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JANUARY

INNOVATION LANDSCAPE

A LANDSCAPE OF INNOVATION FOR K-12 EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS

OFFICE OF Innovation FOR EDUCATION

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IDENTIFYING THE NEED AND AIM

Innovation in education has emerged as a pivotal force for transformative change, aiming to enhance academic performance and learning outcomes for all students. As the landscape of education evolves, so does the need to understand the efficacy and necessity of innovation within Arkansas schools. This research paper presents the findings of the Innovation Landscape Project initiated by the Office of Innovation for Education (OIE) in 2022, aimed at comprehensively assessing the current state of innovation in Arkansas schools.

Through statewide surveys, virtual focus groups, and interviews with diverse stakeholders, this study delves into the perceptions, challenges, and opportunities surrounding educational innovation. Additionally, national research on innovation in education is synthesized to provide context and inform future directions. The resulting landscape offers insights that guide the strategic efforts of OIE, facilitate collaboration with the Department of Education (DESE), and empower stakeholders to dismantle barriers hindering innovation in schools.

Key findings suggest a growing recognition of the importance of innovation in fostering positive impacts on students, staff, parents, and the community at large. By leveraging the collective wisdom of stakeholders and aligning efforts with national best practices, this research endeavors to shape a more dynamic and responsive educational ecosystem. Ultimately, the Innovation Landscape serves as a blueprint for empowering the future of education in Arkansas, ensuring equitable access to innovative practices that propel student success in the 21st century.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Innovation Landscape is to guide the work of OIE, in collaboration with DESE and support partners, to 1- provide an agile infrastructure for innovation in schools in Arkansas and 2- support educators and leaders in removing barriers to innovation; thereby increasing the success and ensuring positive impacts on students, staff, parents, and community. The best hope for this landscape is to empower the future of innovation in education in Arkansas.

> "We have to design ideas for kids who are not being successful in the classroom. We have to understand that not all kids are going to college and we have to expand their CTE [Career and Technical Education] experience. We have to develop partnerships to better serve our kids and communities. We have to focus on partnerships and relationships. We have to provide kids [with] what they need to be successful in the community. It benefits the workforce, the community, and the kids. We have to work better with Arkansas higher education. We have to be innovative about how we put the message out there for education and [share] what we are doing in schools." *Arkansas Educator*

Innovation in Arkansas schools refers to "a new or creative alternative to the existing instructional and administrative practices that is intended to improve academic performance and learning for all students" (A.C.A. § 6-15-2801). As a primary supporter of innovation for education in Arkansas since 2013, The Office of Innovation for Education (OIE) has a vested interest in understanding the landscape of innovation ten years since its origination in formal code. Accordingly, OIE launched the innovation landscape project at the end of year 2022 through statewide surveys, virtual focus groups, and follow-up interviews and surveys with diverse stakeholders from across Arkansas. In addition, OIE reviewed national research on innovation in education and expanded the vision for the future based on stakeholder feedback.

DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

Stakeholders from the state of Arkansas were recruited to participate in feedback cycles through focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys. An emergent qualitative design was used for the project. Emergent design involves data collection and analysis procedures that can evolve over the course of a research project in response to what is learned in the earlier parts of the study. In contrast to more structured design approaches, an emergent design welcomes ongoing and at times unanticipated information, adding to the richness of the data and allowing for the process to be more responsive. For this project, OIE designed and conducted initial surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and a follow-up survey.

Data from an initial exploratory survey was sent to educators which helped design the focus group and interview questions. Follow-up surveys were sent to parents and community members to expand understanding of the emerging themes, and to incorporate their perspectives given their crucial role in education.

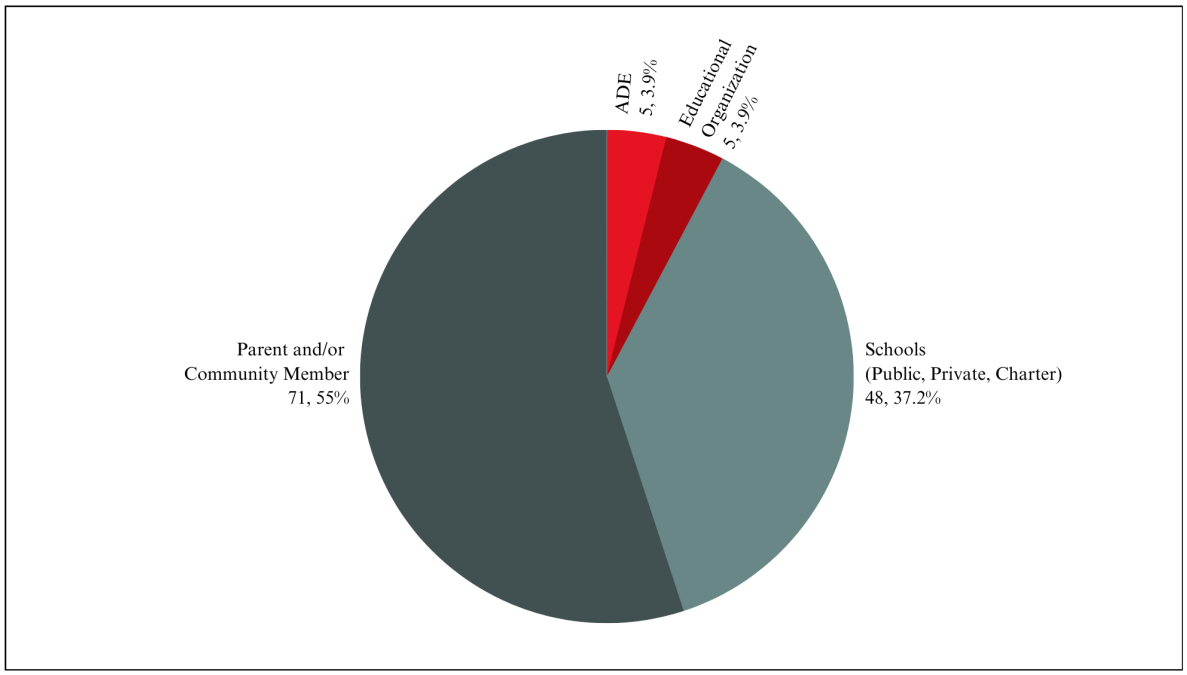
In essence, this sequential approach (survey, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and additional surveys) allowed OIE to benefit from both the breadth of survey data and the depth of qualitative insights. It also provided opportunities for ongoing refinement of the landscape research questions and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the innovative landscape in Arkansas. In the following sections, information on the participants, focus groups, interviews, and surveys are provided.

Participants

One hundred twenty-nine overall participants responded and Figure 1 shows their educational connection. Of the 48 schools that participated, 16 were Schools of Innovation.

