



SEPTEMBER 2021

# Partnership Turnaround: Year Three Report





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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**





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## Overview

This interim report is part of a multi-year evaluation of the implementation and efficacy of Michigan's Partnership Model of school and district turnaround. The Partnership Model aims to build district capacity to improve outcomes in the lowest performing schools and districts by fostering a coalition of partners from the [Michigan Department of Education \(MDE\)](#), Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), and local communities. [Partnership districts](#) and charter organizations crafted three-year [Partnership Agreements](#) that highlighted districts' specific needs, established strategies to address those needs, and detailed measurable achievement and process goals. If these goals were not met by the end of the three-year period, schools would be subject to high-stakes accountability consequences, including the potential for reconstitution or closure. The state also allocated \$6 to \$7 million in each year of the reform to date in the form of [21h](#) grants to support districts' efforts to meet their goals.

This is the third annual report that will be released as part of our evaluation of the [Partnership Model](#). These reports are different and separate from the [Review of Goal Attainment \(RGA\)](#) process the [Office of Partnership Districts \(OPD\)](#) conducts with Partnership districts. [The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative \(EPIC\)](#) is the strategic research partner to MDE, and although MDE requested the analysis documented here, our evaluation and its results are independent of MDE and the conclusions and recommendations are EPIC's own.

The purpose of this report is to provide an updated overview of Partnership Model implementation and outcomes in [Partnership schools](#) and districts across the state. Given that this report covers both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, it documents how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Partnership schools and districts as they work to support students and families during this unprecedented time. To describe implementation, outcomes, and the effects of COVID-19 on Partnership schools and districts, we use an event study design that leverages longitudinal data on students and educators throughout the state, combined with analysis of data from Partnership teacher and principal surveys, interviews with Partnership leaders, district instructional modality data, and county-level data on COVID-19 transmission and deaths. This multi-method approach allowed us to answer questions not only about the effect of the reform, but also how the model was implemented, how educators perceived implementation, and how and why implementation varied depending on different contexts.

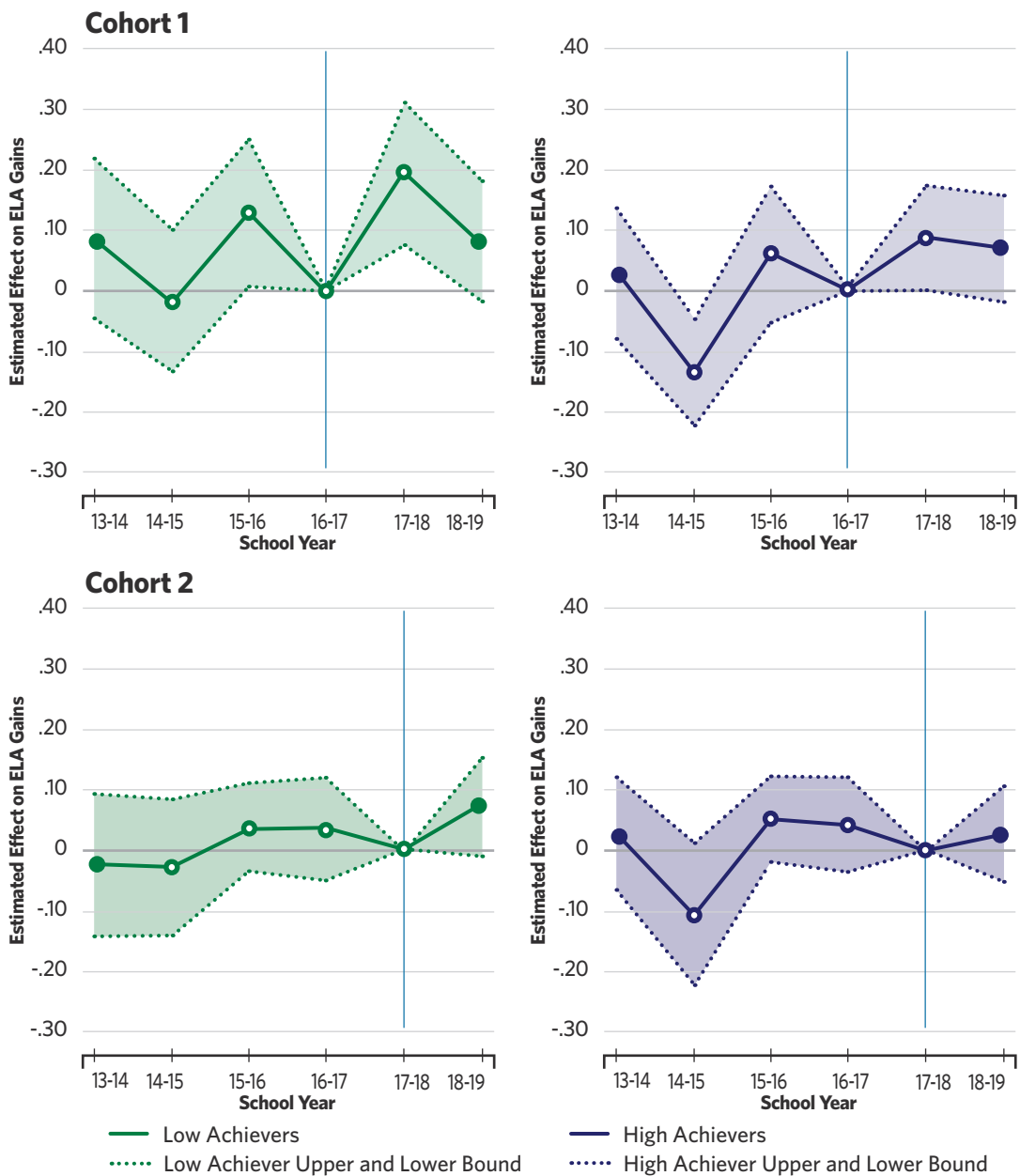
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## MAIN FINDINGS

