State Education R&D Landscape: Indiana

States have the opportunity to prioritize and build system-wide education R&D infrastructure that drives innovation and transforms experiences and outcomes for all learners. **This spotlight leverages the recommendations in [Seizing the Opportunity for State Education R&D: Findings and Recommendations for Action](#) to map the existing bright spots within Indiana to each recommendation and the opportunities for action.**

Indiana Overview:

Indiana has established a strong foundation for state education research and development (R&D) through its vision that explicitly prioritizes innovation and data-informed decision-making. The state demonstrates leadership commitment to innovation and provides extensive flexibility mechanisms that empower local communities to pursue contextual approaches to educational transformation. Indiana has built critical R&D infrastructure, complemented by public-facing performance dashboards that translate key learner characteristics into measurable outcomes.

Establish a state vision and goals, prioritizing innovation.

Articulating a vision for education creates a shared purpose and direction for systems transformation. While serving as an important signal of a state's support for student-centered learning and its commitment to local empowerment, a clear vision helps align programs, resources, roles, and initiatives. A public-facing research agenda with critical questions aligned to a state's strategic plan priorities can serve as a north star to guide R&D.

Indiana's Alignment

Indiana's vision and strategic priorities, "[Learner-Centered, Future-Focused Education](#)," emphasize the importance of collaboration with system-wide stakeholders, innovation, and data-informed decision making through three strategic priorities: (1) Student Learning & Opportunity, (2) Educator Talent, Quality, & Value, and (3) System-Alignment & Capacity. The state explicitly emphasizes "creating capacity and flexibility to drive effective learning-focused innovation," providing a strong foundation for system-wide R&D in

collaboration with educators, families, communities, and employers. Building on these priorities and engaging stakeholders across the state, the Indiana Department of Education identified a shared vision of the [five key characteristics](#) foundational for learners' lifelong success.

Opportunities for Action

- Create statutory definitions of "innovation" and "education R&D."
- Develop a public-facing research agenda that aligns with core strategic priorities and centers education R&D as an important mechanism for achieving state goals.

> *"Do you have a disruptive, transformational vision that inspires something worth studying? If not, we're just contributing to the best practices... You have to be honest about the risks that you're taking, because that's where you find your research questions."*
> - Ron Sandlin, Chief Innovation Officer at the Indiana Department of Education

Establish a dedicated office to oversee and drive state education R&D

States, whether through an education agency, a higher education institution, or an intermediary, can prioritize dedicated space and capacity for innovation to improve and reimagine education.

Indiana's Alignment

Indiana's [Secretary of Education and Higher Education Commissioner](#), [Dr. Katie Jenner](#), is committed to innovation. Indiana's approach of combining her role across K-12 and postsecondary, while maintaining position coherence in innovation across education sectors. Dr. Jenner's commitment to innovation is visible in the department organizational chart, across [key initiatives and their outcomes](#), and external-facing communications. Her executive cabinet includes a Chief Innovation Officer who oversees policy development and implementation in key areas such as school accountability, high school redesign and student pathways, and school support and transformation.

Although not established for system-wide R&D:

- The IN DOE's [Office of School Support and Transformation](#) is supporting R&D across the state through a first-of-its-kind competitive [Next-Generation School Improvement Grants](#) (SIG). Awardees of the grant, which are identified based on test results, receive an initial $300,000 planning grant, then $3 million over the next 3 years. Indiana's creative approach of block grants for transformation enables both strategic and contextualized innovation, entirely driven by the school district and the community. This program is currently serving 28 schools across 23 school corporations.

- The [Charter School Program (CSP) Quality Counts Grant](#) is a federally funded program that emphasizes the opening, expansion, or replication of high-quality charter schools. Indiana received the largest grant in the history of the program, $109 million, to help school and district leaders think strategically about risk-taking that builds capacity and drives innovation.

Opportunities for Action

- Devote FTEs, reporting under the CIO, for at least two research staff.
- Formalize partnerships with higher education institutions and other sector leaders in service of education R&D.
- Establish an advisory council with stakeholders across the state to 1) inform research and development priorities from a broader systems perspective, and 2) improve feedback loops.
- Establish a process to handle incoming research requests.
  - This process should elevate research aligned with the state's strategic priorities and community-level needs.
  - It should require applicants to address how their work will reach the field through user-friendly, actionable summaries that can inform changes in practice or policy.

"We have assigned a senior leader with the responsibilities to manage our R&D platform, and that platform connects our state priorities, our department priorities, which include rethinking high school with measurable outcomes, and very specific research questions. That last part is something we had never done in the past."
- Ron Sandlin, Chief Innovation Officer at the Indiana Department of Education

Empower local leaders to test evidence-based solutions and develop innovative models that improve learner experiences and inform systems transformation.

State leaders can consider ways to lift administrative burdens, smooth the path to innovation, and provide the conditions and resources schools and districts need to transform student learning.

Indiana's Alignment

Indiana provides robust flexibility mechanisms for education leaders and communities to innovate. This includes options such as innovation waivers, innovation programs (Innovation Network Schools or Coalition of Continuous Improvement School Districts), Home Rule (local control), and charters.