Figure 1

Stakeholder Connection in Education

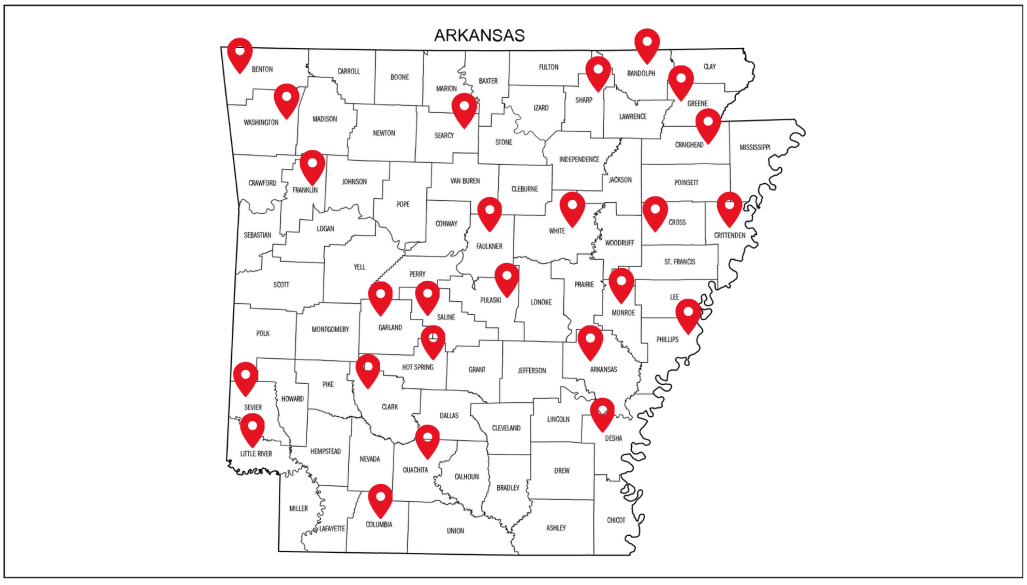


Note. Figure 1 details the roles participants hold in education (x, %).

Stakeholders participated from across the state. Figure 2 breaks down the counties in which participants reside.

Figure 2

Participants by County



Focus Groups and Interviews

The number of focus groups and in-depth interviews hosted by OIE are provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3

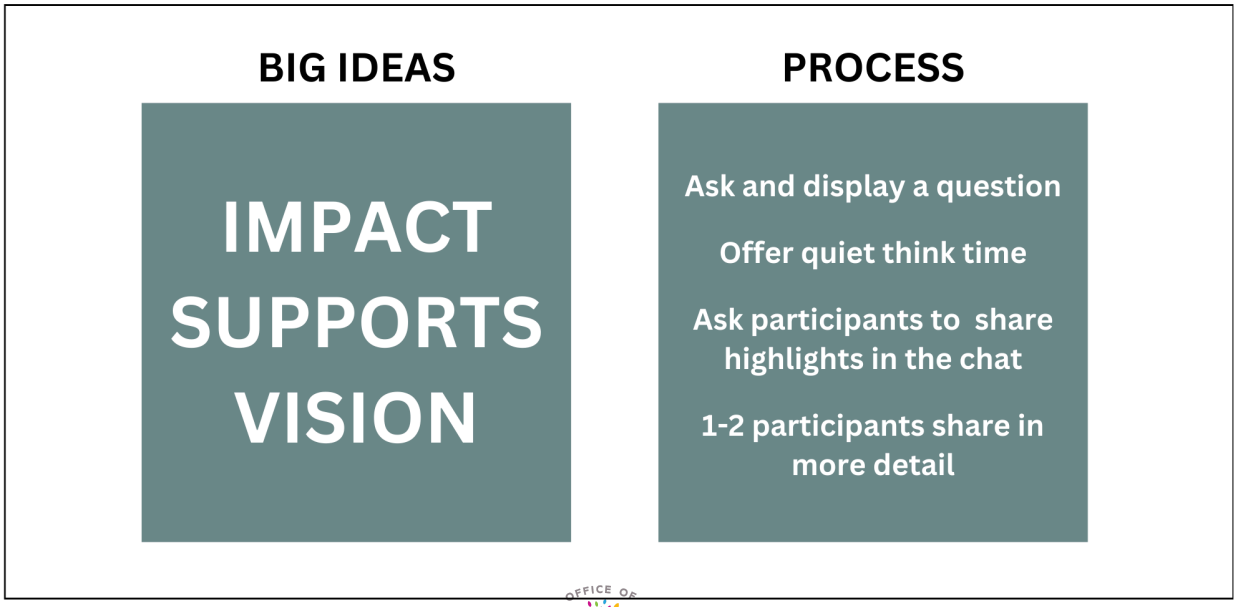
Focus Groups and Participants by Month

Month	Number of Focus Groups	Number of In-Depth Interviews
September 2022	1	0
October 2022	0	2
November 2022	1	8
December 2022	1	1
January 2023	1	3
Total	**4**	**14**

In semi-structured focus group discussions, stakeholders were asked guiding questions based on the 3 'BIG IDEAS' and using the 'PROCESS' shared in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Focus Group Guiding Questions and Process



In the semi-structured interviews, stakeholders were asked to reflect on specific examples relating to innovations and their experiences in an Arkansas educational setting. The questioning followed the background of the participants and related, when possible, to their personal experiences with the School of Innovation process, charter process, and/or experiences with Act 1240. While the overall goal was to focus on the impact, supports, and expanding the vision of innovation in education, the participants were provided the space to define and explore innovations, while also contributing examples of how they may have approximated or adapted innovations to meet their learning community needs.

Questions used in Focus Groups and interviews:

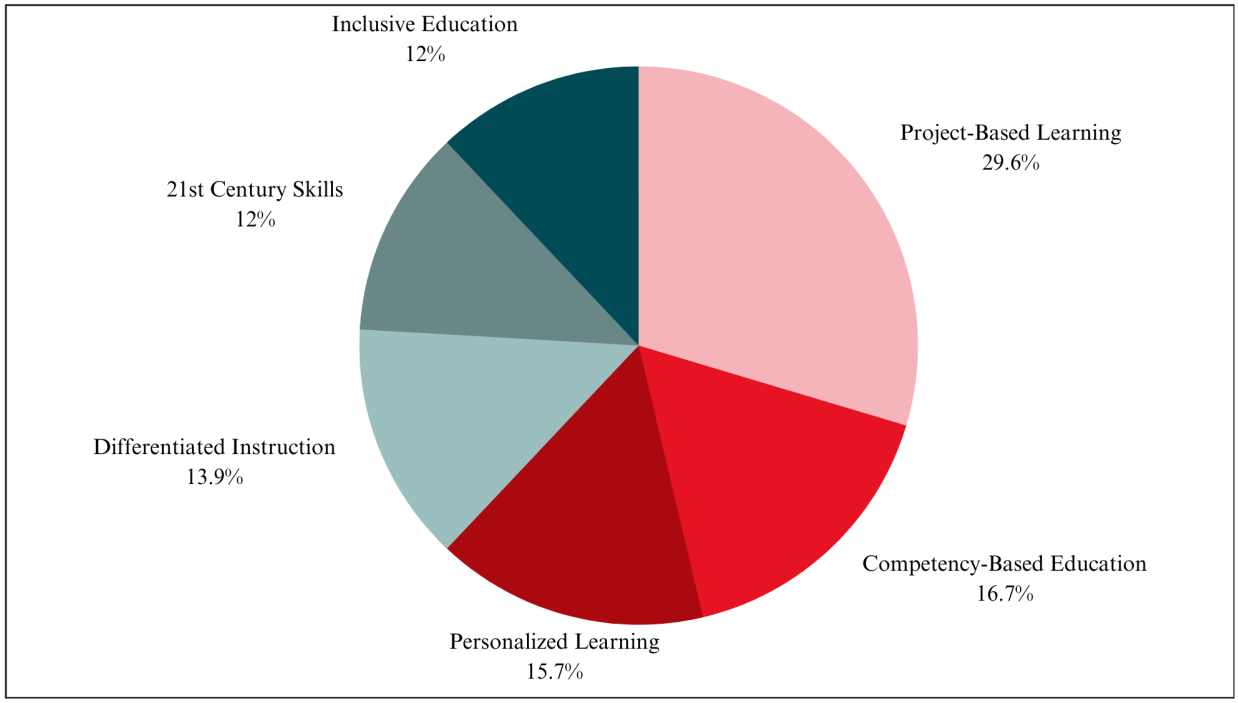
- Think back to a time when an educational innovation impacted _____(you, your classroom, your school, your district, your organization).
- Think back to a time you were a part of launching an educational innovation and you faced some challenges. What supports helped you most when things got challenging?
- Think back to a time when you were a part of a successful educational innovation, what supports (both internal and external) contributed to you, the team and the innovation being successful?
- Is there anything about the **SOI process/Charter process/Act 1240** you might improve to better support the work of innovation?
- What are some dreams you have for innovation supporting Arkansas students? How do you see Arkansas making that happen over the next 5-10 years?

