MEETING OBJECTIVES

**DISCUSS** the history and context of Innovation Status in the Denver Public Schools and **SHARE** initial learnings about and from Innovation Status; and

**LEARN** directly from Innovation Leaders; and

**GET FEEDBACK** regarding next steps for proposed areas of additional learning.
INNOVATION STATUS: WHAT IS IT, AND WHAT IS THE THEORY OF ACTION?
Innovation Status and Innovation Zones are rooted in the 2008 Colorado Innovation Schools Act.

In 2008 and to this day, Innovation Status is driven primarily by passionate educators.

There are 54 Innovation Schools in Denver Public Schools in SY 2018-2019.

A school with Innovation Status must have a comprehensive school plan, with the areas for which they seek autonomy outlined in waivers.

Because of the state law, their unique plans, and the authorization process Innovation Schools go through, conversation about Innovation Status is related to, but different from, conversation about DPS-wide flexibility/autonomy.

See the attached two-page overview for more context about Innovation Status.
WHAT IS FLEXIBLE, WHAT IS NOT?

There are some things that are flexible for Innovation Schools, and, very intentionally, there are some things that are not. *This list is not intended to be exhaustive.*

**Flexible:**

- School-level governance structure
- Aspects of Finance and Budgeting
- Aspects of HR (e.g., some processes for hiring, retaining and dismissing teachers)
- Educational program (e.g., textbooks, professional learning)
- Schedule and Calendar

**Among Things that are Not Flexible:**

- DPS Mission, Vision, and Values
- Special Education Requirements
- ELA Requirements
- Safety and Security
- DPS Discipline Policy
- Aspects of HR (e.g., innovation teachers and leaders are DPS Staff)
- Participation in and Requirements of School Choice
There have been several different theories of action regarding Innovation Status since its inception:

- In the very early years, there was a belief in autonomy for autonomy’s sake, based in statutory language that schools should receive the “**maximum degree of flexibility**” possible and thus be freed up from cumbersome aspects of district bureaucracies in order to improve outcomes for students.

- Innovation has been and continues to be viewed as a strategy to **attract and retain top talent**, as empowerment is a key lever for effective and meaningful leadership, which further reflects deep belief that effective leadership drives important outcomes for students (and the adults who serve students).

- About five years ago, the Portfolio Office shifted its authorizing practices to focus on the potential power of a **strategic plan that ensures alignment of leadership, staff and community** around a shared purpose and path toward improved outcomes for students.
**WHY DO SCHOOLS SEEK INNOVATION STATUS OR TO JOIN A ZONE?**

- **To improve outcomes for students**
  - To increase educator voice in important school decisions
  - To engage in substantive turnaround or school improvement
    - Goldrick, Valverde, Oakland, DCIS at Ford, Manual
  - To create and implement innovative systems different from the District
    - Denver Green School, Dr. MLK Early College
  - To codify a school vision and the systems behind it
    - Beach Court, Merrill
  - Zone-Specific: To collaborate with school-selected peers with common interest(s)
    - Luminary Learning Network, Northeast Denver Innovation Zone, Beacon Schools Network
WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR

1. Academic Data
2. How the District has Changed
3. What We Are Hearing from Innovation Leaders
INNOVATION SECTOR ACADEMIC DATA

Like charter and district-managed schools, Innovation Schools showed greater learning gains in math than the state (for Innovation Schools, at a statistically significant level two of three years). From CREDO
INNOVATION SECTOR ACADEMIC DATA

Like charter and district-managed schools, Innovation Schools showed greater learning gains in reading than the state (for innovation Schools, at a statistically significant level two of three years).
Looking at subgroups, the Innovation Sector saw more growth - and at in a statistically significant way - for students in special education in reading than district-managed schools - but less in math.
INNOVATION SECTOR ACADEMIC DATA

Looking at subgroups, the Innovation Sector saw growth - though not in a statistically significant way - for Black students, similar to the district-managed sector.

