



POLICY BRIEF

State Education Leaders' Perspectives on Leading and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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DISCLAIMER

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University is an independent, non-partisan research center that operates as the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). EPIC conducts original research using a variety of methods that include advanced statistical modeling, representative surveys, interviews, and case study approaches. Results, information and opinions solely represent the analysis of the author(s) and are not endorsed by, nor reflect the views or positions of grantors or partners, or any employee thereof. All errors are our own.



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By: Ayesha K. Hashim and Hayley Weddle

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To understand Michigan education leaders' experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and state-level efforts to support K-12 education during this time, Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) researchers interviewed 18 state-level leaders from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the governor's office, professional associations, and advocacy groups. Key findings include:

- **State leaders worked to balance the health and educational needs of students and educators, with roles and strategies shifting over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.** In the early months of the pandemic, the Executive Office of the Governor and MDE took quick action to ensure that core educational functions continued. Over time, state leaders provided more flexibility to districts to make decisions about instructional modality. While state leaders prioritized building local-level capacity, these efforts were often constrained by the limited bandwidth and authority of state-level agencies, organizations, and associations.
- **State leaders leveraged existing relationships to collaboratively meet the needs of students and educators early in the pandemic, though political tensions led to less collaboration over time.** While many leaders shared examples of working across state-level organizations, references to direct collaboration "on the ground" with educators, students, and families were more limited. State-level collaboration became more complex over time as political tensions heightened.
- **State leaders expressed concerns about how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing racial and socioeconomic inequities for students and families.** In particular, state leaders highlighted disparities in families' and students' health concerns, financial resources, and access to the

internet, devices, and quiet places to learn. Leaders also shared how the pandemic complicated efforts to provide mandated services for English learners and students receiving special education services. Some leaders hoped that the inequities the pandemic highlighted would enable them to advance advocacy efforts for traditionally marginalized communities.

- **State leaders faced several challenges as they worked to ensure students' access to education during the 2020-21 school year.** These challenges included navigating existing governance and funding policies that were inadequate for meeting district and school needs coming into and during a crisis, inconsistency in local-level implementation of state-issued guidance stemming from Michigan's history of acute local control, gaps in internet connectivity across the state, and concerns surrounding the allocation and use of pandemic relief funding. For many leaders, efforts to address these mounting challenges led to significant stress and burnout.
- **State leaders described the 2021-22 school year as surfacing new and emerging challenges primarily at the local level.** These challenges included increased uncertainty in local decision-making, heightened politicization of schools, pervasive staff shortages, and the ongoing effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of local leaders and educators.

Interviews with state leaders revealed the need to re-imagine systems and practices to better prepare for future crises. Findings suggest the need for (1) improving capacity and cohesion across state-level organizations for crisis management, (2) pursuing legislation to bolster education and better prepare for future crises (e.g., increased funding for schools, developing and sustaining educator pipelines), (3) developing state-level partnerships to include local stakeholders, (4) leveraging state-level partnerships to address pandemic-related inequities in the long-term, and (5) showing empathy and support for the challenges leaders and educators have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU) is conducting a study of school district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to support student learning. This research is in response to the Return to Learn legislation, which tasked the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) with studying student progress toward learning goals during and beyond the 2020-21 school year. As part of this study, EPIC researchers interviewed state-level leaders to understand the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced in Michigan and state-level efforts to support K-12 education during this time. In what follows, we share findings related to state education leaders' priorities and roles during the pandemic, conditions that enabled and constrained their efforts to support local-level leaders and educators, and continued challenges in the 2021-22 school year.

METHODS

EPIC researchers interviewed 18 state-level stakeholders across 13 state-led organizations, student advocacy groups, and professional associations during the winter of the 2021-22 school year. Although EPIC invited several state legislators to participate in this study, invited legislators did not respond to requests for interviews. Throughout this brief, we refer to the participants as "state leaders" and, when informative, make distinctions between participant roles (i.e., state-

level policymakers, professional association leaders, etc.). We use the pronouns “they/them” to protect participants’ anonymity. We conducted 60-to-90-minute interviews via Zoom. Interview questions focused on leaders’ priorities to support K-12 districts and schools while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to collaborate with other leaders and organizations in pursuit of shared goals, perceived barriers and challenges in supporting school districts, and reflections on their growth as education leaders. Participants were also asked to reflect on current opportunities and challenges unfolding during the 2021-22 school year. Interviews were transcribed and coded based on broad conceptual categories as identified in our interview protocol (e.g., priorities for supporting districts and schools, barriers and challenges, opportunities for collaboration, etc.). We then analyzed coded data for emergent themes. To ensure the accuracy of findings, we offered participants an opportunity to review a draft of this report and provide feedback.

