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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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STATE SUPERINTENDENT

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Subject: Response to Partnership Turnaround: Year Two Report

When the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) reached out in the fall of 2017 to our strategic research partner, Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) and requested that they embark on an independent evaluation of our newest school and district turnaround strategy, we did so for two important reasons.

The first is that Michigan has been challenged with disparate, disconnected, and constantly changing approaches to helping our lowest performing districts and schools. The causes of this approach are many—federal policy, state policy, changing leadership, grant program requirements—but the result is that, instead of enacting a research-based policy, evaluating its implementation, and modifying the intervention as needed, we have used a less measured and more reactionary approach. The MDE wanted this effort to be different. The Partnership District model is rooted in evidence around what works with low performing schools— but we also know that there is no “one size fits all” approach to solving the issues facing these districts and schools. Moreover, many of the challenges faced by Partnership Districts are large systemic issues that span beyond the education realm, so any solutions require partners, time, and honest conversations about deep-seated changes that are necessary. To do that, we need ongoing evidence while we implement the model.

The second reason the MDE engaged in this independent evaluation is that we, as an agency, are committed to using research and evaluation to drive our decision-making and policy implementation efforts. While it is easy to say “data-based decision making” or “evidence-based policy decisions,” it can be much more difficult to actualize. The MDE saw an opportunity to walk the talk—to have a transparent and independent process to evaluate our efforts and allow us to improve based on data and evidence as we continued to implement.

It is in that spirit that we issue this response to the Partnership District evaluation. In this response, we will highlight 1) what the MDE finds exciting in the report, 2) what the MDE is working to improve based on the report, and 3) issues that are seen in Partnership districts but that are indicative of larger issues facing the education world in Michigan overall.

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What the MDE finds exciting in the Year Two Report

- The MDE was encouraged to see continued and gradual improvements in measures of test score growth for students in Cohort One Partnership schools in their second year of implementation. Students in Cohort Two Partnership schools experienced similar growth to comparison schools in their first year of implementation. While test scores are far from the only measure of success for students (in Partnership Districts or otherwise), they are an important indicator, and they are also a measure with a high degree of external validity with key stakeholders.
- The MDE was also encouraged to see teacher retention improving in Cohort One Partnership schools relative to non-Partnership schools, and to hear from educators in both cohorts that they are more likely to stay in their positions in the coming year.
- The MDE is pleased that educators in Partnership schools are increasingly satisfied with their schools and their jobs, which may help to explain improvements in teacher recruitment and retention. Surveys show that principals and teachers in Partnership districts believe that their schools and districts are increasing focus on several critical areas of operation that might be driving improvements. In particular, they highlight: facilitating improvements in academic improvements for students on the cusp of state achievement levels, and the ability to support special populations of students. One of the ways in which the Partnership Model appears to drive improvements is by generating a uniform strategic planning process and assisting districts with strategic planning efforts.

Finally, the Year Two Report compares the Partnership Model to models used in other states and the data indicate positive results.

What MDE is Working to Improve

The EPIC report highlighted the MDE's efforts to standardize processes and procedures in order to streamline the Partnership process and help districts use the Partnership Agreement and associated planning to further improvement efforts. As we approach another round of Partnership District identification in the fall of 2021, we are continuing to develop a more standardized process for onboarding the districts and assisting them with the development of their plans. The MDE has written a new Partnership Agreement Liaison manual that will assist with this task. Also, the MDE has refined the business rules for evaluating the Partnership Agreements in the summer/fall of 2021, and because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Partnership Agreements were extended one year.

Additionally, the EPIC report found that many Partnership districts are focusing on academic improvement as well as efforts to support the whole child. These efforts are in line with MDE's [Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#). In the 2020-21 school year, the Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Process (MICIP) will provide all districts with a whole-child focused tool for assessing needs and creating high-quality plans. This tool will be particularly useful for Partnership Districts in developing the kind of plans the Partnership model encourages.

Of course, we need to maintain our focus on student achievement. We are working to determine why the Year Two Report showed less evidence of progress on math and ELA M-STEP growth and SAT scores.

Broader Issues: Again, in Year Two, we find one of the greatest challenges facing Partnership districts is human capital—the need to recruit and retain high quality teachers and leaders. Principals identify inadequate and uncompetitive teacher compensation and the stigma of being a Partnership district or school as impediments to hiring. They have implemented several strategies to address these persistent recruitment challenges, including working to improve teacher compensation and instituting “Grow Your Own” programs. They have also worked to improve teachers’ working conditions to increase teacher retention. Efforts to this end include improving teacher compensation, removing additional responsibilities from teachers so they can focus on core instruction, working to build trust and a sense of belonging, and focusing on teacher development via instructional coaching and targeted professional development activities. The MDE used 21h funds (dollars appropriated to Partnership Districts) to help provide retention bonuses for teachers.

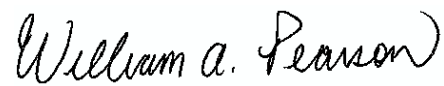
The solution to this problem is found in every layer of our system—not solely within the MDE’s purview. There is a critical role for many stakeholders, such as the legislature, districts, schools, and educator preparation programs, to enhance and strengthen the educator workforce.

Final Thoughts

The MDE thanks EPIC for its collaboration on this important evaluation and report. We also thank our Partnership Districts for participating in the evaluation activities and providing survey and interview data to the research team so that we can collectively work to improve the success of this model.

Questions or comments about Partnership Districts should be directed to William Pearson, Director of the Office of Partnership Districts, at pearsonw1@michigan.gov or 248-444-4524.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William A. Pearson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Dr. William Pearson, Director
Office of Partnership Districts