NOTE: See full CREDO report for more detail
## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM INNOVATION SCHOOLS?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Innovation Schools...</th>
<th>The District Scaled This By....</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developed comprehensive school plans (with a vision and systems to support it) as part of their Innovation application</td>
<td>Using comprehensive school planning in the Tiered Support process, even if the school isn’t applying for Innovation Status</td>
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<td>Started writing unique job descriptions for staff and teachers to take hybrid roles</td>
<td>Developing Teacher Leadership and Collaboration (TLC) across District schools</td>
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<td>Consistently requested flexibility in curriculum, assessment and professional learning</td>
<td>Developing Universal Flexibilities, which allow a great degree in flexibility in curriculum, aligned professional learning, and assessment and to all District schools</td>
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<td>Sought waivers to hire staff earlier in year</td>
<td>Moved the opening of staff applications to November 1</td>
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<td>Emphasized the role of the school leader in working with staff and customizing the school to students and the community</td>
<td>Empowering leaders with meaningful decision-making and feedback across District schools</td>
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*When I started teaching at a charter school 15 years ago, in order to have flexibilities, you had to be a charter. [DPS did not have flexibility for] changes to any large structures. Now, a school is not having to be a charter school, still be District-run, but have flexibility.*

-Innovation Leader
LEARNING 1: SCHOOL PLANNING AND ADULT INVESTMENT IN THE PLAN REALLY DO MATTER.

- The application to become an Innovation School requires a thorough planning and visioning process. Across our interviews, leaders spoke to the value of having to create a comprehensive vision and plan for the systems to support it.

- Innovation Status is a highly democratic investment tool. It is the only school planning tool that requires a literal consent process of teachers, administrators, and community.

- Because Innovation Schools go through periodic renewal, the system has reflection and revision built in to the process.

_Innovation vision is a huge part of what makes Innovation Schools successful...some plans are incredibly thoughtful._ -DPS Instructional Superintendent

_Innovation Status isn’t a substitute for...a solid school design. The bottom line is that the authorizing and planning pieces are critical to improving results of Innovation Schools._ -Advocate
LEARNING 2: THERE ARE COMMON FLEXIBILITIES INNOVATION SCHOOLS SEEK AND BARRIERS TO TAKING THEM TO SCALE.

There are several common flexibilities across schools with Innovation Status:

- Calendar and schedule flexibility - noted by school leaders as especially valuable for staff development.
- HR flexibilities - to more nimbly hire, train, and retain effective teachers and remove ineffective teachers.
- Greater budget autonomy, including budgeting on actuals.
- Unique roles and compensation flexibilities - lauded as particularly helpful in hiring excellent people for unique educational programs.

BUT, taking these to scale for 150+ schools can present some real financial and logistical barriers.
LEARNING 3: “THE SYSTEM” HAS TO EVOLVE WHEN THERE IS GREATER SCHOOL-LEVEL FLEXIBILITY. IN SOME WAYS IT HAS, IN OTHERS IT HASN’T.

- Central office supports have had to change in response to Innovation Schools and their plans. In some ways, they really have (see slide 13).
- And, in other ways, supports haven’t adapted; we must acknowledge that Innovation Schools and iZones are still encountering real barriers to Plan implementation.

*Innovation Status has pushed DPS in necessary ways but not sufficient ways.* -Central Office Leader

*If people are feeling Innovation is stagnant it’s because we’re being met with so much resistance; we’re not always able to think outside the box because the box is actively pushing back. Leaders spend so much time fighting for their waivers, they’re not actually able innovate.* -iZone Leader
LEARNING 4: THROUGH ZONES, INNOVATION SCHOOLS SOMETIMES FORM A SMALLER ORGANIZATION WITHIN THE BIG ORGANIZATION TO SEEK THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS.

- Innovation Zones allow Innovation schools to have a larger hand in forming their learning community.

- Innovation Schools tended to be networked together for several years; over the last few years, they have been blended into district-run networks, each with a different concentration of Innovation Schools.

- Innovation Zones offer a smaller community of like-minded peers within the larger organization.

- Innovation Schools value DPS supports and being part of the DPS Family of Schools, AND there are inefficiencies of scale, including lack of differentiation and personalization.

- Innovation Schools not part of iZones still use their status to advocate for greater personalized support within the larger system.

*We want to be part of the Family [of Schools].* -iZone Leader

*Because our Zone is small* we can go deeper with DEI work and other staff development. *The thoughtful PD that’s happening is profound…* -iZone Leader
LEARNING 5: PARTS OF THE BROADER NARRATIVE DON'T ALWAYS FIT WITH LEADERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE.