This research is situated in Michigan, which includes 835 traditional public and charter school districts spanning urban, suburban, and rural contexts. While findings focus on state-level leaders’ reflections about the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, it is important to acknowledge the complex history of education and politics in Michigan. Compared to all other states in the country, Michigan ranked last for education funding growth between 1995-2015.¹ Before the pandemic, the state was experiencing a teacher shortage², as well as gaps in internet connectivity and access to technology.³ In addition, the state is characterized by a history of strong local control, limiting the authority of many state-level actors. Moreover, Michigan is mixed politically, often referred to as a “purple” state. Throughout the period being studied (2020-21 and 2021-22), the state had a Democratic governor and Republican-controlled legislature. This is relevant to note, as national research indicates that partisanship played an influential role in decision-making amidst the pandemic.⁴ Finally, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction, who is in charge of MDE, is appointed by and reports to an elected state Board of Education.

FINDINGS

The findings outlined below provide a strong foundation for EPIC’s next phase of data collection and reporting focused on districts in Michigan that, despite many challenges, demonstrated progress in supporting student learning during the pandemic across instructional modalities.

State leaders worked to balance the health and educational needs of students and educators, with roles and strategies shifting over the course of the pandemic.

In the early months of the pandemic, the Executive Office of the Governor and MDE took quick action to ensure that core educational functions continued. Over time, state leaders provided more flexibility to districts to make decisions about instructional modality. While state leaders prioritized building local-level capacity, these efforts were often constrained by the limited bandwidth and authority of state-level agencies, organizations, and associations.

At the Beginning of the Pandemic, the Executive Office of the Governor and MDE Took Quick Action to Continue Core Functions of the Educational System for the 2019-20 School Year

Starting with [Executive Order 2020-05](#), the governor's office stipulated how schools should maintain core functions under drastically different and evolving circumstances.⁵ These functions included, for example, monitoring student attendance and enrollment, funding schools, employing educators, developing continuity of learning plans, and maintaining federally mandated services such as special education and meal distribution. Over 150 Executive Orders were released during the first six months of the pandemic. A participant explained, "The biggest priority was developing those [Executive Orders], writing those, very quietly getting feedback, rolling them out when they were about to be released, educating people on them, and then, getting legal interpretations on them once they were out." The governor's office also granted authority to MDE to pause teacher evaluation and recertification for the 2019-20 school year. In addition, the US Department of Education approved MDE's waiver request to pause standardized testing.

In response to executive orders and pauses in requirements, a broad network of state leaders and organizations offered guidance to local-level stakeholders about compliance with new procedures. State leaders from MDE, professional associations, and student advocacy groups shared legal interpretations, press releases, webinars, continuity of learning templates, and other materials. Specifically, MDE released 244 guidance documents during the first year of the pandemic. One participant from MDE described this process as changing "the rules of engagement" so that schools could continue to operate under drastically different circumstances.

Over Time, State Leaders Provided More Flexibility to Districts to Make Decisions About Instructional Modality

Beginning in summer 2020, the state legislature passed a bipartisan "Return to Learn" package of bills to give school districts flexibility to determine instructional modality.⁶ Several state-level leaders across organizations and associations described the summer 2020 legislative session as a uniquely bipartisan and cooperative effort to support district and school re-openings. A participant from the Executive Office of the Governor explained how "once we knew more about the disease, it became easier to come around and creatively think about solutions." The participant went on to explain how the governor's office worked with the state legislature to support schools that wanted to return to in-person instruction:

As we went into the 2020-2021 school year, we decided to try to do that legislatively in a bipartisan way without having to do it by Executive Order. We were able to successfully get a bill package done for that... There was a significant amount of flexibility for schools to determine if they wanted to be in person.

Echoing this sentiment, another participant recounted that "for the most part, the political environment was more cooperative and collaborative during the pandemic than it was prior to the pandemic because legislators wanted kids in school." Similarly, a professional association leader described working with MDE to help the state legislature understand the need to "alleviate the

stress of district leaders, to not have barriers in place, so that they could feel ready to explore what this new way of learning was going to look like.”

