

FAQ: Innovation Research Zones Program

Updated June 19, 2018

Q: What is the innovation research zones program?

A: The program creates the opportunity for one or more school districts, district schools, and/or charter schools to apply for a special “innovation research zone” status under Minnesota law. That status allows for some statutory flexibility, as well as a formally recognized status that can be helpful, both externally in arranging partnerships and internally in politically defending attempts at innovation.

Q: When was the innovation research zone legislation passed?

A: The legislation was passed during the 2017 legislative session. Education Evolving led a coalition that included Minnesota Association of School Administrators, the Association of Metropolitan School Districts, the Minnesota School Boards Association, and was supported by Schools for Equity in Education and EdAllies.

Importantly, the innovation research zones legislation is distinct from the Innovation Pilot Project legislation that the Minnesota legislature passed in 2012. This earlier legislation established five year innovation pilot projects, but did not provide districts with the opportunity to apply for statutory exemptions.

Q: What are the benefits of applying for an innovation research zone status?

A: Some of the benefits expressed by those who applied for and received the innovation research zone status are:

- Flexibility from state laws and rules.
- A formal framework for partnering with other school districts, local businesses, universities, and nonprofit organizations on school innovation.
- Political “cover” for innovation with school board and other stakeholders.

Q: What laws and rules can be waived within an innovation research zone?

A: There are five areas, listed in statute, where innovation research zones can ask for exemption:

- Any law or rule from which a district-created, site-governed school is exempt ([123B.045](#)).
- Any statute or rule from which the commissioner has exempted another district or charter school.
- Online learning program approval ([124D.095](#), subdivision 7), but only if the school district or charter school offers a course or program online combined with direct access to a teacher for a portion of that course or program.
- Restrictions on extended time revenue ([126C.10](#), subdivision 2a) for a student who meets the eligible pupil criteria as defined under MN Statute [124D.68](#), subdivision 2.



- Any required hours of instruction in any class or subject area for a student who is meeting all competencies consistent with the graduation standards described in the innovation zone plan.

Q: How many innovation research zones can the commissioner approve?

A: The commissioner can approve up to six innovation research zones—three in the seven-county metropolitan area and three in greater Minnesota. EE will be working to raise this cap in future legislative sessions (see below for more information).

Q: How many innovation research zones are currently approved?

A: In spring 2017, the commissioner approved six innovation research zones for the 2018-2019 academic year. However, one of the seven-county metro applicants declined the status. This created one opening for an innovation research zone for the seven-county metro area.

Q: What are the currently approved innovation research zones?

A: The five remaining approved innovation research zones, as of June 2018, are:

- Bloomington Public Schools (Metro)
- TriDistrict: Inver Grove Heights, South St. Paul and West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan School Districts (Metro)
- Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton School District, St. James Public Schools, Fairmont Area Schools, Waseca Public Schools, St. Peter Public Schools, Sleepy Eye Public Schools, Tri City United, and Granada Huntley East Chain (Greater MN)
- Montevideo-Benson (Greater MN)
- Norman County West (Greater MN)

Q: Can I apply for innovation research zone status right now? What is the application deadline and notification date?

A: Yes, *there is currently one slot available* for a metro area innovation research zone. In response to feedback from multiple stakeholders, MDE will be editing the application and process for the 2018-19 academic year. MDE expects to open the application in early fall 2018. EE will be working with MDE and will provide updates as they come up.

Q: What has to be included in the innovation zone application?

A: The innovation research zone application must include the following information:

- *Application Information:* The participating district(s), charter school(s), and any partnership organizations (including nonprofits, businesses, or governmental units).
- *Program Information:* Brief summaries of the proposed innovation hypothesis, how the innovation zone will implement their innovation, and how they will research and evaluate the effectiveness of the innovation. The application also asks how their innovation zone will align with the World's Best Workforce and what emerging practices they will use.
- *Exemptions:* Which allowable exemptions to Minnesota Statute or Rule they are seeking.



- *Instructional Staff:* How the plan was developed in concert with the school's instructional staff, how they will be impacted, as well as how the results will be disseminated.

Q: What is the process for deciding which applications will be accepted for innovative zone status?

A: The legislation created an Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel, which reviews submitted innovation zone plans and recommends them for approval to the commissioner of education. The commissioner, however, has final decision-making authority on plan approval.

Q: Who is on the Innovation Research Zone Advisory Panel?

A: The panel is comprised of the following members:

- Denise Dittrich, MN School Board Association
- David Adney, MN Association of Secondary Principals
- Brad Gustafson, MN Association of Elementary Principals
- Deb Henton, MN Association of School Administrators
- Eugene Piccolo, MN Association of Charter Schools
- Sara Gjerdrum, Education Minnesota
- Krissy Wright, Educators for Excellence
- Thomas Sanford, Office of Higher Education
- Dave Heistad (Bloomington) and Kim Gibbons (CAREI) will be the evaluators

Q: What if my application is rejected?

A: Rejected applicants can re-submit their plan after the innovation zone partnership has modified their plan to meet each of the objections.

Q: What does EE plan on doing to improve the legislation during the 2019 legislative session?

A: For the 2019 legislative session, EE will be working with their Student-Centered Learning Policy Advisory Council, other organizations, and legislators to raise or remove the current cap and to add exemptions, which will be informed by stakeholders.

More Information:

- The innovation zone application can be found at: <http://bit.ly/IZapplication>
- Instructions for the application and additional background information can be found at: <http://bit.ly/IZinstructions>
- A detailed summary of the contents of the law can be found at: <http://bit.ly/IZlegislation>
- With further questions contact Krista Kaput at krista@educationevolving.org