# TEA Time: An Introduction to Math Innovation Zones – November 2018

**Narrator:** Welcome to TEA Time, a podcast about all things public education from the Texas Education Agency.

**Host:** Welcome to another edition of TEA Time. Today, we're visiting with Andrew Hodge, the director of math innovation zones for the Texas Education Agency. Andrew, thanks for joining us today.

**TEA Director of Math Innovation Zones Andrew Hodge:** Great to be here, Gene.

**Host:** I think we need to start with just explaining exactly what is a math innovation zone. Can you give us a brief description?

**Hodge:** Sure. I think it really helps to start with the problem that you see in a lot of classrooms today. I think back to my own experience teaching Algebra II. You have – I had maybe 25 students in my classroom. I had students that were actually above grade level. I had quite a few students that were on grade level. But then I had a lot of students that were maybe three, four, five years behind grade level. But the goal is still the same regardless of where those students come in, it is take them where they need to be in order to be on a path for college, career, military readiness. And when you think about that idea of taking each and every single one of those students to where they need to be, it really requires a personalized approach to learning.

So what math innovation zones is is adding a component of technology into the classroom to be able to use the benefits of technology, use the appropriate use and responsible use of technology to assist that teacher in having a personalized and differentiated approach to driving math instruction. What does it actually mean to have a high fidelity implementation of a program designed to reach every single student where they are and take those students to where they need to be? And so through that, math innovation zones has created a program and a framework to really scale and expand these high quality blended learning programs across the state of Texas.

**Host:** So before we get into some specifics on what some of those are, how would you describe this? What's the focus here for math innovation zones?

**Hodge:** Another great question, and something that we think about a lot. Really, the idea is for this to eventually be across the state throughout districts. Right now our focus is really thinking about what does it take to push the needle on students taking Algebra I in the eighth grade and doing it well. So Algebra I in the eighth grade – readiness and participation. And so because of that goal – and I should say that that goal has been shown to be a game changer for students, it is predictive of college and career success – but because of that we say, okay, what is it going to take to make sure that those eighth graders are taking Algebra I successfully in the eighth grade, and then backwards planning, okay, what does that mean for sixth grade? What does that mean in third grade? Kindergarten?

**Host:** Who are some of the districts that are already taking part in the pilot or the math innovation zone work and what are some of the things they're doing in that district?

**Hodge:** So we currently have 14 math innovation zones that are implementing the program this year across the state of Texas. So these districts range from Tulia ISD up in the panhandle to Dallas ISD to KIPP Texas down in Houston. So it's a pretty wide variety of districts, charters, urban, rural. Spring Branch is actively participating in the program. So we're really trying to see and learn from all of these districts of different sizes, what does it take to truly deliver that personalized experience in math achievement, but to do it in all of these different settings in 1,200 districts across the state of Texas, and they are very different from one another, so we're trying to figure out, what does each individual district – size, style, setting – look like as a math innovation zone, and we're learning from those districts each and every day.

And what we intend to do through math innovation zones is not say, 'This is exactly the model that you need to put into your classroom' – but it's to enable folks with the resources that they need to think through the framework of what goes into a strong blended learning model and then turn around and say, 'What does this actually look like with my given teachers and students?'

**Host:** Math innovation zones look different in different districts. Tell us some of the components that are part of, maybe, basic parts of math innovation zones.

**Hodge:** Sure. So we think about math innovation zones in three basic components. One is commitment. Does the district want to explore this program, explore math innovation zones, and are they willing to devote the staff, the limited staff that they have, to be able to focus on those programs. So one, is there a high level of commitment? The next one that we think about and really talk a lot about with districts is planning. We call this a high fidelity of planning in which we are able to use our technical assistance network to work directly with each individual district to create a design and implementation plan to answer the question 'what does math innovation zones look like given my district, given my teachers, and given the students that we serve on a daily basis?'

And then on the other end, software is an incredibly important component of math innovation zones, and I say component because a lot of people hear blended learning or hear technology in schools and they think kids in front of computers, and that is not what math innovation zones is in and of itself. That's a component. We have chosen four state-approved software vendors. Those programs were chosen based on their ability to achieve high-quality results on the STAAR test here in Texas, and those programs are required to be used by each of our math innovation zones. So at its very basic level, what you will see in a math innovation zone is likely a teacher that is potentially working directly with a group of, say, ten students, maybe introducing some new concept, while at the other side of the classroom, there's a group of students that are actively engaging with one of these software programs, and those software programs are adapting to those students individual needs. So if someone is sitting in a classroom and they're actually above grade levels by two grade levels, those software programs can adapt to exactly where that student is and give them the content that they need in order to take them even higher. At the same time, a student that's sitting right next to him can really be working on those remedial skills that that student needs to deeply understand even to get up to grade level in order to be able to be on that track to go to college.

**Host:** So a question we get asked often, often by our commissioner: What does success look like for math innovation zones looking, looking to the future?

**Hodge:** Math innovation zones at its core is about personalized learning, and so what that means is that there's different goals for each individual student. So there are a handful of different metrics that we look at. When we think about a high level, what is important to us is that our students, and this is our Agency goal, that our students are on the path for college and career or military. So that's really the high level goal that we

think about, and then we backwards plan and break down, well, what does that look like? What are indicators along the way that can give us a good sense of where those students are relative to that goal?

One of the components that we have built into the system is we have worked with our software vendors to dive into their research, and have them present indicators that are predictive of student success and student growth as they use the individual software program. So they are able to predict with a high level of certainty, if a student does 'x' on this program, then they will achieve 'y' STAAR results. And we see that as a proxy for being on track to eventually make it to be prepared for college and career. So the leaders of the school can look back and say, 'What do we actually need to do in order to determine what do we need to build for these students to ensure that they're on track to be successful this week, this month, this semester, in this grade level, in order to be on track for college and career readiness?'

**Host:** Is there anything else that people need to know about math innovation zones?

**Hodge:** It's fun, it's new, it's focused on teachers and district personnel trying to understand what will make it easier, what will make it more sustainable for you all to be able to achieve high level results in math. We're excited to hear more from districts. We're excited to keep developing this program. And we're excited to see the results that our students achieve over the course of this first year throughout the state of Texas.

**Host:** And I can't wait for our next visit when you give us a progress report on how things are going. Thank you to Andrew Hodge, director of math innovation zones here at the Texas Education Agency, for joining us on this episode of TEA Time.

**Hodge:** Thanks, Gene.

**Narrator:** For more on this and other education issues, visit our website at tea.texas.gov. For more TEA Time episodes, visit tea.texas.gov/podcast or look for us where you download your other podcasts. Join us again soon for another episode of TEA Time, a podcast from the Texas Education Agency.