State Leaders Across Organizations and Associations Focused on Building District and School Capacity for Delivering Instruction During the Pandemic

Given gaps in district and school readiness to transition to remote learning in a pandemic and safely return to in-person schooling, state leaders worked across roles and organizations to build schools’ and districts’ capacity. State leaders took action to: (1) build systems for internet connectivity (e.g., the Statewide Education Network) and alternative learning platforms for engaging K-3 learners (e.g., through the Michigan Learning Channel), (2) help districts procure digital devices and hotspots at competitive prices, (3) recommend appropriate tools for online instruction, (4) develop procedures for cybersecurity, (5) offer webinars and professional development, and (6) facilitate networking for local leaders and educators to exchange information and ideas.

Additionally, state leaders supported local-level capacity to resume in-person instruction. They provided state-issued guidance documents focused on school re-opening and student recovery. State leaders also helped school districts source COVID-19 rapid tests, face masks, hand sanitizer, and other personal protective equipment so that staff could safely conduct essential services on site, offer in-person learning accommodations for students with disabilities, and eventually re-open schools for in-person instruction.

While these efforts started in earnest in spring 2020, they continued throughout the 2020-21 and even the 2021-22 school years. The following quote from an association leader reflects the association’s persistent efforts to support technology access:

We were very engaged in all the technology and data because we knew we had to move to remote learning, and there was a lot of places that were prepared well and could move right into that, and there were other situations where, obviously, they didn’t have either the connectivity or the devices that they needed to serve students during that period, which was March [2020] through the end of the [school] year. It seems like a long time ago, but it really has not stopped. We provided a lot during that time [...] we have some resources, providing hotspots for communities, assisting with gathering data on the need for devices and connectivity, coordinating regional device purchasing—we purchased over a million devices in that first year—and coordinating expansion of internet connection and trying to work both with private and nonprofits to evaluate the safety and security of the process.

State Leaders Also Worked to Address Students’ Mental Health and Socioemotional Needs, Which Were Considered Crucial for Learning

This focus was most apparent among state-level leaders from professional associations with relevant expertise (e.g., school counselors and school psychologists) as well as student advocacy

groups. In certain cases, leaders advocated for new laws or worked with local practitioners to develop new procedures to ensure students' access to critical services. Examples that state leaders shared included advocating for legislators to authorize emergency telehealth appointments with school psychologists and behavioral interventionist support for students with disabilities during the school day. Another participant described working with school counselors to create virtual 'calming rooms' to share mental health resources. They discussed finding "new ways to be supportive" of students and families virtually, adding that "we went from, 'we don't know what to do, just grasping for any ideas' to people sharing out best practices that were working for them."

Additionally, state leaders discussed efforts to hire more school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and paraprofessionals. Professional association leaders played a key role in educating district and school leaders about the roles and responsibilities of support staff and how they could support student recovery in the pandemic. One participant shared that support staff oftentimes "are not utilized properly. They might be used for administrative tasks, clerical tasks... test administration [when] that is not what we want to do." The participant went on to share how their association was collaborating closely with other state-level organizations to "help spread the work as to what exactly we should be doing."

At Times, Strained Capacity at the State Level Limited Efforts to Support Schools, Districts, and Communities

Participants across organizations and associations described navigating school building closures and remote instruction as new challenges, and thus they did not always have the expertise, solutions, resources, or authority to address district and school needs. One state leader, for example, described "jerry-rigging" a website of mental health resources for students and parents. As examined in more detail below, state leaders were also grappling with their own trauma, loss, and stress amidst the pandemic. Understandably, at times these stressors constrained individuals' bandwidth to respond to increasing complexities across the education system. Reflecting on their strained capacity, a state-level leader shared: "To be living in the global pandemic with kids of my own [...] it is hard. It is almost deepening my passion and drive and commitment at a time when I have the least amount of bandwidth to do it."

State leaders leveraged existing relationships to collaboratively meet the needs of students and educators early in the pandemic, though political tensions led to less collaboration over time.

While many leaders shared examples of working across state-level organizations, references to direct collaboration "on the ground" with educators, families, and students were more limited. State-level collaboration became more complex over time as political tensions heightened.