- Perception that Innovation Leaders can do whatever they want, while they feel they often can’t enact their basic waivers.
- Innovation Sector Leaders worry that they are going to experience more mandates and fewer meaningful autonomies in our changing environment.
- Innovation Leaders are feeling more push back on their plans and plan development processes than they have before, from multiple spaces.
- There are strong beliefs and assumptions about why leaders seek Innovation Status, but they are not always correct (e.g., “it’s all about money”).
- In general, Innovation Leaders want to tell their story, to engage in proactive and collaborative planning while maintaining their status, AND are trying to balance the time spent on those responsibilities with the important role of focusing on day-to-day teaching and learning.

Leaders have had push back [regarding Innovation], and I think that could have been diminished if there was clearer communication from the District and Board about what it means to be Innovation...that we are using this plan to help kids. -Innovation School Leader
LEARNING 6: WHILE INNOVATION STATUS HAS SUPPORTED IMPROVEMENTS, IT ISN’T A “MAGIC WAND.”

Innovation Status has been more effective in some schools than in others. We have hypotheses about contextual factors that likely contribute to successes:

- Continued focus by school leadership teams on the Innovation Plan as a strategic plan for the school, inside and through other DPS or State planning processes, likely matters.

- A school supervisor’s understanding of, focus on and support for the identified strategies of the Innovation Plan likely matters.

- Shifting expectations or conditions in the ecosystem can interrupt a school team’s ability to execute plan elements.

An innovation plan can also be a supportive tool in a leadership transition (whether a school leader, school supervisor, teacher leader, or other key leader), as a tool to share the intended design and aiding intentional succession planning. At the same time, transitions like this may also undercut plan implementation.

_There is no way I could have turned this school around if I didn’t have the Innovation Plan. I wouldn’t go to work at a DPS school that is not an Innovation School now._ -Innovation School Leader
LEARNING 7: WE ARE JUST NOW SETTING UP THE SYSTEMS TO MORE CONSISTENTLY LEARN FROM THE SECTOR AND NEED TO DO MORE.

- DPS has learned from Innovation Status largely reactively, as opposed to proactively.

- We need to shift the statutorily required renewal process to maximize systems learning. Historically, we’ve focused exclusively on school-level learnings, rather than sector-wide and whole-district learning.

- We are developing an Innovation Council, which could be a natural tool to do more intentional learning with the sector.

- The new DPS Impact Team could also be a natural leader in supporting the work of identifying and codifying our learnings.

We want to share, and we want to be a lab…You develop new ideas and experiment with new ideas so that if you are successful, others can walk away with them as well. -Innovation School leader

We are quick to say innovation is the answer or innovation is not working, but we need to better clarify what are we trying to solve, so then innovation can be more clearly monitored and learned from. -Innovation School Leader
HEAR FROM THE FIELD
PANELISTS

A deep thank you and welcome to:

- Tomi Amos, Executive Director, Northeast Denver Innovation Zone
- Joe Amundsen, Director of School Improvement
- Ginger Conroy, Innovation School Leader, DCIS at Ford
- Frank Coyne, Lead Partner, Denver Green School
- Kimberly Grayson, Innovation School Leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Early College
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
- **Promising Practices** - What additional systems and structures can DPS implement to ensure promising practices in Innovation Schools are known and considered for scaling?

- **Context May Matter** - Under what contexts is Innovation Status more successful/meaningful, and how?

- **Barriers** - What common barriers do Innovation Schools face in implementing their plans? How can these barriers be lifted? Or, are barriers indicative of areas where flexibility should potentially be reduced?

- **Deeper Understanding of Teacher Narratives** - What are the teacher narratives at Innovation Schools? How do they vary, and under what contexts?

Given competing priorities for the Board and the District at this juncture and what you’ve heard from these Innovation Leaders tonight:

1) Are these possible areas of additional learning the right ones? What would you add or differently contextualize?

2) If you had to pick one focus area, given competing demands, which would you select?
- Reviewed research and data from third parties, including CREDO, A+ Colorado and the Rose Family Foundation.

- Reviewed previous theories of action, existing Innovation Plans, and data collected at Innovation renewal.

- Interviewed 17+ leaders and teachers in Innovation Schools, Central Office, and the DPS Board.