

## Frequently Asked Questions about Innovation Zones

### What are Innovation Zones?

- Innovation Zones are school-driven groupings of DPS Innovation Schools that collaborate to enable them to better serve students
- Innovation Zone schools are not charter schools and remain within the school district and *remain accountable to the DPS board* – the Innovation Zone only continues to operate if the schools within the Zone are succeeding
- Innovation Zones have an independent, community-based nonprofit organization that helps coordinate work across the schools in a Zone
- Innovation Zones are fundamentally about educator empowerment. They exist to empower leaders and teachers with the opportunity to design and sustain a shared learning community specifically tailored to the needs of their students and communities, and the adults who serve them.
- Building on the promising early results of Denver’s first Innovation Zone, the Luminary Learning Network, the DPS Board recently released a Call for Zones, including Zones with independent nonprofit governance.

### Why would a school decide to join or form an Innovation Zone?

- **Leader and Teacher Empowerment.** Zones afford leaders and teachers the opportunity to design and sustain a shared learning community specifically tailored to the needs of their students, and the adults who serve them.
- **Shared Learning.** Because Zones are organized around common interests, there is an explicit opportunity and expectation for shared learning to manifest across schools and teams within the Zone. This does not mean all schools must offer the same educational model.
- **Economies of Scale.** In a Zone, schools may choose to pool available resources together to obtain the services they want, maximizing the impact of dollars available and gaining the benefit of economies of scale not available to schools in isolation. Importantly, economies of scale are not limited to “hard” financial resources; they also can take shape through community partnerships or innovative staffing models between schools, i.e. sharing a nurse or IB Coordinator across campuses.
- **Zone-Specific Support Structures.** Zones can offer the opportunity to construct a support team tailored to the needs of schools in the Zone. For example, schools might choose to pool resources to hire an “operations lead” whose job is to relieve administrative and operational responsibilities at the school level, freeing up more time for school-based teams to focus on teaching and learning. Similarly, a Zone within the District network structure might choose to hire an executive coach with expertise in a particular model instead of an alternative network support role. Staffing models will vary depending on the number of schools and students, theory of action, revenue, and expertise available.
- **Steadfast Focus and Increased Flexibility.** Zones are empowered to set priorities specific to the schools within them; these priorities must align to the Zone plan and to schools’ individual innovation plans and must be informed by data trends on an ongoing basis. Zone schools may choose not to participate in most programs or practices offered by DPS support services that are not aligned to Zone and school priorities, although areas related to legal responsibility and compliance will not be made flexible.

- **Community Ownership.** The Zone creation and renewal process requires stakeholders to have direct voice in oversight of the zone, thereby empowering local community members as official, ongoing partners in the effort.

#### **Are Innovation Zone schools still part of DPS?**

- Yes, Innovation Zone schools remain district schools and teachers and principals remain district employees. While DPS delegates significant responsibility to Innovation Zones and has made it clear that they want to support reasonable decisions by Innovation Zones, DPS has final say about staffing decisions and other important school policies.

#### **Are Innovation Zone schools charter schools? Are they privatized?**

- No, Innovation Zone schools are not charter schools and remain in the district
- Innovation Zone boards operate in many ways like a public body (for example, they have to meet in open meetings). They are also directly accountable to the DPS Board.

#### **What is the role of an Innovation Zone organization/board?**

- All Innovation Zone organizations are community-based nonprofit organizations
- Board members are unpaid
- Innovation Zone boards include community members and public officials. For example, the board of the Luminary Learning Network Innovation Zone includes an elected DPS board member, a representative appointed by the DPS superintendent, and two school principals and community members.

#### **How does funding work? Are there financial differences?**

Innovation Zone schools will have the ability to opt out of some centralized district services. The money the school would have paid for those services is instead available to the school to buy other services or hire more staff members, meaning that they have more control over their budgets allowing them to spend money and resources most needed by students

- Does an Innovation Zone nonprofit take resources away from schools?
  - All board members of an Innovation Zone organization are unpaid, and the organization is a nonprofit so nobody is making a profit. All funding goes directly to schools and then a portion may be used for Zone staff to operate the Zone, much in the same way that schools outside the Zone pay for instructional superintendents. No money is kept or made by the Zone.
  - An Innovation Zone nonprofit may have one or more employees to do work to support all (or some) of the schools in the Zone.
  - An Innovation Zone nonprofit may also consult with schools in its zone and decide to collaborate on services such as professional development for teachers or principals
- How does an Innovation Zone affect other DPS schools financially?
  - Innovation Zone schools receive only funding for students at their schools, so they are not taking away funds from other schools
  - In addition, Innovation Zones contribute financially to key districtwide priorities even if they might not benefit the Innovation Zones directly (high school sports, for example, in the case of the Luminary Learning Network) – it is important to be a good citizen of Denver Public Schools

#### **Are Innovation Zones privatizing public education?**

- No, Innovation Zones are not privatizing public education. Innovation Zone schools remain part of the district, and are ultimately accountable to the DPS superintendent and elected school board
- Innovation Zone nonprofits meet openly and share information about their decisions
- Innovation Zone schools care deeply about the success of the district and want to create strong schools that serve students well and demonstrate the power of a great DPS school

#### How would enrollment work at Innovation Zone schools?

- Zone schools would follow DPS enrollment practices. DPS continues to manage general enrollment for all Zone schools

#### Who would be the employer of staff members at Zone schools?

- DPS continues to be the employer of teachers, principals, and other staff members at Zone schools. Network/shared staff are employed by the nonprofit.

#### Who would the Zone board be accountable to?

- The Zone board would be accountable to both the local district and to the state education department

#### **More information from the DPS issued Zone Request For Proposals:**

##### **Requirements for Innovation Zones and Associated Schools**

While I-zones are in part designed to increase the amount of flexibility available to schools, there are key areas where the District will maintain final decision-making rights for all schools; there may be additional areas identified that are unique for particular schools/I-zones. These areas are generally designed to ensure equity for all schools and students across the system, regardless of governance type; the list below is non-exhaustive and will continue to be updated.

- **Enrollment Practices:** All schools must participate in District School Choice and engage in equitable enrollment practices that apply across the family of schools.
- **Special Education:** The District maintains its LEA status for schools in I-zones and thereby maintains the legal liability for related issues. Given this, the District will be responsible for ultimate decisions regarding special education compliance, including the placement of center programs.
- **ELA Programming:** The Consent Decree applies to schools in innovation zones just as it does traditional district-run schools. Therefore, the district will continue to play a role in ELA programming at I-zone schools, including program designation and teacher training.
- **District employees:** All I-zone school employees remain DPS employees; therefore, it is the responsibility of DPS to approve ultimate hiring and firing decisions and to collaborate with I-zone leadership while investigating and taking action on any claims of employee misconduct. DPS will generally approve hiring and termination recommendations from the I-zone and shall not unreasonably deny these recommendations.

**Items that will not be flexible:** Although the District seeks to give maximum flexibility to I-zones in order to accelerate student achievement, there are areas where, largely due to legal obligations or equity concerns, District processes must be followed. These include:

- Legal services
- ELA and SPED compliance
- School Choice and enrollment practices
- Final decision-making around HR issues
- State/federal mandated reporting
- Financial reporting
- Parent complaints and grievances

There are also areas where I-zones will have flexibility in their methods but must be in compliance with the basic requirements. For example, schools/I-zones may choose their own curriculum, but must ensure it is aligned with the Colorado Academic Standards.