Leaders Leveraged Strong Pre-Existing State-Level Partnerships to Help Maintain Access to Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Across all state-level interviews, participants cited collaboration as central to how they navigated the pandemic. The majority of stakeholders relied on collaborative relationships established before the pandemic. One leader described how their organization leveraged existing partnerships to address pandemic-related challenges, stating, “We need to come together and build this thing together as multiple groups, multiple providers, and multiple stakeholders. That was a critical element of our thinking, and a lot of that was done pre-COVID.” Similarly, another state-level leader reflected on the importance of having strong, reciprocal relationships prior to the pandemic. They explained, “It’s a two-way street [...] it’s a relationship business. When a crisis happens, it is ‘Okay, this is the natural thing to do. Let’s talk about this.’”

Participants described working closely with a variety of state-level partners, such as other education stakeholders (e.g., state-level associations, MDE, institutions of higher education), as well as stakeholders outside of education (e.g., Michigan Department of Health and Human Services) and policymakers (e.g., the governor’s office, legislators). Describing efforts to collaborate with a variety of state-level partners, one leader shared:

We immediately started collaborating with our other partners in the education world, talking about what the needs would be from districts, dividing up who could do what so that we were not overlapping, and that we were best serving the field. And then having regular communication with [the Department of Health and Human Services] and the governor’s office.

Participants mentioned involvement in several cross-organization coalitions focused on helping districts and schools recover from the pandemic and building a more resilient educational system. State leaders engaged national experts, peer leaders in neighboring states, public health leaders, medical professionals, and local leaders in these collaborative networks. Examples of the cross-sector and cross-organization networks that state leaders referenced include the Return to Learn Advisory and Student Recovery Advisory Councils (organized by the governor’s office), Launch Michigan, the Special Education Coalition of Michigan, the School-Based Mental Health Professionals Coalition, as well as convenings of separate working groups MDE organized made up of district superintendents, teachers, and students. Activities undertaken by these networks included addressing district needs for managing the pandemic, strategizing around accelerated learning for students, building integrated systems and evidence-based interventions for student mental health, and advocating for the recovery needs of special student populations. Reflecting on the power of these cross-organization collaborations, a state-level leader summarized, “We’re transforming the state using relationships and networks.”

State Leaders Provided Fewer Examples of Direct Collaboration With Local-Level Educators, Students, and Families

While state-level leaders described robust partnerships with other state-level organizations and stakeholders, references to direct collaboration with stakeholders “on the ground” (e.g.,

educators, students, and families) were more limited. A participant from MDE described the value of a statewide teacher network and student advisory council, and two association leads referenced partnering with students. However, most references to partnerships focused on collaboration with other state-level leaders or entities. Expressing concern about limited collaboration between state-level leaders and local educators, a participant shared, “If you are not hearing us, if you’re not including us in that conversation—teachers, support staff, education support professions—if you’re not working with us, then you’re missing the biggest piece of information about how to navigate where we’re headed.”

In reflecting on their minimal interaction with educators, students, and families, one professional association leader shared that, “We’re probably the furthest away from the classroom that you can imagine...The teacher being real close to kids and families. That was hard. Building leaders, district leaders, et cetera...We’re the furthest away from some of that. That became difficult.” This quote reflects the general feeling that, although state-level leaders and associations may not always have direct access or capacity to collaborate with individual educators, families, and students, it is nonetheless important to take these groups’ voices into account when determining policy. However, doing so in the pandemic proved challenging.

In Some Cases, Political Tensions and Disparate Priorities Were Barriers to Sustained Collaboration

The majority of leaders across the state described focusing on two primary goals amidst the pandemic: “safety and to return to school in-person as soon as possible.” However, at times, leaders had to prioritize one of these goals over the other depending on the needs of their primary stakeholders. Given that many of the participants had a specific set of constituents to represent, priorities across each organization were varied. For example, while many interviewees positioned returning to in-person learning during the 2020-21 school year as essential for ensuring students’ equitable access to learning opportunities, some worried that the health and safety risk for educators was too high. Describing the effect of these tensions on collaboration, a leader shared, “there was not as much collaboration as you would want there to be [...] Sometimes everybody is just focused on what *they’re* doing.”

Efforts to collaborate between policymakers also grew increasingly dissonant over time. Notably, the state legislature challenged the emergency powers of the Executive Office of the Governor in the court system, reflecting tensions across the state political system. The Michigan supreme court eventually ruled that the Governor did not have authority under the Emergency Management Act of 1976 to issue executive orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also dissonance in the state about teacher evaluations as the pandemic continued. Specifically, while MDE and some professional associations were in favor of pausing teacher evaluation requirements in the 2020-21 school year, the state legislature did not issue supporting legislation.