Innovative leaders are exploring how to leverage these options in creative ways for the development of innovative models:

- Purdue Polytechnic High School, a learner-centered charter school, provides personalized competency-based learning and real-world experiences.
- The Indiana Microschool Collaborative is leveraging charter autonomy combined with Indiana's innovation policy to establish a network of microschools across the state.
- As a result of the Next-Generation School Improvement Grant in Newcastle, business partnerships tripled from 50 to 150, expanding internships and community support for learners.
- Randolph Eastern School Corporation has been leading collaborative regional work around career and CTE pathways.

In part to create more freedom and flexibility for the state's teachers and incorporate learning outside of school buildings, Indiana has undertaken an effort to prioritize and streamline academic standards, reducing the total number of standards by a third. New standards are being phased in with a streamlined K-12 curriculum, a new statewide ILEARN test, and changes to the school accountability system to reflect more holistic indicators.

The new K-8 standards were presented in June 2024, with full implementation planned for the 2025-2026 school year. High school standards will be updated in the 2025-2026 school year. The new school accountability system, which includes the revival of A-F grading, will be implemented in the 2026-2027 school year.

The state's [redesigned graduation requirements](#), developed in collaboration with education stakeholders, increase flexibility and personalization for learners and expand the opportunities for real-world learning experiences.

Opportunities for Action

- Establish a statutory state-wide innovation network; consider incorporating leadership development covering innovation mindsets, change management, awareness of existing flexibilities, and design thinking.
- Recruit successful innovators as mentors.
- Provide more block grant flexibility for Charter School Program (CSP) grants, allowing schools to nimbly adapt funds to their needs.

> *"Indiana has always had a wide-open waiver to rules. Districts haven't applied because of 'caged bird syndrome.' There's a comfort with what people know. The fact that people had to get a waiver… doing something different is a risk. If you change policy, now it's the norm."*
> - Scott Bess, Indiana State Board of Education Member

Identify and build the needed capacity that impacts mindset and behavior change.

More attention must be paid to the human factors of systems change at every level—the knowledge, skills, and mindsets required for educators to lead, conduct, engage in, or even make better use of R&D.

Indiana's Alignment

Through its future-focused vision, extensive flexibilities that can be leveraged for innovation, and the bold leadership of State Superintendent Dr. Katie Jenner, Indiana has a strong foundation for signaling to education stakeholders across the state that innovation and evidence-based decision-making are both encouraged and critical to the future success of Indiana's youth and economy.

Indiana's five [key characteristics](#), foundational for learners' lifelong success, create a compass and a system-wide shared understanding of the values, trajectory, and education outcomes for learners.

Opportunities for Action

- Synthesize and report on grant impact and outcomes to inspire others with successful models and inform policy change.

Modernize state longitudinal data systems (SLDS)

Robust and reliable data across systems are the backbone of strong R&D.

Indiana's Alignment

Indiana has an established state longitudinal data system that connects data across the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, the Indiana Department of Education, the Department of Workforce Development, and the Family and Social Services Administration. A data request process makes the data accessible to the public.

The Graduates Prepared to Succeed (GPS) dashboard's five key characteristics are expanded indicators in the SLDS that capture a more holistic picture of a learner's journey and strengthen schools' abilities to document and share evidence of their impact. The Indiana GPS dashboard seeks to:

- Empower educators by providing a variety of essential data points to support continuous improvement of student learning across the K-12 continuum.
- Support families and community stakeholders by providing meaningful, relevant, and transparent information about school progress and performance, and
- Elevate the highest-performing schools as models of excellence, and identify other schools for additional support.

There are also additional dashboards that are driven by state longitudinal data, such as a college readiness dashboard.

Leverage tools, artificial intelligence, and technology platforms to support and enable education R&D efforts.

Research and data must be made more accessible and actionable to be utilized for either continuous improvement or rapid innovations

Indiana's Alignment

Indiana leverages online dashboards to communicate data:
- [Indiana Graduates Prepared to Succeed](#)
- [College Readiness Dashboard](#)
- [College Value Dashboard](#)

Build human capacity through partnerships, networks, and community engagement.

To be effective, R&D must directly engage the educators, students, families, and communities it aims to serve. As state leaders develop their priorities based on statewide challenges, they can engage with local leaders to build capacity and relationships among people doing the work.

Indiana's Alignment

Although the IN DOE has not established a formal innovation network, department leaders have prioritized community engagement to inform the future of learning in Indiana. Entities have been set up to leverage available flexibility and address local challenges.

- The [Indiana Microschool Collaborative](#) is established as a charter school network whose mission is to "create and support innovative, personalized microschools that transform education and expand meaningful school choice across Indiana."
- The [Indiana Charter Innovation Center](#) is actively trying to match existing charter schools with leaders who are ready to innovate.

Provide technical support for R&D activities and continuous improvement.

Even those who are predisposed to change need support to see it through. Real, sustained change requires dedicated resources to access research partners, professional learning, and capacity that schools and districts don't have in-house for design and implementation

Indiana's Alignment

The Next-Generation School Improvement Grant Program includes a vetting process for technical support providers. Grantees select the approved provider best aligned with both their vision and context from the list and utilize their grant funds for technical support.

Opportunities for Action

- Invest resources in providing technical support for innovative leaders in traditional public school environments.