Surveys

In a survey sent to parents and community members, participants were asked to identify educational innovations with which they were most familiar. The surveys also revealed what participants considered as being innovative, which varied across different contexts and communities. The most common innovations are outlined in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Innovations in Arkansas Schools



Note. Most common innovations in Arkansas schools as identified by stakeholders.

In the survey sent to school leaders and educators, participants indicated that the benefits innovation in education provides to students were:

1. **Enhanced Learning Experience:** Innovation allows students to be at the forefront of their learning, providing more opportunities to connect with content knowledge and skills and making it relevant to 21st-century students. Innovation keeps education relevant to student interests and prepares them for future endeavors, including college and career.

2. **Empowerment and Ownership:** Innovation provides students with a real voice and choice in their educational journey, giving them greater ownership and accountability in their learning process.

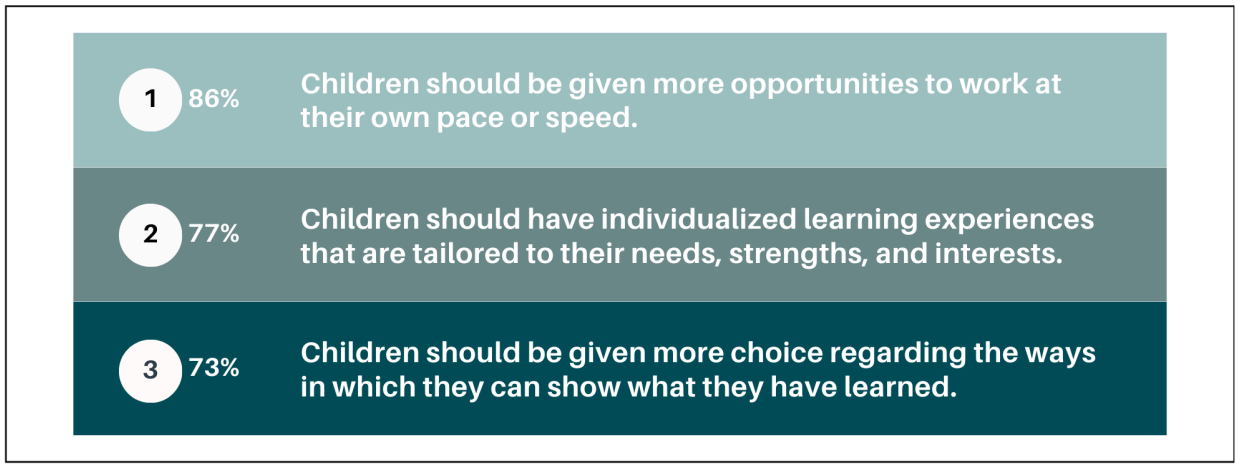
3. **Personalization and Flexibility:** Innovative education is personalized to students guiding their learning process and allowing for individualized education, which is tailored to their needs, strengths, and interests.

4. **Increased Engagement and Motivation:** Innovation makes learning more engaging--motivating students to attend school and take ownership of their learning and giving students opportunities to work at their own pace or speed. Participants noted an increase in student attendance and achievement.

5. **Success for Students who are Non-Traditional and/or Underserved:** Innovation allows students who do not fit into a traditional model to succeed. Participants noted a decrease in student discipline, increase in attendance and engagement, and success for traditionally underserved students.

In a survey given to community members and parents, the most agreed upon statements regarding education in Arkansas are outlined in Figure 6

Figure 6
Most Agreed Upon Statements Regarding Education in Arkansas by Community Members and Parents



HISTORY OF INNOVATION IN ARKANSAS EDUCATION

Over the past few decades, Arkansas continues to shift toward a more student-focused approach with the goal of ensuring readiness for college, career, and community engagement for all students. Several initiatives and pathways mark this more recent shift to student-focused learning, including innovations happening within the structure of traditional public schools, conversion charters, open-enrollment charters, Schools of Innovation, Act 1240, and Credit by Demonstrated Mastery. We explore these six primary pathways in further detail below.

Traditional Public Schools

Public schools in Arkansas are governed by the "Rules Governing the Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools and School Districts." Within these rules, traditional public schools throughout the state have chosen to innovate on their own, aligning with the state's governance while also finding flexibility through innovative concepts and accessing the option of seeking waivers as needed.

Conversion Charter

In 1995, Act 1126 was the first legislation to allow the creation of conversion charter schools providing existing schools with waivers from education laws, rules, and local policies with the goal of increasing student achievement. However, due to the restrictiveness of the process, no public schools applied (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2017). Act 1126 required schools wanting to become conversion charters to be approved by two-thirds of the school's employees and students' parents, local school board approval, and follow regulations set by the State Board of Education (Costrell & Wolf, 2008). With the lack of public schools interested in converting to charter schools, Act 1126 was an effort to expand charter schools with the passage of Act 890 and the creation of open-enrollment schools. (Costrell & Wolf, 2008).

Open-Enrollment

Act 890 of 1999 added the option of open-enrollment charter schools, which was open to any non-sectarian group with tax-exempt status (Costrell & Wolf, 2008). While conversion charter schools could only accept students from within their district, open-enrollment charter schools could accept students across district lines. Act 890 paved the pathway for charter schools in Arkansas and in 2001 the state's first four open-enrollment charter schools opened their doors (Costrell & Wolf, 2008).

Schools of Innovation

A new option for public schools to boost innovation and student achievement became available in 2013 with SB66 (Act 601) allowing schools to designate as "schools of innovation." This bill provided flexibility to school districts in how they designed their instructional environments to meet school and student needs, increase flexibility, and increase student achievement (Office for Education Policy, 2014). Act 601 reflected similar programs hoping to raise student achievement levels implemented in other states in the 1990s (Office for Education Policy, 2014).