### Pre-Pandemic Student Achievement Gains Were Strongest Among the Lowest Achieving Students

The Year Two Report showed that students in Partnership schools were making improvements prior to the pandemic—especially in Cohort 1. We find this year that (1) the gains in Cohort 1 were largely concentrated among the students who were lowest achieving before the start of the intervention, and (2) while the average Cohort 2 effects were more muted, the lowest achieving Cohort 2 students made significant gains. These estimates are shown in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1. ELA Event Study Estimates for Lower and Higher Achieving Students**

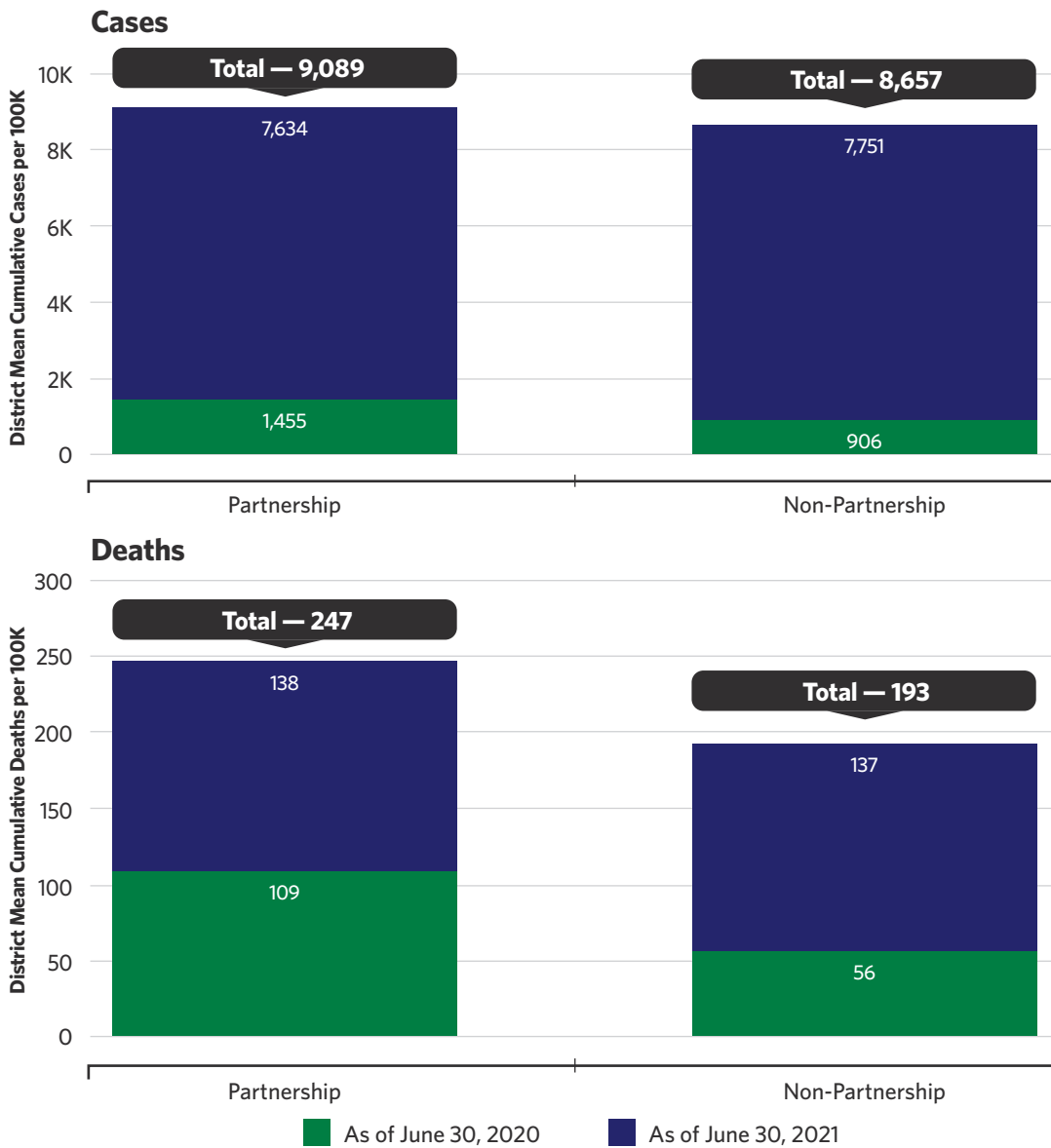


Note: Markers represent coefficient estimates on interaction between Partnership and year indicators in event study models, with the identification year (2016-17 for Cohort 1) as the omitted reference year. Shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic Struck Partnership Communities Especially Hard, Undermining Opportunities to Learn in Partnership Schools and Districts

