

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

### SCHOOLS OF INNOVATION IN ARKANSAS:

#### A CASE STUDY OF IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND EARLY IMPACTS



The Office of Innovation for Education (OIE) released the report: *Schools of Innovation in Arkansas: A Case Study of Implementation Challenges and Early Impacts*, in September 2019. Arkansas law describes a School of Innovation (SOI) as one that ‘transforms teaching and learning,’ and defines innovation as ‘a new or creative alternative to the existing instructional and administrative practices.’ SOI-designated schools are engaged in practices that are intended to improve academic performance and learning for all students” (p. 1, Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), 2017). As part of this study, focus groups were conducted with schools’ leaders, teachers, students, and students’ parents.

The purpose of the case study was two-fold. A primary purpose was to inform schools and districts interested in the SOI process as to the benefits of this work for students, staff, and community and to provide lessons learned from the field as to common challenges involved in this work. A secondary purpose was to guide the work of OIE and the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (formerly ADE) in providing support to SOIs and schools applying to become SOIs to increase their chances for success, and potentially, increase the positive impacts on students, staff, parents, and community.

As schools and districts plan, propose, and begin implementation of innovative practices, this executive summary draws attention to the following from the full report:

- A deeper understanding of how innovative transformations impact students in SOIs,
- The benefits of becoming a School of Innovation as perceived by different key stakeholders, and,
- Unintended consequences that students might be experiencing.

## **Study Design**

A purposive sample of five Schools of Innovation were selected for participation in the case study. The schools were chosen based on the results of a survey provided to all Schools of Innovation. The survey involved self-reporting of the use of innovative practices as well as questions designed to uncover the extent to which student-focused practices were employed and with what frequency. Using a semi-structured interview guide developed by OIE, two representatives of OIE conducted one-on-one face-to-face interviews with principals of the five schools chosen to participate in the case study. In addition, focus group discussions with teachers, parents, and students were held at each school.

## **How Innovative Transformations Impact Students**

Becoming a School of Innovation allowed the schools studied to initiate new strategies designed to help all students succeed. Across the student focus groups, the following five themes emerged:

- Student-Centered,
- Flexible Schedules,
- SOI as a Family,
- Instructional Approaches,
- And “Life After High School.

### ***Student-Centered***

Overwhelmingly, students in the sample of schools described teachers as aware of their educational and emotional needs, as effectively addressing student learning needs and helping students learn, and as open to and responsive to student feedback on their instruction. Students’ general sense was that teachers “tailored instruction” to meet students at their respective levels, at different learning rates, in relation to their specific needs, strengths, and weaknesses, and regardless of academic achievement levels. Students found teachers to be receptive and responsive, and open to student feedback about their instructional approach, curriculum, and classrooms, in varying degrees. Some students connected teachers’ ability and willingness to motivate students to the effectiveness of the learning environment.

### ***Flexible Schedules***

Flexible schedules was a stand-alone theme that emerged from prompted and unprompted student comments related to increased flexibility in school day schedules. Students enthusiastically noted their favorite thing about becoming an SOI was the flexible schedule. Students reflected that the schedule was less boring, gave them opportunities to make their own choices, taught them time management skills, allowed students to get to know their teachers better, allowed them to spend more time on assignments, and provided opportunities for credit recovery, tutoring, and/or club participation.

### ***SOI as a Family***

The theme SOI as a Family emerged powerfully from student comments. The students expressed how they felt the path to becoming a SOI helped create a family-like feel to their schools. This captured students’ sense that, at school, they are cared for and that every student has an adult who knows them and will help them, creating a caring, trusting, family-like environment for them. Students felt their schools were a safe, warm, caring, and welcoming environment in which everyone is connected and important.

### ***Instructional Approaches***

In the SOI schools studied, students described the changes in their instruction, noting that they were now more involved in hands-on learning, small group learning, the use of technology, and experienced increased autonomy. An interesting finding for schools interested in the SOI path is the described sense of autonomy students felt. Students at these schools felt heard by teachers and administrators and felt that their voice impacted what happens in their schools.

### ***“Life After High School.”***

The “Life After High School” theme arose from three codes: Higher Order Thinking Skills, Life Skills, and College and Career Readiness. This theme captured students’ perceptions of how well their schools and teachers were equipping them for success after their K-12 careers ended. The SOI students noted that their schools were flexible in preparing them to go directly into the workforce or to college, and felt that, overall, they were being prepared for “life after high school.”

### **Becoming a School of Innovation has Many Benefits According to Key Stakeholder Groups**

Principals, teachers, parents, and students all mentioned the benefits of becoming a School of Innovation. Teachers described becoming a School of Innovation as challenging but exciting. The benefits of being a school of innovation that emerged across stakeholder groups were the following:

- Being a School that “Works for All”
- Transforming Learning to Emphasize 21st Century Skills for the Future
- Increasing Ownership for Students and Their Learning, and
- Intentional Relationship Building.

