Districts of Innovation Report – Taylor County

Cohort I - 2nd Monitoring Year
2015-16 School Year

Background

The 2015-16 school year was the third year of implementation for the first cohort of Districts of Innovation (DOI), and the second year for the second cohort. The Taylor County monitoring visit took place on April 28th. The official monitoring visit to Taylor County involved site visits to schools and discussions with staff, as well as meetings with the leadership team and designated point of contact. Additional informal site visits were made in Taylor County during the 2015-16 school year.

A 3-part rubric was developed for the monitoring process. Parts 1 and 2 referred specifically to requirements listed in the regulation and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by each DOI. Part 3 was tailored to the individual innovation plan of each district.

Monitoring was discussed with participating districts during the 2013 DOI retreat and again at the fall 2014 retreat. Additional discussions pertaining to monitoring were held individually between the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), Division of Innovation staff and each DOI leadership team. Districts were asked for input regarding additional measures they felt would provide evidence of the effects of the innovation plan.

Both Cohort I and Cohort II districts were asked to provide updated reports to the KDE staff by October 31, 2015 using the 3 rubrics.

Executive Summary

Taylor County's strength as a District of Innovation lies in the many opportunities it has designed to ensure all students have access to multiple means of learning and succeeding in school. This approach includes traditional classroom settings, virtual learning, self-paced learning, multiple dual credit and accelerated learning opportunities and satellite CTE courses. A student acceleration policy allows students to learn based on their intellectual ability and not their chronological age.

The innovation plan is built around a wagon wheel approach with six spokes representing the following components: traditional learning environment, self-paced knowledge acquisition, project-based learning, peer lead learning, virtual school, and the Cardinal Academy. Students, teachers and parents work together to place the student in the best environment for them. The average daily attendance has increased as more students are engaged in school and eager to be part of the school experience because of the personalized, multi-faceted approach. Taylor County is well on its way to becoming the first truly mastery-based district in the state.

New facilities to be completed for 2016-17 exemplify the "wagon wheel" approach. Upon completion, a new primary school will be opened, the existing middle school will house grades 3-5 and the existing high school will house grades 6-8. These buildings will be connected by a hub that allows students to move as needed from school to school.

A new "Innovations High School" is being constructed in close proximity to the main campus and students will be bused to the high school to participate in additional learning opportunities.

Multiple student-led enterprises are evident at the high school, some of which have led to employment in the community. CTE pathways include culinary arts, media arts and aviation. The health science instructor teaches a program at Taylor County High School that is a satellite program of the Green County Area Technology Center (ATC). Students do not need to travel to the ATC to take the course and earn credit for their work.

The Cardinal Academy was established for students identified as gifted and talented and provides opportunities for students at middle and high school to go beyond the traditional school experience. Students in the middle school Cardinal Academy meet for one class period daily and utilize a self-paced online program called Odysseyware to complete middle and high school courses. A minimum of six off campus enrichment opportunities are scheduled throughout the year. Students who meet the Cardinal Academy criteria in high school have non-traditional learning opportunities both on and off campus. There is a concern for being able to locate students who are members of the Cardinal Academy if there was to be a lockdown as the students are not required to report to any teacher at any time during the day. The district may want to develop a check-in policy to verify that each student can be located.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are in place, and teachers have time to collaborate and plan on early release Fridays each week. However, the PLC's do not show diversity with inclusion of CTE with a variety of academic content teachers meeting together.

An additional concern is the equity of the many courses offered. Specifically, there is question as to whether the education provided in the online courses equal to the Cardinal Academy or the traditional classroom learning and how mastery equated to the caliber of learning occurring in all options.

Topic: Incorporation

The district has incorporated the approved DOI plan into the comprehensive district improvement plan (CDIP) and comprehensive school improvement plans (CSIPs) of participating schools or has replaced the CDIP/CSIPs with the DOI plan, pursuant to 701 KAR 5:140(4)(1).

Topic: Leadership Team

The district has established a district leadership team that meets monthly. The district reports that all members of the leadership team are involved in the planning and implementation of activities to move the innovation plan forward. The district has appointed Charles Higdon as the point of contact.

Topic: Student Data Reporting per 701 KAR 5:140

Required documentation of student demographic data and student progress toward graduation and college and career readiness was provided through the School Report Card links.

Topic: Certified and Classified Staff

Pursuant to 701 KAR 5:140(4)(d), the district provided a link to a list of certified teachers participating in the plan. All teachers within the district participate on some level in the innovation plan. The district has three main programs incorporated into the innovation plan: The Cardinal Academy, STARS Program and Virtual Program.

Seven faculty members serve in the role of advisors to Cardinal Academy students in a non-traditional setting. Virtual Academy faculty also serve in non-traditional roles as facilitators to online learning. Both the Cardinal Academy and Virtual Academy offer extended learning opportunities. The Virtual Academy offers opportunities for credit recovery as well as accelerated learning. However, information on the qualifications of instructors in these two programs was inadequate.