Educators and students in Partnership districts grappled with extraordinary challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus struck Partnership communities heavily at the outset of the pandemic and Partnership communities experienced more community spread and higher death rates throughout the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, as shown in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2. Average Cumulative Cases and Deaths by Partnership District Status**

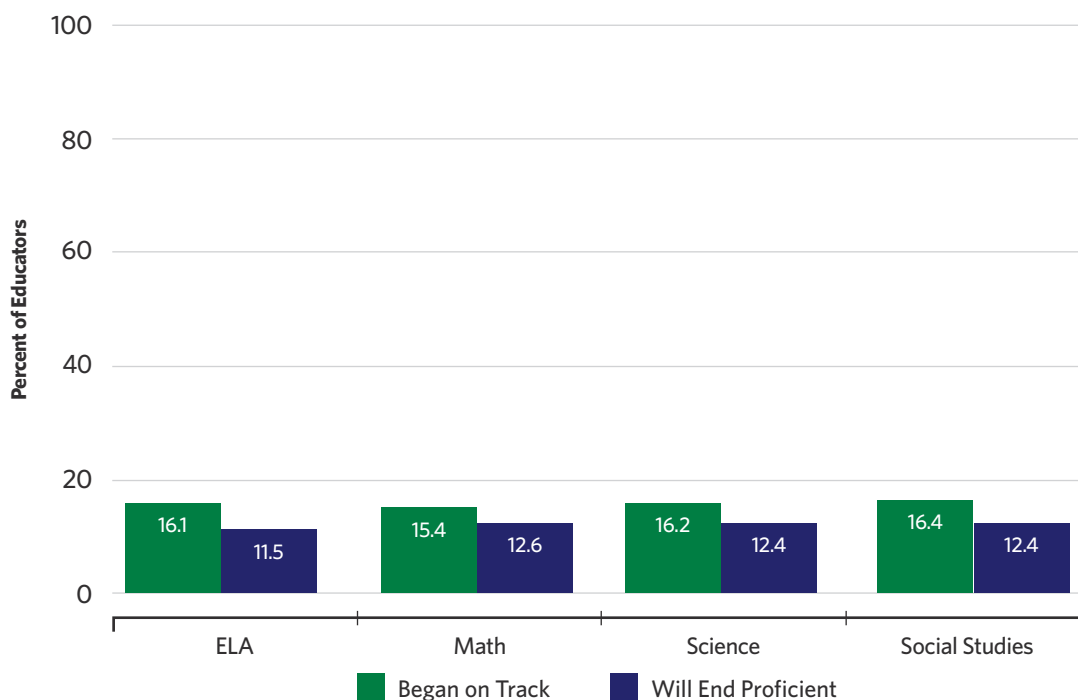


Note: Figures provide mean cumulative community case (top panel) and death (bottom panel) totals in Partnership and non-Partnership districts, respectively, experienced. County totals applied to districts where counties are located and summed up to June 30, 2020 (green bars) and then June 30, 2021 (blue bars). Bar heights represent means of those cumulative totals weighted by district enrollment. The first bar of the top panel can therefore be interpreted as: On average, students in Partnership districts lived in communities that experienced 1,455 confirmed cases per 100,000