Act 1240

In 2015, both conversion charter schools and open-enrollment charter schools were in full operation and utilizing waivers to meet school and student needs, increase flexibility, and increase student achievement. As the open-enrollment charter schools attracted students from the public schools in their district, the Arkansas House of Representatives introduced HB1377, later Act 1240 of 2015. Act 1240 of 2015 grants public schools the same waivers utilized by open enrollment charter schools educating students in their district with the goal of equalizing the opportunity for innovations across schools (H.B. 1377, 2015).

Credit by Demonstrated Mastery

As recently as 2018 new legislation was added to allow students to earn credit for a high school course by proving mastery of the content, allowing students the opportunity to personalize and accelerate their learning (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). Arkansas

Code Annotated 6-15-216 provides the pathway for public schools to apply for and award Credit by Demonstrated Mastery (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022) through the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education Course Approval System. Students interested in earning Credit by Demonstrated Mastery complete a two phase assessment process. In the first phase, students are assessed on the course standards. In the second phase, students submit an artifact "which requires the student to apply knowledge and skills relevant to the content standards" (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022).

THEMES IDENTIFIED IN STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

The feedback gathered from diverse stakeholders across Arkansas encapsulates a rich tapestry of perspectives, experiences, and aspirations regarding innovation in education within Arkansas. From educators and administrators to parents and community members, voices from diverse backgrounds converge to paint a nuanced picture of the current educational landscape. As we embark on a journey to explore these themes, it becomes evident that understanding and addressing these perspectives are paramount in fostering a culture of innovation that empowers all stakeholders and enhances student outcomes.

Impact of Innovation in Arkansas

Impact of Innovation for Education:

- Transforms learning to be more student-focused
- Galvanizing force in culture and community
- Builds a culture of continuous learning and collaboration

Support for Innovation in Arkansas

Supports for Innovation:

- Building, district, and state collaborative networks
- Community participation and integration in the design of school system
- Transparent processes for innovation and service from state, regional, and local providers
- Experiencing models of innovation and expanding understanding

Vision of Innovation for Arkansas

Expanding the Vision for Innovation and Impact:

- Greater differentiation and personalization of learning, including expanded opportunities for all students (beyond multi-tiered systems of support to all students supported in more personalized ways)
- Future pathways preparation
- Deeper community engagement and integration

When stakeholders were asked to reflect on specific examples relating to the impact of innovations and their experiences in an Arkansas educational setting, the following four themes and sub-themes emerged. The following section offers a more in-depth review of the themes and subthemes related to the impact of innovations.

Impact of Innovations in Arkansas

- **Transforms learning to be more student-focused**
    - Leads to a deeper understanding of the learning and of the student learner
    - Promotes ownership of learning
    - Includes supports for all students
    - Impacts student growth on a wider-range of criteria, including whole child development
- **Galvanizing force in culture and community**
    - Supports the development of school goals that are tied to community priorities
    - Encourages community engagement and integration
- **Builds a Culture of Continuous Learning and Collaboration**
    - Increases collaboration,
    - Builds teacher efficacy and leadership
    - Improves professional learning for adults

Transforms learning to be more student-focused

> "We go back to having those personal relationships, and really knowing our kids and creating individual paths for them … I'll give you an example, we have a young lady who wants to be an interior designer, and you know people say, 'Well, that's really not construction,' but it does have a construction focus. They work with architects every day and so the exposure part of that. So we didn't take the entire group on a field experience. But we booked a field experience for her, and it was with someone that teaches it and has that degree who connected her with additional architects she could visit, [including] females. You know you're trying to show female students that they can be in those careers. And so when people say interior design generally, you think about decorating yet there's so much more to it. That's what I think of as being innovative…taking that one student that had a special interest and providing those student opportunities." *Arkansas Educator*

Stakeholders noted transformed learning that was more student-focused was an impact of innovation. Interviewed stakeholders, especially teachers, emphasized the importance of personalized learning or tailoring their approaches to gain a deeper understanding of individual needs, interests, and strengths of each student. Parents also stressed the importance of teachers

understanding their individual child and the power that transformation can have in a school and classroom culture. Other shifts offered by stakeholders involved creating personalized learning plans, differentiating instruction, providing various pathways for students to achieve their goals, and helping students learn and plan for the future.

> "Personalized learning plans and student choice play a significant role in promoting student agency. When students have a voice in what they learn and how they demonstrate their understanding, they become more engaged and self-directed in their education." *Arkansas Educator*

In addition to knowledge and content skills, stakeholders saw the transformation to student-focused learning empowered students to take ownership of their learning. Stakeholders, in particular principals of innovative schools, discussed the important role innovation plays in fostering a sense of agency, autonomy, and self-direction among students. Educational innovations leverage learning experiences that help students make choices and decisions in their education, and consequently, their future. When discussing learning experiences, stakeholders offered examples of career and technical education, concurrent college courses, community service work, and passion projects.

Secondary educators focused particularly on the importance of having flexibility in their schedules so that students could make choices and set goals. For many schools, increased flexibility in scheduling the day was a chief innovation. Often at the secondary level, increased autonomy and flexibility for students were coupled with additional supports which included mentoring programs, community-based opportunities, weekly goal setting, and personalized learning plans. At the elementary level, agency, autonomy, and self-direction were evidenced by choices given students on how to demonstrate learning, personalization of pace, goal setting and student-led conferencing, and passion projects.

> “[Our school] it is a place where people truly come for the innovation [which is] that every kid gets what they need, it doesn't matter who they are.” *Arkansas Educator*

In the landscape feedback, stakeholders, including educators and parents, felt that the impact of innovation could be seen in their systems with the students who typically seemed left out, including students with special education and 504 needs. By becoming more student-focused, schools were able to transform to respond to needs yet also change their mindset about how they approached students and supports for all students.

> "We focus on meeting the needs of all students, including those with exceptionality and gifted students. We're always looking for ways to use our resources more dynamically to support diverse students." *Arkansas Educator*

> "I strongly believe in the power of inclusive education. When we create classrooms where students with special needs are included and valued, it benefits everyone. It fosters empathy and understanding among all students." *Arkansas Educator*

Building on the theme of student-focused, stakeholders across all groups emphasized the impact that thinking about education differently could have on how schools think about student growth on a wider range of criteria. Leaders in particular, offered the impact that transforming to a more student-focused school had on their staff, students, and families in thinking more holistically about student development, including the importance of considering "a range of assessment methods that truly capture the individual strengths and progress of each student." Stakeholders emphasized, particularly following COVID-19, the importance of considering students' social and emotional growth.

> "As educators, we need to assess not only academic achievement but also students' social and emotional growth. We should measure what matters to their holistic development." "But now what I do is when they [students] come I look at their mental health background, and where they've been and things like that, so we can keep an eye on them….that's probably one of the biggest changes that has occurred [for our school of innovation]." *Arkansas Educator*

Teachers emphasized using assessments closer to the student to better understand their growth and needs:

> "We focus on formative assessments that provide ongoing feedback to students and teachers. It's not just about a final grade; it's about understanding where students are in their learning journey and how we can support their growth." *Arkansas Educator*

As stakeholders described their school's transformation to become more student-focused, a more holistic understanding of student growth emerged which allowed schools to better understand, respond, and support student growth on a wider range of criteria.

