeholders.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

State education agencies that want to establish an innovation office must be thoughtful in defining the office’s role. It must be fully integrated into the agency so that it can work collaboratively with other offices, including those focused on academic standards, student assessment, teacher performance, and budget coordination. Full integration will allow the innovation office to serve as a champion for innovative practices across all divisions.

At the same time, the office must maintain a culture of innovation and flexibility. It must be able to respond nimbly and resourcefully to a rapidly evolving personalized learning landscape. Staff should understand their mission as helping to create a context for innovation—not as monitoring compliance or imposing mandates on schools and providers. Conditions that foster innovation will make states more appealing to high-quality providers and partners than those with less favorable conditions. To cultivate this mind-set, states may wish to recruit external talent from the private and nonprofit sectors, as well as innovation-minded staff from within the state education agency. Recruiting a mix of internal and external talent will lead to a staff with the right expertise and orientation, as well as a deep understanding of how the state education agency works.

Because the public sector faces inherent political and bureaucratic limitations to fostering innovation, policymakers may want to consider establishing a nonprofit organization that will support schools and districts implementing personalized learning (see Play No. 4).

CONTACT FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

Learn more about **Tennessee's Office of Personalized Learning** at: http://tennessee.gov/education/districts/district_support/personalized_learning.shtml

In Marcy 2014 the **Tennessee** State Department of Education released a request for proposals for support for its **Innovative Educator Network**. View the RFP, which provides details about the network, at: http://tn.gov/generalserv/cpo/sourcing_sub/documents/Solicitation33150-02114_Amendment3.pdf

Details on **New York City's iZone Blended Learning Institute** can be found at: <http://izonenyc.org/?project=blended-learning-institute>