residents from the beginning of the pandemic through June 30, 2020, and another 7,634 confirmed cases per 100,000 between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021, for a total of 9,089 total confirmed cases per 100,000 by June 30, 2021.

Even as districts throughout the state returned to in-person learning in spring 2021, Partnership districts—whose communities were battling high rates of COVID-19—offered remote-only instruction for most of the 2020-21 school year. Learning from home was especially challenging for students in Partnership districts; Partnership district teachers reported that they believed their students grappled with out-of-school challenges related to access to health care and housing, economic instability, food insecurity, and illness, as well as in-school challenges related to resource and capacity constraints. As Figure 2 shows, as the 2020-21 school year came to a close, few educators believed that their students were on track with academic content standards. These findings lay bare the reality that the pandemic’s effects will reverberate into future school years as educators and students renew their efforts to accelerate learning.

**FIGURE 3. Educators' Estimated Share of Students Who Began on Track and Will End Proficient on Content Standards**



*Note: Principals and elementary teachers were asked about each subject area; secondary teachers were asked about the subject area of their primary teaching assignment. Bar heights represent the percent of educators who agreed or strongly agreed that their students began on track with content standards in each subject and would end the school year proficient in content standards for each subject. Responses are pooled across principals and elementary and secondary teachers.*

## Progress Toward Improving On-Time Graduation Rates in Partnership High Schools Stalled During the Pandemic

On-time high school graduation rates, which were ticking up in the first two years of Partnership implementation for Cohort 1 schools, dropped back down in 2019-20 as educators and students in Cohort 1 schools grappled with exceptional challenges related to the pandemic. Cohort 2 graduation rates also remained similar to pre-intervention levels.

## In Low-Performing Schools in Michigan, Students Moved to New Schools and Districts at Lower Rates Than Previous Years but Left Public Schooling at Higher Rates

Across Partnership and a group of similarly low-performing comparison schools, the probability of student transfers out of their schools and districts decreased in 2019-20. However, the probability of students leaving Michigan public schools entirely increased. Cohort 1 students in particular were approximately 2 percentage points more likely to leave Michigan education in 2019-20 than in previous years and also more likely to leave than students in low-performing comparison schools.

## Kindergarten Enrollment Declined Sharply in Partnership Schools in 2020-21

Kindergarten enrollment in 2020-21 plummeted by 38% and 27% in Cohort 1 and 2 Partnership schools, respectively—substantially steeper drops than the rest of the state. While Partnership district leaders felt financially shielded from enrollment declines by state and federal policies and resources intended to buffer districts from pandemic-related enrollment and revenue shocks, the future of these funding maintenance strategies is unknown.

## Student Absenteeism Was Pervasive in Partnership Districts as Educators Grappled with Educating and Supporting Students Who Did Not Attend

Challenges related to student absenteeism that surfaced in prior reports became even more salient during the pandemic as Partnership districts—and especially Partnership schools—shifted to remote instruction. While we do not have reliable administrative data on absenteeism during the pandemic, educators in Partnership schools reported that up to about half of their students were absent each day when they responded to the Partnership survey in February and early March of 2021. In turn, teachers felt that attendance challenges affected their ability to educate students, likely impeding student learning during the pandemic.

## Partnership Schools and Districts Continued to Monitor Goals Even As Partnership Evolved from a Sanctions-Based Accountability Policy to a Supportive Capacity-Building Intervention

By summer of 2021, OPD leaned in further to Partnership as a supportive rather than punitive intervention, providing Cohort 1 districts with the option to remain in Partnership for an additional year or to exit. Districts elected to remain in Partnership to continue receiving Partnership supports and 21h funds. These decisions on the part of the state and districts further cemented Partnership as an intervention focused more on supports than sanctions, reflecting school turnaround policy across the country. Although district and charter leaders perceived Partnership as a supportive rather than punitive intervention, schools and districts continued to monitor progress toward goals even during the pandemic.