Galvanizing force in culture and community

> "The school and community are one. I think almost everyone believes that. The community is proud of "our school." *Arkansas Educator*

As stakeholders shared the impacts of innovation based on their experiences, the theme of culture, climate, and community emerged from their stories. Some educators offered stories of

working on culture and climate within the walls of their building and classrooms, including with students:

> "We believe in fostering a strong sense of community among our students. Through collaborative projects and group discussions, students learn the importance of teamwork and supporting one another." *Arkansas Educator*

Other stakeholders offered examples of working with community members as an element of their school's innovative efforts and goals, expressing community engagement and integration as "a crucial aspect of our educational approach" and innovative plans. For example, in some Schools of Innovation, "guest speakers from the local community[are invited] to share their experiences and expertise with students." Regular guests may also help lead high-interest activities for students, such as dog-obedience training, cooking, performing arts, chess and Lego leagues, and community helpers clubs. Schools of Innovation are expected to co-design and collaborate with their community based on the school needs and goals and several stakeholders expressed this collaboration was a highlight of their work. Furthermore, Arkansas Arkansas Code Annotated §6-16-1901 leverages community-based learning, stating that "beginning with the graduating class of 2026-2027, a public high school student shall complete a minimum of seventy-five (75) clock hours of documented community service in grades nine through twelve (9-12), as certified by the service agency or organization with which the public school student volunteers, in order to graduate. Several school and district leaders tied their innovative efforts and stories of impact to community service learning.

> "In our school, we have a strong sense of community. We encourage students, teachers, and parents to work together to create a positive and supportive learning environment." *Arkansas Educator*

In other innovative schools, community leaders serve alongside teachers and leaders to expose students to nontraditional career fields such as industrial maintenance, solar power industries, and coding. In some instances, these opportunities are developed as a broader regional coalition works together to ensure students are exposed to opportunities that are engaging and expose them to future possibilities for career and life, such as the "Be A Model, Break The Mold" career exploration event for young women in Southwest Arkansas schools held The University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana, held in conjunction with Southwest Arkansas Education Cooperatives, including De Queen-Mena Education Service Cooperative, South Central Service Cooperative, and Southwest Arkansas Education Cooperative. As eloquently offered by a School of Innovation principal, "One of the most valuable factors in our school's success is community involvement. Our community is an important part of our school, and our school is an important part of our community."

Builds a culture of continuous learning and collaboration

> "I feel like it's the limits of my own imagination that limit my innovation; I need to know what I don't know to best serve our kids." *Arkansas Educator*

This theme highlights the impact of innovation in Arkansas related to building a culture of continuous learning and collaboration. When stakeholders gave examples of working in schools focused on innovating, or other stakeholders offered the impact they had experienced from innovation in schools, the emphasis on continuous learning and collaboration was key.

> "Innovation has brought efficiency, allowing for greater sharing, collaboration, and collective efforts." *Arkansas Educator*

According to stakeholders, working on specific innovations in their schools and communities encourages a supportive and collaborative environment where educators are empowered to enhance their professional skills, where educators and community members can share knowledge and expertise, and where the community engages in ongoing learning and growth. Innovation in education has also encouraged stakeholders to connect with others both within and outside their districts, sharing ideas and best practices to enhance student learning. This culture of collaboration and sharing encouraged teachers and leaders "to step outside the box and try something a little different" impacting teacher efficacy and leadership while being responsive to school, educator, and student needs.

> "It's helped me connect with other stakeholders outside my district on what they are doing that's really good, and how we can take what they're doing and tweak it to make it fit what we need here..." *Arkansas Educator*

Inherent in this culture was ongoing job-embedded professional learning and support networks for adults. One educator described finding support for her learning from other colleagues who were also open to questioning, trying new approaches, thinking deeply, and tolerating discomfort. These support networks helped this educator maintain her innovative mindset and provided a space to explore and refine her ideas and learning. "I find myself constantly seeking a learning community of like-minded individuals with that flexibility and that openness to try, to fail, and to eventually succeed."

Supports for Innovation in Arkansas

When stakeholders were asked to reflect on supports that helped them launch and contribute to a successful educational innovation, including when challenges arose, the following themes emerged.

Supports for Innovation

- Building, district, and state collaborative networks
- Community participation and integration in the design in the school system
- Transparent and flexible processes for innovation and service from state, regional, and local providers
- Experiencing models of innovation and expanding understanding

Building, district, and state collaboration and networks

> "Having that connection, that bond with those schools, I think those were very helpful. Everybody looks different, but everybody has a lot of the same challenges, so kind of the process they use to work through it." *Arkansas Educator*

Building on the themes that emerged from impacts of innovation on education, stakeholders, especially educators, offered an important lever for support in launching, problem-solving, and sustaining innovative work was being a part of a network. In some cases, that network referred to an "outside network of people who support" who may have a fresh perspective and in other cases, the network referred to "hearing from people across the U.S. about things that are working with what they are doing" and taking a "collaborative approach to having discussions with people who are doing the work" when engaged in similar innovative initiatives.

> "I do think that collaborative approach to having discussions with people who are doing the work is probably the strongest support [I received.]" *Arkansas Educator*

At the district level, a focus on "utilizing the Co-ops and meeting with neighboring superintendents to offer support" was a critical support. While at the school level, educators shared that collaboration was important-- at the school level through both formal and informal networks, along with assistance from the district, especially when implementing out of the box strategies and initiatives. As one teacher shared, "none of our support had anything to do with funding or money. It was more about trusting your team and really collaborating." Another leader shared, "If we communicate better and trust our teams to implement and help facilitate the implementation of them, then I think that's going to be our best resource."

Community Integration

Expanding on the impact that innovation can have on galvanizing a community, school leaders, in particular, described how "having that support outside of the school that was looking in and supporting us" was a crucial support. This support was especially integral when trying new strategies and initiatives in their schools and with their communities. In addition, leaders knew and expressed that the support, communication, and collaboration had to go both ways and be integrated with the community:

> "We are in a small community that had tradition and had done things the same way. It was critical to have support from my staff to be an additional voice to parents and the community." *Arkansas Educator*

Transparent and flexible processes for innovation with service from state, regional, and local providers

> "One thing I would say is the flexibility and service from State, Regional, and Local providers has been very good for us." *Arkansas Educator*

When stakeholders were asked to reflect on supports that helped them launch and contribute to successful innovations, the theme of having transparent and flexible processes for innovation, along with support and service from providers emerged.

> "I think flexibility is really important…By nature, public education tends to put kids in boxes, and we tend to say, 'If this is a good idea for one, then it has to be a good idea for all.' *Arkansas Educator*

For transparent processes, the feedback that emerged revealed that educators were aware of the different options for leveraging innovation and flexibility in Arkansas, including understanding different options through the structures of conversion charters, open-enrollment charters, Schools of Innovation, and Act 1240 Waivers. Through a variety of service providers, including educational service cooperatives, personnel and resources from the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Office of Innovation for Education, the Arkansas Public School Resource Center, and the Arkansas Leadership Academy, stakeholders felt they could access and knew how to request service to learn more about options available for innovating.