In addition to state-level tensions, the federal and state departments of education developed different priorities around the continuation of standardized testing for the 2020-21 school year. While MDE and many professional associations felt that standardized testing should be paused amidst the pandemic, the federal government did not approve Michigan’s request for testing waivers for the 2020-21 school year.

As explained in the following section, state-level leadership amidst the pandemic was further complicated by urgent challenges stemming from remote learning and school building re-opening, which exacerbated long-standing inequities in the state. For many leaders, navigating these challenges while also grappling with their own health concerns, losses, and other stressors took a significant toll on their wellbeing.

State leaders expressed concerns about how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities for students and families.

In particular, state leaders highlighted disparities in families' and students' health concerns, financial resources, and access to the internet, devices, and quiet places to learn. Leaders also shared how the pandemic complicated efforts to provide mandated services for English learners and students receiving special education services. Some leaders hoped that the inequities the pandemic highlighted would enable them to advance advocacy efforts for traditionally marginalized students.

Across All Interviews, State-Level Leaders Described the COVID-19 Pandemic as Exacerbating Existing Racial and Socioeconomic Inequities in Michigan

One leader explained, "We're one of the most segregated states in the nation, and we have incredibly bad learning gaps between the 'haves' and the 'have nots.' The pandemic has simply shined a bright light on this fact." Similarly, another leader mentioned how the COVID-19 pandemic put "a huge spotlight" on inequities across race and socioeconomic status. Deepening reflections on equity, several leaders described increased national attention on anti-Black racism following the murder of George Floyd in summer 2020. Describing how this national context influenced conversations in Michigan, one leader shared, "I feel like [pre-]pandemic—people just didn't talk about it [...] They knew racism was there, but they didn't talk about it. Because of what's happening around us, you can't *not* talk about it now."

Leaders Highlighted Many Hardships Exacerbating Inequity for Students and Families Amidst Remote Learning, School Building Closures, and Reopening

Leaders identified challenges which included health concerns, financial instability, and inequitable access to the internet, devices, and quiet places to learn. Some leaders also reflected on complexities related to upholding the rights of students who receive federally mandated services

such as teaching English learners and providing special education services amidst remote learning and disruptions to schooling. One leader explained, “There was a lot of complexity around students with disabilities and special education—ensuring that their rights were not being violated and that we weren’t opening up schools to lawsuits while ensuring that they were getting the services that they need.”

Promoting students’ equitable access to education amidst the pandemic was further complicated by increased absences, some of which persisted as schools transitioned from remote learning back to in-person. Sharing concerns about these absences, one leader noted that thousands of students were “lost” amidst the pandemic. The following quote from an MDE representative demonstrates the critical role schools play in offering a safety net for vulnerable student communities; a safety net that was suddenly lost when school buildings physically closed, “Remember that we are the greatest reporters of child abuse—schools, the school districts, and school staff members. When you can’t see your [students], it does prompt questions as to what is going on with them.”

All Participants Expressed a Strong Commitment to Leveraging Their Leadership Roles and Collaborative Relationships to Address Inequities

Some leaders hoped that the inequities the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted would enable them to advance advocacy efforts for traditionally marginalized communities. Examples included shifting financial aid application deadlines, increasing funds to support English learners, and recent school efforts to hire more mental health support staff. One leader explained, “It’s kind of like opening a new eye to say, ‘what systems, practices, and policies are not meeting the needs of all students in an equitable way?’ [...] We would be missing a huge opportunity if we did not capitalize on that understanding.”

Similarly, other leaders described the pandemic as presenting a window of opportunity to advance equity. However, almost all participants shared that their bandwidth was limited after almost two years of leading through the crisis. Reflecting on their work, one leader shared, “I’m more committed than ever, but also more exhausted than ever.” In the following sections, we further address emotional burnout and stress as one of many challenges state leaders faced during the pandemic.

State leaders faced several challenges as they worked to ensure students’ access to education during the 2020-21 school year.

These challenges included navigating existing governance and funding policies that exacerbated conditions of crisis, inconsistency in implementation of state-issued guidance at the local level, persistent gaps in internet connectivity, and concerns surrounding the allocation and use of relief funding. For many leaders, efforts to address these mounting challenges led to significant stress and burnout.

