



MEMORANDUM

TO: House Education Policy Committee
FROM: Danyika Leonard, Policy Director, on behalf of Education Evolving
DATE: May 1, 2020
RE: Innovation Research Zone Bill (HF 4098)

Madame Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Danyika Leonard. I am the Policy Director for Education Evolving, a non-partisan education organization that works to advance student-centered learning for all students, by supporting teachers who are designing and leading schools, and by advocating for policy that allows for thoughtful innovation in schools across the state. We believe that policy must enable and support innovation, by creating space, removing barriers, and a climate of encouragement.

I am here to testify today in support of House File 4098. This bill will codify and strengthen the previous innovation research zone law, which Education Evolving advocated for in 2017, and allow schools, districts, and charter schools greater flexibility to use research to map uncharted waters and implement innovative education methods. We also support the new language that reduces time consuming bureaucracy by simplifying the IRZ approval process and granting exemptions concurrently with commissioner approval of Innovation Zone plans. This would address the frustration we heard from educators who applied for innovation zones under the 2017 law, where many exemptions they sought were left unapproved without a clear explanation.

Prior to the schools moving to distance learning, we heard a lot this session about problems getting in the way of serving all students in Minnesota. At a time when there's a lot of exasperation about not knowing how to solve these problems, it has become more apparent now than ever that we must begin to map uncharted waters. It's critical that we keep nurturing a culture of strategic innovation and exploration to probe, prototype and pilot different strategies. This bill provides important flexibility and state leadership for innovation approaches like personalized learning, competency-based education, anytime/anywhere learning, and other pedagogies.

Educators have clearly demonstrated during this pandemic that education must adapt and innovate to meet the evolving needs and demographics of our students, and that the authority to innovate cannot be limited to our crisis response. We've seen schools and districts move mountains by rapidly adjusting instruction in response to the COVID-19 distance learning executive order. We've seen schools work to prevent the further widening of the state's achievement gap down the line. I ask the committee to see innovation research zones as an opportunity to discover and replicate what works for Minnesota students now and in the future.

Thank you, Representative Sandell, Representative Mariani, Representative Edelson, Representative Christensen, and Representative Kunesh-Podein for your leadership and support on this bill, and your efforts toward creating policy that would benefit all students.