> "We had people that check[ed] in with us, and we always knew that we had a contact that we could ask clarifying questions…We always had someone to say, "You know what, I don't know. But let me get back to you." And so there was always someone in our corner to help…lead us through the process of [School of Innovation] designation." *Arkansas Educator*

Another educator shared the benefits of having a district conversion charter process:

> "It fits within our district system. It's not for every kid. It gives us an option, and the one thing that I think a charter should be for is to try new things, so that you can improve public education as a whole [and] they have given us some waivers. It gives us flexibility to do some things that we can't do under the standards, and I think that's very important to

> look at when you talk about innovation. What are the things we're doing that handicaps us from being innovative?" *Arkansas Educator*

Whether reaching out to DESE, OIE, or working to integrate innovative processes with existing service providers such as the Arkansas Leadership Academy, educators who had been through an option for leveraging flexibility and innovation felt they knew how and where to get support. One school leader expressed when she was working on her School of Innovation designation application, "anytime we had questions we could reach out to someone that was very helpful as far as walking through some of the questions we had or issues we may have had."

Experiencing models of innovation and expanding understanding

> "[The SOI process] challenged us to think about the areas that maybe weren't as strong [at our school] and this helped us think about the whole innovative landscape. We visited schools that we're doing some really great things that we could benefit from… we were able to go and see all the great things that are happening across the state." *Arkansas Educator*

Whether working on a charter school application, considering a 1240 Waiver, or pursuing School of Innovation Designation, stakeholders, including parents and families, felt learning from others who had experience implementing innovations, experiencing models of innovation through facilitated journeys, participating in structured networks, and innovative conferences were key.

When stakeholders were asked about their dreams for innovation how those innovations in action might support Arkansas students over the next 5-10 years, the following themes emerged:

Vision of Innovation for Arkansas

- Greater differentiation and personalization of learning, including expanded opportunities for all students (beyond multi-tiered systems of support to all students supported in more personalized ways)
- Future pathways preparation
- Deeper community engagement and integration

Greater differentiation and personalization of learning, including expanded opportunities

When thinking about the future of education and the impact that continued innovation could have, stakeholders envisioned making learning more personalized and providing every student with expanded opportunities to be successful, including reimagining what success looks like.

> We would create "spaces where students can flourish in their respective natural talents and have the space to explore multiple options for their future." *Arkansas Parent*

Stakeholders advocated for generating new ideas in collaboration with their communities and were especially sensitive to students facing challenges in traditional classrooms and structures, whether that applied to special education, acceleration opportunities, changes in grade level and time-bound learning, or increased opportunities for career and community experiences.

> "We would be able to walk into a school building and walk into classrooms, and we would not be able to tell students who are in subpopulations or labeled… Any of the labels that we place on kids for a variety of reasons would not be emphasized because the system would be so coherent." *Arkansas Educator*

> "I would really like to see…schools take away the grade level barriers, because I think when we, when we talk about getting kids through high school, there's more to it than just being a tenth grader or eleventh grader. I think there's still a lot of barriers that we deal with from grade level restrictions that keeps kids from excelling and personalizing their experience in school." *Arkansas Community Member*

Recognizing that students need exposure and access to both career and college opportunities, stakeholders indicated they aim to offer more hands-on learning experiences like the ones at the Kohler Academy in Sheridan and Peak Innovation Center in Fort Smith. Additionally, stakeholders aspired to see more learning environments where students could explore and nurture their unique talents and noted that supporting educators and other adults in adopting more innovative teaching methods is a part of making this vision happen. As one stakeholder shared, "We expect children to be creative and innovative - but what about the innovation of adults? How do we promote and develop [this approach]?"

> "We have to understand that not all kids are going to college and we have to expand their CTE experience. Look at Sheridan/Kohler relationship. We have to develop these partnerships to better serve our kids and communities." *Arkansas Parent*

Future pathways preparation

Building on the theme of expanding opportunities by increasing exposure and access, stakeholders, including parents and community members, shared that ensuring students are prepared for future pathways while in school is their vision.

> "It's just really painting a picture in the future for every single graduate being prepared for the path, whether that's a career, that's college, that's the military or working in the community. Every kid, being prepared for the future and having this sort of information

> about pathways, so that the student and the family… understand what those options are." *Arkansas Parent*

Stakeholders recognized that part of making that vision a reality might require schools to rethink the role and structure of schools and rethink the role of the teacher, especially at the secondary level. As one stakeholder shared his vision,

> "Becoming more and more specific in what we get [students] prepared for -we can't generalize anymore - we can't expect our teachers to be generalists - maybe we approach the structure of schools? How do we hone in on the specialization of the skills our teachers already have, so that we aren't expecting our teachers to know everything?" *Arkansas Educator*

Deeper community engagement and integration

When visioning the future and the potential impact of innovation on education, stakeholders continued to weigh in on the importance of community. Stakeholders, especially administrators and community members, see deeper community engagement and integration as a key to helping students, schools, and communities.

> "I would like to see kids start businesses...in the community, so that it builds [our town] up as a bigger commerce area… [I'd like to see us] trying to keep our students here, and maybe start businesses that can sustain our community. We have a lot of people moving here. We don't have enough housing, so just one construction company, or something like that … could help us in sustaining where we are." *Arkansas Educator*

> "I would like to see more of a connection with entities outside the school. You know different corporations and things, because ultimately the majority of your student population in the state's going into the workforce. They're not going to college. College has become too expensive." *Arkansas Parent*

Building on the impacts stakeholders are already seeing when schools and communities work together, they imagined a future where the "school and community have a seamless transition between the two - where things that are happening in society, schools are preparing them for jobs, etc." A future where we are preparing them now so that they are "critical thinkers" with "almost an engineer mindset" so that they can "maneuver and adapt."

RELATED RESEARCH

Education Innovation: Enhancing Learning and Teaching

According to the Office for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016), education innovation encompasses the creation and dissemination of novel educational tools, instructional practices, organizational forms, and technology. While distinct from research, innovation often draws on research to enhance the quality and efficiency of educational services. The primary focus of innovation lies in transforming processes and practices to yield positive changes in learning experiences. Innovative education moves beyond implementation within the walls of the school and strives to build a connected learning ecosystem linked to communities (Education Reimagined, 2023).

Educational innovations possess the potential to significantly elevate learning outcomes and overall education quality. By embracing changes in the educational system and adopting new teaching methods, a more personalized and effective learning environment can be established (OECD, 2015 & 2016; Wolf, 2010). Customizing the educational process to individual needs and learning styles fosters better student engagement, rendering learning more pertinent and enjoyable and enabling students to delve into subjects at their preferred pace and manner. Embracing educational innovations serves to drive student-focused education and thereby improve student achievement and success. The process of innovating education that enables student-focused and deeper learning outcomes demands significant changes in our approach to both the mindset and practices within the educational system (Education Reimagined, 2023).