## While Elements of School Climate and Culture Improved in Partnership Schools, Perceptions of Student Motivation and Parent Engagement Decreased During the Pandemic

School climate and culture appeared to improve somewhat in Partnership schools (in Cohort 1 in particular) in the 2020-21 school year, with teachers and principals reporting that teachers have high expectations for and a strong rapport with students, and that they and their colleagues share beliefs about the school's mission. On the other hand, educators across Partnership districts perceived that students were less enthusiastic to learn than in prior years and a large majority of principals and teachers perceived that low student motivation and a lack of parental engagement were great hindrances to school improvement. Student motivation and parent engagement may have been a particular challenge in 2020-21 due to the largely virtual format of schooling as well as the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on Partnership communities.

## The Share of Partnership School Teachers Leaving Their Schools and Districts Declined in 2020-21, but More Teachers Left the Profession Entirely

Partnership teachers continued to leave their schools and districts at higher rates than other teachers throughout the state, though Cohort 2 showed signs of progress toward increasing teacher retention in school. Partnership teachers were more likely to exit the profession entirely in 2019-20 than in prior years—especially in Cohort 1. Exits from the profession were concentrated among less experienced and Black teachers.

Survey data show that the share of teachers in Partnership districts intending to stay in their current role increased in the 2020-21 school year, and that this increase was even steeper in Partnership schools in particular. Teachers cited factors such as school leadership and culture and climate as their top reasons for wanting to stay. These responses highlight that teachers in Partnership schools and districts value malleable aspects of the workplace that leaders can prioritize in school improvement efforts.

## School Leadership Continued to be a Bright Spot in Partnership Districts and Partnership Schools in Particular

Teachers largely reported that their principals were effective school leaders. Reports of principal effectiveness increased over the three study years and were higher in Partnership schools than in **non-Partnership schools** in Partnership districts. Of particular importance in 2020-21, teachers on average said they felt supported by their school and district administrations during the pandemic. Finally, the vast majority of principals in Partnership districts reported plans to stay in their current positions into the 2021-22 school year, suggesting that teachers' positive experiences with school leadership may sustain into future years.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### State and Local Policymakers Will Need to Focus on Accelerating Learning in the 2021-22 School Year and Beyond

While educators and students made extraordinary efforts to teach and learn during the pandemic, they contended with immense challenges both inside and outside of the classroom. Students in Partnership schools and districts are likely to enter the 2021-22 school year substantially behind academically, and there will need to be additional efforts to accelerate learning and to meet students where they are to help them succeed. MDE has already begun to [make resources available](#) to educators to support accelerated learning efforts.

### Students in Partnership Districts Will Need Supports Beyond Academics

While academic growth is a core focus of the Partnership Model, our findings suggest that students in Partnership districts will need robust socioemotional and resource supports. Districts could invest pandemic relief funds in high quality professional development to help educators to implement trauma-informed practices and infuse socioemotional learning into their lesson plans and daily routines. As educators and students return to in-person schooling, providing them with the necessary tools to cope with trauma and build resilience will be critical to accelerate learning and close the opportunity gap for students in Partnership schools.

### Continued Funding and Support Will Be Critical to Help Partnership Schools and Other Low-Performing Schools and Districts Meet the Academic and Socioemotional Needs of Students

Partnership districts will feel the weight of any enrollment declines and high rates of absenteeism that continue into the 2021-22 school year because they rely heavily on state and federal funding, which is calculated based on student enrollment and penalizes high levels of absenteeism. At the same time, the academic and socioemotional challenges that have been exacerbated for students in Partnership schools and districts during the pandemic will require additional supports and funding to address. A growing literature demonstrates that money and resources are critical for school and district improvement—and these resources will be particularly important in coming years.

### There Needs to be Increased Efforts to Recruit and Retain Teachers—and Especially Black Teachers—in Lower Performing Schools and Districts

Across the sample of low-performing schools, teachers—especially novice and Black teachers—were substantially more likely to exit the profession after 2019-20 than in prior years. Although more educators reported plans to stay in their current roles for the 2021-22 school year, it is unclear the extent to which this is a pandemic blip or a true shift in trajectory. Either way, policymakers at both state and local levels will need to continue to focus on educator recruitment and retention efforts, especially into low-performing schools and districts. Given a large evidence base on the benefits of Black teachers for student outcomes, these efforts should focus on recruiting more Black teachers in particular.