### ***Being a school that “works for all”***

Students expressed appreciation for the increased one-on-one time with teachers, and the opportunity to get extra help, or move ahead. A consistent theme from teachers and principals was the use of blended learning to allow for learning that is more personalized for each student. A personalized pathway accommodates all learners. As one teacher said, “Our kids are so much more involved. I think the excitement in our school, that’s the biggest change. Kids are involved in their learning. They know where they are, they know where they need to go and we’re trying to give them a plan to get there.” Another teacher remarked, “I’ve seen the growth from them from the beginning to now and it’s unbelievable. Not comparing themselves to others—just comparing herself to herself—that’s proof to me---School of Innovation is the change that needs to happen.”

Teachers were also proud that they had “achieved thinking outside of the box and doing something progressive and new and innovative.” As one teacher stated, “[I]t’s cutting edge. Progressive and that benefits all students.” They discussed that their school “letter grade improved.” One teacher noted that the school grade was “arbitrary” to him, but instead, the greatest benefit he sees is, “Students taking responsibility and instilling hope for these students. [...] They’ve grown (*sic*) but they’re learning the responsibility.” This responsibility was tied to the fact that now, “They have [...] choice.” They also noted that “fun” was a successful outcome or change that resulted from adopting their innovations.

### ***Transforming Learning to Emphasize 21st Century Skills for the Future***

Principals and teachers expressed the belief that through their innovative strategies they are doing a better job equipping their students with 21st Century Skills, such as problem-solving and critical thinking, collaborating and coordinating with others, decision making, cognitive flexibility, and an orientation for service.

SOI students noted that their schools were flexible in preparing them to go directly into the workforce or to college. For example, students in one school noted that their school “bends to how you want to go, either college or straight into the workforce.” In a different school, students explained that the teachers, counselors, and leaders are “very focused on what we need and what classes we want to get put into and how we can best be (*sic*) prepared in high school to help for the job choices that we want in the future” and “They will find a way for all students.”

### ***Increasing Ownership for Students and Their Learning***

Principals and teachers in this study report that encouraging and allowing students to take ownership of their learning has resulted in the students being much more engaged in learning. When students understand exactly what they’re supposed to learn they are better able to monitor and adjust their work (Rimmele, & Prenzel, 2005). Students in one school studied reported in every class teachers have the learning goals, objectives, and the level you need to be in order to be considered proficient prominently displayed on the wall so you know when you walk into every class what is expected of you. Some teachers have created conditions for students to fully participate in assessing their needs and progress, voicing their goals and making regular decisions about their learning. This learner-centered approach aligns with research that underscores the importance of a sense of power and competence to the positive development of children and youth (USDHHS, 2003).

### **Unintended Consequences**

While the feedback from the student focus groups was mostly positive, students surfaced unintended consequences around autonomy and access to technology. While autonomy or student choice was generally discussed as a positive thing across the various student groups, some students noted the downside of students making poor choices for their flexible course choices. For example, “There will be students who are failing a class and they’ll need to go to that class, but they’ll schedule themselves somewhere else instead of being in the class that they need help with.” Another student added, “I do like the self-scheduling, but [...] there are a lot of students that miss opportunities to get some help because they just wanted to go somewhere else.”

Overall, students at various schools seemed to have several issues related to the increased use of technology at their schools. For example, one student shared, “There’s a kid in my first period...We had a PowerPoint due for this week. [...] He didn’t have WiFi at home and the only time he could work on it was at school, but we don’t have computers for him to use all the time. He would have to do it on his phone. [...] when you do it on the phone, it looks different when you pull it up on the computer. It’s just a very big mess.” Another student added “some students don’t have phones,” while one student shared that the computers students do occasionally have access to “run slower than Christmas and don’t really work at all.” These computer limitations make it difficult for some students to access and complete assignments.

## **Advice and Closing**

Based on the study, schools considering the path of SOI should (1) include stakeholders from the beginning and (2) go slow and monitor and adjust. The shifts to becoming a School of Innovation are fundamental, and teachers, as stakeholders, must be involved from the beginning and their values and beliefs must be brought to the table. Merely renaming traditional practices, without modifying basic beliefs about the practices themselves and the supporting methods, will not significantly alter the nature or quality of a learning environment (Casey, 2018). Likewise, simply requiring teachers to “buy-in” to an idea after it has already been developed instead of including them from the beginning of the process to instill “ownership” may lead to teachers who are less than enthusiastic about the process.

Teachers, along with other key stakeholders, including students and parents, play an important role in the implementation of educational innovations and should be involved in planning innovative changes from the beginning. Taking ownership of change will result in more lasting change and allowing for continual refinement is a key aspect of the change process. Lasting change, according to these five schools, is part of the process of becoming a School of innovation. As one teacher described, “It’s a process. It’s not just that we made this change and now we stop.”

## **Learn More**

The OIE report, *A Case Study of Five Public Schools in Arkansas That are in the Early Implementation Stages of Becoming a School of Innovation*, is a guide for future innovative schools in the state and may serve as a roadmap to the organizations supporting them.

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