A student-focused environment represents a dynamic and interconnected framework that revolutionizes the organization, support, and assessment for learning. It establishes the conditions for collaboration among students, their peers, and adults, prioritizing student agency and empowering them to make meaningful decisions regarding their learning and societal contributions. The community and the world at large serve as dynamic learning environments, with libraries, community centers, churches, public parks, school buildings, and businesses all recognized as legitimate and valuable venues for learning. Technology is harnessed to expand access to learning opportunities, flexibly acknowledge, monitor, and credential a student's educational journey, and communicate successes for families, employers, and higher education institutions (Education Reimagined, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The findings from OIE's School of Innovation Case Study (2019), which included interviews with educators, parents, and students, echo the themes from the current landscape interviews and focus groups. In the 2019 case study, students reported teachers in their innovative schools "tailored instruction" to meet each student at their various levels, learning rates, and met their specific needs, strengths, and weaknesses in academic abilities. Students also felt the flexible schedule in their school made it "less boring" and gave them opportunities to make choices in

their learning, taught them time management skills, and created a space where they could get to know their teachers better. Consequently, students reported spending more time on assignments and had more time for credit recovery, tutoring, and/or club participation.

Education and Innovation: Paving the Way Forward

> "The meaning of change will always be "new" because it is human endeavor that is perpetually dynamic. Educational change has meaning because it pursues moral purpose and does so by bringing best knowledge to bear on critical issues of the day. Above all, when it works, it does so because it motivates "a million change agents" to find meaning in collective action to improve humankind. Meaningful work, action-based, never finished–one could spend a lifetime!" *Michael Fullan, 2007.*

For decades, innovation in education has created systems to empower students to grow, thrive, and experience diverse and expansive educational opportunities coast to coast in rural and urban landscapes (Education Reimagined, 2023). Examples in innovation in education can be seen across many states. Leaders from various states have identified a key challenge in developing innovative educational systems—the prevalence of accountability systems that uphold traditional education models. These systems heavily rely on a limited set of metrics, such as standardized testing and rigid curriculum mandates, which conflict with a student-focused vision. Encouragingly, some states have taken steps to shift away from exclusive reliance on test-based outcomes. Initiatives like graduate profiles or learner portraits have emerged, marking an initial move towards more comprehensive assessment methods (Education Reimagined, 2023).

While traditional education policies primarily focused on STEM disciplines, a broader perspective now acknowledges the role of creativity, critical thinking, arts, social sciences, and more in driving innovation (OECD, 2016). This inclusive approach cultivates a diverse pool of innovators, well-equipped to effectively address modern challenges within the economy and society.

Innovative Approaches in Education: State Overviews

In April 2020, the Aurora Institute published ten "future-focused state policy actions to transform K-12 education" and provided state examples of the innovation occurring in education within the states. The state profiles along with related research are offered below.

State Policy Priority #1: Profile of a Graduate/Portrait of a Learner

- Leverages collaborative work to outline the vision of success of a student/graduate/learner,

    - In South Carolina, the state Board of Education adopted a Profile of A South Carolina Graduate in 2015, a comprehensive array of knowledge, competencies, and attributes essential for the future success of high school graduates
- Other states who have adopted a profile or portrait of a graduate include, but are not limited to, Virginia, Nevada, Utah, Indiana, and more (Next Generation Learning, 2023).

State Policy Priority #2: Innovation Zones

- Offer schools and districts a way in which to apply for waivers to support innovation, flexibility, and student-focused education
    - Successful innovation zones include: Arkansas, Colorado, Minnesota, Kentucky (Aurora Institute, 2020)
- 2023 legislation allows Mississippi schools to receive the distinction of "school of innovation" and provides appropriate waivers for innovation (Next Generation Learning, 2023).

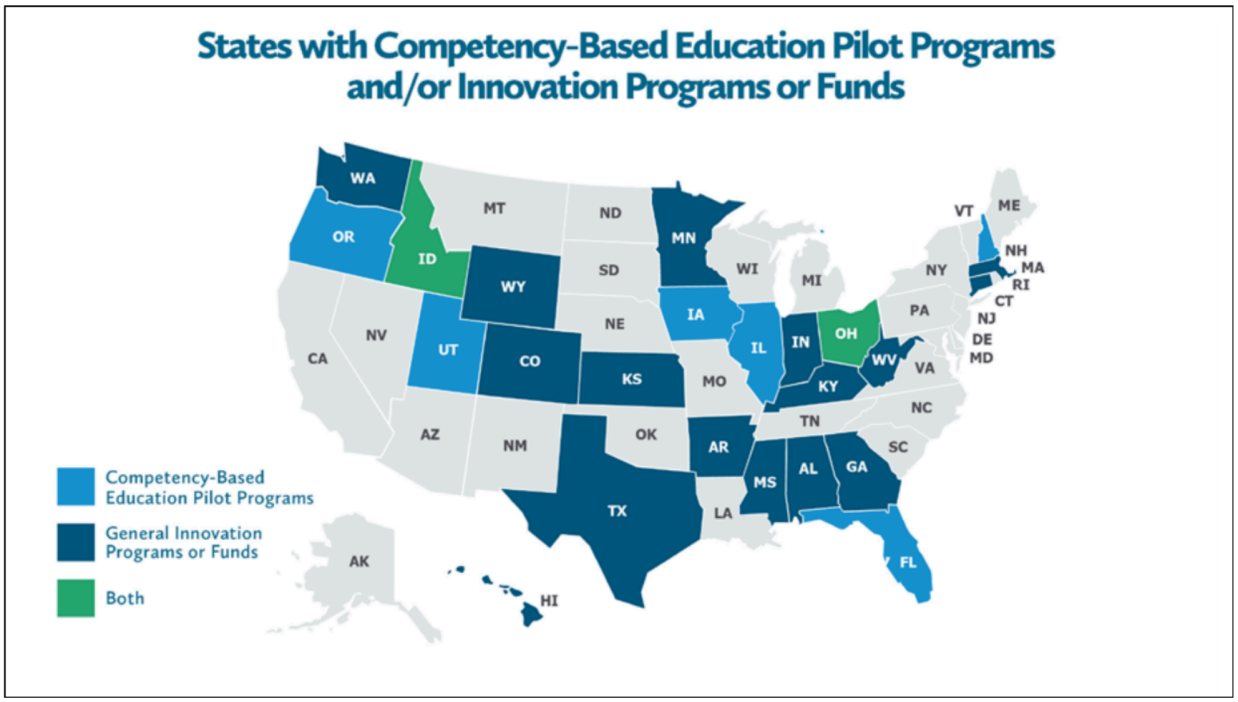
State Policy Priority #3: Competency-based Education Task Forces/Pilots

- Concept of "anytime, anywhere learning" accentuates the importance of flexible learning environments; empowers students to learn at their own pace and convenience, adapting to their individual needs and preferences (Aurora Institute, 2020)
- Excel in Ed highlights competency-based education with state-level policy solutions and innovative pilot programs that personalize learning and inform statewide policies (Education Counsel, 2017).

Excel in Ed offers a map (Figure 7) visualizing state policies related to innovation and competency-based education pilots. This map serves as a valuable tool for understanding progress and initiatives across regions, emphasizing areas necessitating further collaboration and effort to drive innovation and enhance the educational experience for students (Education Counsel, 2017).

Figure 7

States with Competency-Based Education Pilot Programs



Note. States with Competency-Based Education Pilot Programs and/or Innovation Programs or Funds according to Excel in Ed.

State Policy Priority #4: Credit Flexibility

- Avenues for students to earn credits by showcasing mastery through the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies; policies establish a functional equivalency, recognizing achievements beyond traditional seat-time requirements (Aurora Institute, 2020).
- While Oregon is a leading state in credit flexibility, other states offering innovation in flexibility include, but are not limited to: New Hampshire, Colorado, and Nevada (Next Generation Learning, 2023).

