



October 2019

Partnership Turnaround: Year One Report



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PARTNERSHIP TURNAROUND: YEAR ONE REPORT

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Partnership Turnaround Report:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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BACKGROUND

Michigan's Partnership Model of school reform was launched in the Spring of 2017 to support the state's lowest-performing schools and school districts. This Partnership Model focused on building capacity to improve student outcomes by fostering a coalition of partners from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), intermediate school districts, and local communities. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the reform's implementation across the state, as well as an analysis of first year (2017-18) student academic outcomes. The evaluation lags one year from implementation because of the need to collect and analyze data retroactively. However, releasing the evaluation in yearly installments represents a vast improvement over prior efforts to evaluate turnaround, which often wait three to five years to find the effects of reform. This report is the first of three interim reports that the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) will release as the evaluation continues through the 2021-2022 academic year, followed by a final and summative report scheduled tentatively for September 2022. These reports are different and separate from the Review of Goal Attainment process the Office of Partnership Districts conducts with Partnership districts. EPIC is the strategic research partner to MDE, and although the analysis documented here was requested by MDE, our evaluation and its results are independent of MDE and the conclusions and recommendations are EPIC's own.

This report relied on multiple methods of data collection and analyses. We used 10 sources of data in their evaluation of the Partnership Model:

- 1) student administrative records;
- 2) educator administrative records;
- 3) surveys of teachers working in Partnership schools and districts;

- 4) surveys of principals working in Partnership schools and districts;
- 5) interviews with Partnership district leaders;
- 6) interviews with state-level stakeholders;
- 7) case studies of three Partnership districts;
- 8) an analysis of the Partnership Agreements signed by each district;
- 9) data from the American Community Survey; and
- 10) Bulletin 1014 district-level finance data.

This approach allowed us to ask not only whether the Partnership Model improved relevant outcomes, but also how the reform was implemented, and for whom, when, and where. The key takeaways and the implications of those results follow.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Districts and schools have implemented the Partnership Model, but not always as intended.

By design, each district implemented its own local version of the Partnership Model that was supposed to be guided by its local Partnership Agreement. Districts varied widely in the extent to which they embraced the reform, with some districts using the Partnership Model to address the reform's goals, and others making changes in response more selectively.

Partnership identification may have initially negatively impacted student and teacher outcomes, but after implementation these outcomes improved substantially.

Statewide, the initial identification of Round 1 Partnership status in the spring of 2017 appears to have reduced math and ELA M-STEP test scores in that year. However, after the implementation of Partnership in the 2017-2018 year, both math and ELA improved substantially, exceeding the identification decline. This positive impact is especially strong in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), where high school drop-out rates were lower as well. In addition, teachers in all Partnership schools were less likely to exit the profession after Partnership implementation.

The mixed picture of Partnership Model implementation is to be expected so early in the reform.

Districts and schools have three years to improve under their initial Partnership Agreements. This report focuses only on implementation and outcomes immediately following Partnership designation. Long-term improvement strategies should be assessed through long-term outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS

District superintendents and leaders at the ISD and state levels can use the accountability elements of the Partnership Model strategically to implement change.

Although Partnership is an improvement model on which the state will assess districts for results, the reform also appears to have improved school and district perceptions of MDE support efforts as well as the relationships with the Intermediate School Districts (ISD). Both local and external parties may leverage these relationships to build capacity in the future.

The local focus of each Partnership reform is an important component to Partnership success, but it can also create challenges.

Despite the improved relationships with MDE and the ISDs, districts' other partners vary in usefulness and quality. The state – whether MDE, the governor's office, or the legislature – can recognize local contexts and support improvement efforts by continuing to build state capacity and processes/tools to help support districts as they address locally defined needs. Some processes can be standardized given some shared challenges districts face.

Human capital is the most acute shared challenge facing Partnership schools and districts.

Human capital challenges – in particular teacher recruitment and retention – are perceived by district leaders to be the greatest impediment to improvement. This is a complicated policy problem to address, especially where districts require both a stable work force and one that is highly effective and high-capacity. The human capital problem – including both skill/capacity but also recruitment and retention – extends to principals and district leaders. Leadership turnover in these Partnership districts will affect the continuity of implementation efforts.

Multiple improvement policies that overlap with Partnership Model efforts may affect implementation in the future.

Michigan has a number of high-profile improvement policies that have and will disproportionately affect many schools and districts now in Partnership. MDE can recognize the need to help districts navigate multiple layers of policy and help guide the extent to which districts should selectively engage in strategies to make outcomes productive. As other policies are layered on top of the Partnership Model, state policymakers may need to give districts time to continue long-term plans for productive change.

Fundamental challenges remain for Partnership districts beyond the reach of one particular reform – including challenges related to resources.

Partnership schools and districts are among the poorest in the state, with residents facing long-term and persistent historical challenges related to income, race, and socio-economic status. Although the Partnership Model is intended to make fundamental changes to districts' education systems and spur improvement, reforms are still occurring largely on the margin. Most districts do not report the ability nor many wholesale strategies to upend the status quo, even if improvement goals represent substantial moves forward.

CONCLUSION

This report documents schools' and districts' efforts to create Partnership Agreements and strategies for improvement under the Partnership Model. On balance, we find modest but potentially positive results of some of those efforts, most notably gains in test scores (especially ELA, and especially in Detroit) and in teacher retention. In addition, one benefit seems to be improved relationships between the districts and MDE, as well as collaboration between districts and the ISDs. However, these represent short-term accomplishments that could fade with time, particularly if Partnership

efforts are either not sustained or are hampered by new policies that replace or even conflict with districts' Partnership Model implementation plans. State policymakers should recognize that even a fully implemented Partnership Model is unlikely to be a panacea or a cure-all for fundamental issues facing Michigan's struggling schools. Partnership schools did not fall behind overnight, nor did the conditions of poverty and - in some cases - collective trauma Partnership district leaders reported develop out of a single failed policy or program. These problems are old, and their persistence implies that the solutions to address them must be new.