Other extended learning opportunities include a modified work-study program for those students on the verge of becoming dropouts. Personalized schedules are designed for these students that enable them to complete high school and thus the district reports a 0% dropout rate.

Staff Comment

KDE recommends that the district provide additional narrative for the 2015-16 school year highlighting specific teachers who have created unique learning opportunities for students as part of the innovation plan. Additional information was also requested about the qualifications of the instructors in the Cardinal Academy, and describe what measurable outcomes are being used to document student progress. This information has not been provided.

Topic: Extended Learning Opportunities

The district innovation plan is heavily reliant on extended and expanded opportunities for students. However, no measurable outcomes are tracked.

Staff Comment

KDE recommends that the district establish specific measurable outcomes for each of its wagon wheel options in order to support these innovative approaches. Documentation is lacking in content areas that can be linked to the unique DOI approach. The district reports using MAP and other methods of assessment yet has made no direct connection between the DOI plan and student progress.

Waiver Requests

Waiver of funding based on average daily attendance funding and state mandated test taking requirements so students can take the tests upon completion of the course or grade. KRS 157.360(2) and KRS 158.6453.

The district's "Cardinal Academy" allows students to create their own learning schedule. The Virtual Academy provides another option for students to learn at their own pace. Students take tests when they are ready and move on to the next level when they can demonstrate mastery of the standards.

Waiver of KEES funding statute in order to use funds to pay for early college credit classes while students are still in high school. KRS 164.7874.

This waiver was denied, however, the district has moved forward using resources from the Race to the Top grant and has been able to assist a small number of students in covering the cost of postsecondary coursework.

Waiver of Education Professional Standards Board certification restrictions on subject areas so current teachers can teach additional subjects. KRS 161.048(2)(a-d).

The purpose of this waiver was to allow awarding of credit from certified professionals and allow teachers to provide instruction outside of their current content/grade level certifications. This waiver was denied and district did not pursue a remedy.

Waiver of class size restrictions for multi-age, self-paced classrooms, with individualized learning stations where students learn standards at their own pace. 702 KAR 3:190.

Students test with their original grade level, however performance-based students enrolled in high school courses do take the End of Course assessments, but their scores cannot "count" until they reach ninth grade. The district continues to modify and refine the multi-age, self-paced classrooms at all levels. There is some concern about students' maturity level when they enter college at a younger age.

Waiver of graduation requirements specific to subject matter. 701 KAR 3:305.

Students taking online courses are able to work at their own pace while also being able to work to earn money once they have completed required courses and are on track to graduate. A variety of pathways are available to Taylor County students to insure they graduate and can be college- and career-ready.

Staff Comments

KDE continues to recommend that the district make specific connections to professional development opportunities listed in the plan and indicate which have been used, add any new, and provide documentation that requirements specific to the innovation plan have been met.

Noteworthy

The STAR program utilizes high school students to tutor elementary students and serve as teacher aids/helpers.

Cardinal Academy services students who have demonstrated academic excellence and are deemed mature enough to set their own learning pattern.

Early release Fridays provide time for teachers to collaborate in their PLCs. District's next step is to invite community members to the PLCs to expand the knowledge sharing and resources.

Taylor County Schools was awarded the Digital Content and Curriculum Achievement Award from the Center for Digital Education in 2015.

Health science satellite program established in partnership with the Green County Area Technology Center provides students with onsite training at the high school without the need to travel to Green County.

Appendix

The monitoring team for Taylor County consisted of the following:
>David Cook, Director, Division of Innovation, KDE
>Beth Peterson, Branch Manager, Division of Innovation, KDE
>Kevin O'Hair, Division of Support and Research, KDE
>Dr. Linda Floyd, Office of Career and Technical Education, KDE
>Tara Rodriguez, Division of Student Success, KDE
>Marissa Hancock, Office of Career and Technical Education, KDE

Visits were made to the following schools:
>Taylor County Elementary School
>Taylor County Middle School
>Taylor County High School

Meetings were held with:
>Laura Benningfield, Principal, Taylor County High School
>Tony Jewell, Principal, Taylor County Middle School
>Donna Williams, Taylor County Elementary School
>Bryan Cook, Technology Director
>Tori Gatewood, Marketing Director
>Debbie Gumm, Gifted & Talented Coordinator
>Scott Parks, Special Ed Director
>Jessica McCubbin, Technology Integration Specialist
>Tony Davis, Board of Education Chair
>David Hall, Board Member
>Bob Clark, Board Member

Informal conversations occurred with teachers and students during school walk-throughs.

The district will submit their revised innovation plan no later than July 31, 2016 and will sign a new Memorandum of Understanding no later than September 1, 2016.