

COMMENTARY

Unleashing Locally Driven Innovation

By Ken Kay

Last summer, as I was winding down eight years as president of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, I went around the country and met with 30 district superintendents. I asked each one a simple question: What could I do to help support their efforts to lead 21st-century districts?



We came up with the idea of creating a professional learning community of superintendents and district leaders committed to 21st-century education and the concept of the 4C's: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. A few of us thought the idea of creating a community of practice to support the transformation initiatives of local district superintendents was a great one, so in January of this year we launched **EdLeader21**, a national think tank for superintendents.

I came away from those discussions with one additional perception: *None* of those superintendents felt that federal or state policy was helping their efforts to innovate. This perception was reinforced last spring when I participated in *Education Week's* "**Innovation InSight**" events in New York and Chicago. When I asked about 200 practitioners whether state policy was supporting their efforts to innovate, not one person raised a hand. When I asked if federal policy was supporting their efforts to innovate, only one person raised her hand.

We have a huge disconnect in this country: State and federal policymakers think they are innovating, but they are not partnering with or supporting the efforts of the most innovative districts in our country.

I have encountered dozens of leaders who are driving 21st-century education initiatives in their districts. They are focused on the 4C's and other important 21st-century outcomes, including global competence, financial literacy, and self-direction. They are using dynamic implementation strategies such as understanding by design, curriculum mapping, professional learning communities, project-based learning, and innovative rubrics and assessments to implement these outcomes in their districts. Many of these initiatives have been created in partnership with local business leaders who have specifically communicated the learning outcomes they believe are essential for the 21st-century workforce. To this end, many large urban districts are placing innovation zones within their districts to model promising practices. The zones are focusing on key areas such as college and career readiness and digital literacy.

These locally driven practices are exciting and offer our best hope of bringing innovation to American education. And yet, governmental entities do not seem capable of truly nurturing these efforts. Often, state and federal policies stand in the way of these initiatives, rather than encouraging them.

Here are a few suggestions for how states and the federal government can be supportive:

- States can help drive local innovation. Every state education commissioner could convene meetings with his or her state's most innovative districts and create education innovation summits to gain insight from their most forward-thinking practitioners. This may seem like a small step, but these innovators are often

Commentary Collection: K-12 Innovation

[Unleashing Locally Driven Innovation](#)

[The Video Game-Learning Link](#)

[A 'Split Screen' Strategy for Innovation](#)

[Why We Need to Foster Innovation](#)

not included in state-level deliberations. Instead, they should be embraced and showcased, and policies should be constructed to enhance their ability to innovate. Kentucky has already convened two innovation summits and created the position of director of innovation within the state department of education. Every state should consider following its lead.

- States should establish innovation zones in which best practices are encouraged and cultivated. These could be five- to 10-year programs in which districts are given the latitude for implementation with waivers of potentially stifling state policies. New Hampshire has passed legislation that encourages competency-based models. Kentucky has passed waivers enabling districts to institute move-on-when-ready programs as well as diplomas based on performance and mastery. Five innovative districts in Virginia have proposed a waiver strategy in their state, but have met substantial resistance. This is unfortunate, as these districts are attempting to make real breakthroughs in student achievement.
- Finally, states should encourage innovation in the specific area of college and career readiness. Many of us are excited by the potential of the common-core standards to bring much-needed rigor to K-12 education. In particular, the common core's focus on critical thinking and communication skills should help advance these competencies. But what about collaboration, creativity, global competence, financial literacy, and self-direction skills? Many employers consider these skills essential for career readiness. Local districts must have the flexibility to complement the common standards with their own full definition of college- and career-ready students.

This is essential at a time when the definitions of college- and career-ready are and will continue to be fluid globally. For example, the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, is adding financial literacy and dynamic problem-solving to its exam in 2012 and collaborative problem-solving by 2015. These developments suggest that the definition of college- and career-ready should be open-ended, with room for local adaptation. These variances will permit our country, as a whole, to innovate and create approaches that could become more widespread with time.

This local district flexibility can and should be reinforced by federal policy. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act should be amended to specifically include 21st-century learning outcomes and college- and career-readiness initiatives as acceptable uses by states and districts. Fortunately, bipartisan federal legislation to this effect was recently introduced in the Senate with the **21st Century Readiness Act** by Sens. Kay Hagan, D-N.C., and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine; and in the House by Reps. Tom Petri, R-Wis., and Dave Loebsack, D-Iowa. This legislation deserves strong bipartisan support and enactment.

The president has offered helpful leadership in repeatedly pointing out the importance of critical thinking, creativity, and entrepreneurship skills. The U.S. Department of Education should build these outcomes into its signature programs. The department's current innovation initiatives place too little emphasis on many of the essential learning outcomes. The initiatives are too narrowly structured to foster the kinds of innovation many districts and schools need. More funding for research and development—including by the Institute of Education Sciences—should focus on the 21st-century learning outcomes that innovative districts are attempting to integrate into their curriculum.



—Bob Dahm

Local districts must embrace and steer the vision. These steps are just the beginning salvos to push local policies in this direction and to shift the mind-set away from the idea that innovation can be mandated or imposed.

Today, we are at the beginning of a 10- to 20-year period in which countries will be working on the best ways to teach and assess the content and skills that will produce 21st-century citizens and workers. In the past, the United States had a competitive advantage with districts that excelled. In the past 10 years, we have saddled these very districts with burdens that make it difficult for them to now become leaders in 21st-century education. We need to recognize these great assets. Only then can we build our next generation of innovation around the energy and vision those districts represent. That's what locally driven innovation is about. And we need to unleash it.

Ken Kay is the chief executive officer of EdLeader21, a professional learning community for district and school leaders committed to 21st-century education. It is based in Tucson, Ariz.

Vol. 31, Issue 11, Pages 27,32