



Promote Innovation in Public Schools BACKGROUND March 2010

It is clear that if we are to achieve world-class schools for every student within the next decade, we will need fresh approaches and ideas that produce dramatic leaps in achievement and growth among students, educators and communities. The federal government must embrace its role as a supporter of local and state initiatives to transform schools, rather than a micro-manager.

“Institutionalizing” innovation is a paradoxical goal, and yet this is the federal government’s solemn responsibility: it must craft policies that are strict in their flexibility, incentivize change as a fixed concept, and establish continuity in the pursuit of continuous transformation.

- **How can we promote innovation in schools?**

The federal government should increase and sustain funding in programs that are designed to foster innovation (such as the Investing in Innovation (i3) program funded under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009). Innovative proposals should be developed in collaboration with educators and include a sustainability plan. We believe that research, development, and pilot programs in the following areas are particularly useful and necessary:

- ✓ Unique governance models for public schools, including staff-led schools
- ✓ Wraparound, before- and afterschool, summer programs and services
- ✓ High-quality formative student assessments
- ✓ Curricular reform that includes 21st century learning skills
- ✓ Effective and rigorous teacher preparation and induction
- ✓ Education delivery systems for students in rural or low-income school districts
- ✓ Infusion of education technology into classrooms and schools
- ✓ Educator evaluation systems that are based on multiple, valid measures of performance and are used to improve educators’ practice through use of professional development systems that are job-embedded, aligned, and research-based
- ✓ Longitudinal data systems that assist in determining students’ instructional and other needs
- ✓ Alternative structures to the school day and calendar year designed to improve student learning
- ✓ Magnet and themed public schools – e.g., science, technology, the arts
- ✓ Flexible high school pathways that integrate preparation for career technical education and higher education

In addition to incentivizing pilot activities in the above areas, the federal government should sponsor its own research and establish a public clearinghouse for innovation and promising practices.

- **What kinds of innovative models of education have proven successful?**

We know that successful, innovative, and autonomous models of public school education already exist. Such models invariably include deep and mutually beneficial partnerships with government, higher education, parent and community organizations, education unions, and businesses or philanthropic entities. These models also have produced new and imaginative ways to develop professional development, deliver student instruction and assessments, and offer time for team curricular planning.

One promising example is the Math & Science Learning Academy, a new, union-designed, teacher-led public school within the Denver Public School System. Other examples of innovation that feature strong union-administrator-school district partnerships include:

- ✓ Say Yes to Education Foundation (Syracuse, NY)
- ✓ Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (Evansville, IN)
- ✓ Hamilton County Public Schools (Chattanooga, TN)
- ✓ University of Connecticut - CommPACT Schools (Hartford, CT)
- ✓ Milwaukee Partnership Academy (Milwaukee, WI)
- ✓ Seattle Flight School Initiative (Seattle, WA)

- **Why should we care about school transformation as part of innovation efforts?**

School transformation is not a silver bullet. Rather, it entails numerous, coordinated, and aggressive changes in policies, programs, and behavior within school systems. School transformation must assess and thoughtfully address school organization and structure; leadership and governance; staff recruiting, development and retention; instructional and curricular practices; support services and resources; parent and community involvement; overall school infrastructure, culture, and climate; and other factors.

Intervention models that call for replacing existing leadership and the majority of staff, reorganizing as a charter school, or closing schools should be viewed as methods of last resort, and are not feasible in many communities and regions. Moreover, the choice of an intervention “model” alone does not equal reform. In order to be successful, any interventions must be developed and implemented with shared responsibility among all critical stakeholders.

NEA Recommendations to Congress:

- **Support and promote innovative public school models and programs that accelerate school transformation efforts and prepare students for citizenship, lifelong learning, and challenging postsecondary education and careers**
- **Encourage innovation developed through partnerships—primarily between educators’ unions, administrators, and school districts—that focus on helping student thrive and develop critical 21st century skills**
- **Increase educational research and development to provide a clearinghouse for innovative and promising practices**