State Policy Priority #5: Meaningful Credentials

- State-defined credentials that clearly express students' knowledge and abilities, offering transparency of achievements for students, communities, and employers (Aurora Institute, 2020).
    - Arizona introduced the Grand Canyon Diploma, a competency-based credential enabling students to accrue credit through the demonstration of mastery. This high school diploma is attainable for Arizona students showcasing college and career readiness across all core subjects before graduation. Achieving the Grand Canyon

High School Diploma signifies a student's academic preparedness for college-level courses without the need for remediation.
    - Vermont also has defined meaningful credentials through Act77 (2013), the Flexible Pathways Initiative, which allows districts to combine "high-quality academic and experiential components leading to secondary school completion and postsecondary readiness" (Aurora Institute, 2020).

State Policy Priority #6: Pathways Alignment across K-12, Higher Education, Career and Technical Education, and Workforce/Employment

- Alabama designed a “continuous learning system” that aligns career pathways and workforce development programs readying students for in-demand careers in the state. This system will allow overlapping and collaborative funding from federal education and workforce development streams to support the in-demand career pathways (Aurora Institute, 2020).

State Policy Priority #7: Educator Workforce Modernization

- Builds teacher capacity toward student-centered learning by personalizing the professional learning opportunities for educators
- Tennessee has created a micro-credential pilot as a resource for educators to develop their skills around the Tennessee Academic Standards to promote personalized professional development for teachers in a competency-based education (Aurora Institute, 2020).
- Arkansas has also developed professional learning through micro-credentials, which allows educators time to learn, reflect, and implement skills to lead to higher achievement in students (DESE, 2023).

State Policy Priority #8: Educator Workforce Diversity

- Tennessee awarded $200,000 to four educator preparation programs as part of their Innovation in Preparation Grants. These grants will help educator preparation programs develop innovative strategies in order to recruit a diverse educator workforce, build a pipeline of teachers in high-demand areas, and improve the literacy content in the educator preparation (Aurora Institute, 2020).

State Policy Priority #9: Balanced System of Assessments

- Five criteria: coherence, continuity, comprehensiveness, utility, and efficiency (Marion, et. al, 2020). Coherent systems link clear specifications of learning goals through assessments both horizontally and vertically.
    - Continuity - growth of a student based on learning progressions in both monitoring and evaluating over time
    - Comprehensiveness - allows students multiple opportunities and ways to demonstrate their learning

- Utility - the degree to which the assessment system furnishes the requisite information to effectively fulfill its various and divergent objectives
- Efficiency - eliminates redundant, unused, and untimely assessments making the most use of assessment resources(Marion, et. al, 2020)

State Policy Priority #10: Next-Generation Accountability Systems

- Reshaping accountability systems for ongoing enhancement, striving for both equity and excellence
- Empowering stakeholders through a multifaceted approach that incorporates diverse, well-balanced measures and fosters reciprocal accountability (Aurora Institute, 2020)
    - Colorado is one state leading the charge for innovative approaches to their accountability system. In the 2019 legislative session, Colorado enacted a new law aimed at supporting local education agencies in piloting innovative, student-centered accountability models. The Student-Centered Accountability System Pilot in Colorado offers both funding and flexibility to school districts. Additionally, the passage of Colorado SB-19-204 resulted in the establishment of the Local Accountability System Grant program in 2019. This grant initiative empowers districts to create accountability systems tailored to the specific objectives of fostering college and career readiness for all students. The Student-Centered Pilot Accountability Systems further facilitate this by providing districts with grants and flexibility to develop and implement new accountability models (Aurora Institute, 2020).
    - Utah and North Carolina are also working on rethinking their accountability system to include their Portrait of a Graduate (Next Generation Learning, 2023).

DISCUSSION

> “That is how you create a single story, show people as one thing. As only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become." - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi, 2009

When innovation is viewed as one advanced idea, that becomes the definition of innovation in education. But when we recognize that each school and district is starting with varied demographic and socio-economic challenges, then we can begin to view innovation as a step forward from the starting point for individual schools, each with different points of entry. What may seem basic and rudimentary for one school district, may be a new and intriguing challenge for another considering the history of their culture.

Discussion of educational improvements requires recognition of the varying perspectives that exist based on objectives, cultural values, social policies, and political goals (OECD, 2016). These variations influence the focus and priorities in education over time. Therefore, indicators used to measure innovation progress should be directly linked to specific social and educational

goals, encompassing learning outcomes (e.g. states work toward Portraits/Learner Profiles), cost efficiency, equity, and public satisfaction.

Measurement of innovation should encompass diverse education levels and viewpoints of stakeholders. Though objective measurements may not always be feasible, understanding diverse stakeholder experiences becomes crucial for assessing the success and impact of educational innovation. Aligning innovation efforts with clear objectives and considering stakeholder input ensures a comprehensive and meaningful evaluation of educational progress (OECD, 2016). One of the challenges of measurement of innovation is the varying approaches and entry points, and school and community context. In Arkansas, Schools of Innovation intentionally leverage local innovation and goals. Among the strategies in the School of Innovation (SOI) process, the designation and renewal processes draw most on school's taking a portfolio approach to demonstrate their growth. In this work with SOI, OIE has discovered the need for strategic planning tied to a shared vision which includes community integration, the collection of qualitative and quantitative data for baseline, and a deep understanding of cycles of improvement.

In order to better understand each school's unique journey, the SOI Process utilizes each school as its own baseline. Part of the strategic work the school undertakes is supported by coaching, collaboration, and consultation. Schools implement cycles of inquiry and improvement, drawing on implementation research related to facilitating change. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is a theoretical model for facilitating change that helps leaders and researchers understand, lead, and monitor the complex process of change in education (Hall, et al, 1974) and highlights several principles of change illuminated in this study. According to Hall & Hord, 2020, change at all levels is complex and dynamic. Evidenced across this landscape, several change principles emerged from Hall and Hord's 12 principles:

1. Change is a Process, not an Event
2. Implementing Change is a Whole System Effort
3. District- and School-Based Leadership is Essential to Long-Term Change Success
4. Facilitating Change is a Team Effort
5. Appropriate Interventions are Key to the Success of the Change Process
6. All-way Communication is Needed All the Time
7. Sustaining Change Requires Additional Time, Interventions and Leadership.

The purpose of the Innovation Landscape is to guide the work of OIE, be shared with DESE and support partners to provide support in removing barriers to innovation in schools, to increase the chances for success, and to increase the positive impacts on students, staff, parents, and community. The best hope of this landscape is to empower the future of innovation in education

in Arkansas. As outlined in the themes, stakeholders are holding onto a ***Vision of Innovation for Arkansas*** that offers:

- Greater differentiation and personalization of learning, including expanded opportunities
- Future pathways preparation
- Deeper community engagement and integration

The process of making change happen in innovative ways, includes: working on change as a process by empowering school teams and leaders, removing barriers to change, including how change is measured, and supporting change through a community-based approach. In Arkansas, the future of innovation will cultivate educators and "spaces where students can flourish in their respective natural talents and have the space to explore multiple options for their future."

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