Michigan's History of Underfunding K-12 Education Put the System at a Disadvantage as Education Leaders Tried to Address New Pandemic-Related Challenges

Some state leaders linked this history of underfunding with the limited resources available to support remote learning and attend to students' mental health. One leader shared:

It is like we were totally unprepared in technology, in staffing, and especially in mental health. We really missed the mark. A lot of it is due to the past policies that our state has followed to basically underfund education, and we are suffering the consequences of years and years of poor school funding and lack of legislative support. We found ourselves really scrambling. And we are still scrambling.

Echoing this sentiment, another participant described how many leaders and educators felt under-prepared to use technology to support student learning amidst the crisis:

There was so much uncertainty. How long are we going to be home? How long is school going to be shut down? When are kids going to come back? When is school going to reopen? No one had any answers—there was not a playbook for the pandemic. [...] We had to help our schools transition to online learning, and then it became evident that a lot of our schools didn't have the tools for online learning, and our educators didn't have the strategies [...] We're not prepared for teaching kids in the 21st century using 21st century tools.

An Influx of New Funds and a Culture of Acute Local Control Led to Variation in Local Implementation of State-Issued Guidance

Several participants described concerns about inconsistent implementation of state-issued guidance and the subsequent effect on vulnerable student populations. Participants from professional associations expressed concerns about variation in district implementation of safety protocols and support for student recovery as schools resumed in-person instruction. Other participants expressed concern that school districts became less receptive to state leaders' requirements and guidance once they received large amounts of federal relief funding. In discussing their push for districts to resume in-person instruction in spring of 2021, one representative from MDE explained:

We were inserting ourselves actively to try to get local school districts back to school...we worked closely with the governor's office and managed to get a lot of districts back to school that were reluctant. The legislature served as a stick...At one point, they were basically saying they weren't going to give particular monies to local districts if they did not come back....Unfortunately, their ability to use that lever was limited and it did not affect many of the

districts...The other paradox was, because of this enormous influx of federal pandemic relief funding, the dollars were less interesting because they already had a lot of dollars. Getting a small state funding penalty associated with not being in person didn't have the same—didn't get the same attention that it would have pre-pandemic.

Discussing how local control sometimes enabled decisions that were not ultimately in the best interests of students, another state leader commented that:

What they [MDE] issue is guidance, and that guidance is not mandated. As that [guidance] flows to districts and then down to your schools and eventually to your child, there's no accountability. There are inconsistencies across the state.

Several participants made distinctions between recommended guidance versus requirements. Recommendations are difficult to enforce, especially in Michigan's context of local control. This at times led to inconsistencies in how students were served across districts and schools.

Pervasive Gaps in Internet Connectivity Were Cited as an Ongoing Concern

While bolstering internet connectivity was a consistent priority for state leaders, almost all interviewees argued that gaps in connectivity remained, especially in rural areas. Making internet connectivity available to all students at home was a persistent challenge throughout the pandemic. Reflecting on this challenge, a state leader shared, "We need to learn some lessons from [the pandemic], or we'll be stuck once again [...] We need internet access everywhere."

State Leaders Expressed Varied Concerns About the Allocation and Use of Pandemic Relief Funds

Following the appropriation of approximately \$2 billion of federal COVID-19 relief funds in the 2020 calendar year, a minority of professional association leaders (two participants) commented that the Title 1 formula used to allocate these funds left districts with lower proportions of free and reduced-price lunch eligible students with inadequate funding to keep up with pandemic-related costs. As such, a subset of leaders and their organization members expressed concern about federal formulas for allocating anticipated ARP-ESSER funding. As one state leader commented:

We were all under the fallacy that federal Title I funding was based on equity...it is not. There are vast disparities with schools that have identical demographics. [...] What people ended up receiving on a per student basis didn't make any sense whatsoever. That's how the relief dollars were distributed.

Other state leaders either did not comment on funding or, to the contrary, shared views to suggest that federal and state-level funding should continue to be prioritized for the highest poverty school districts in the state. An MDE representative shared, "if we believe that at-risk students

require more funding to support them versus a child who lives in a middle-class family, who is not special ed, who is not an English learner...then we as a state should be differentiating how we fund districts." These comments suggest that state leaders had different views about equitable approaches to school funding amidst the pandemic.

In addition to discussing how relief funds were allocated, state leaders shared concerns about how districts and schools were using new funds. Some leaders worried that the sudden influx from federal and state governments and pressure to spend these dollars quickly may have contributed to rushed decision-making at the local level. Relatedly, others questioned whether funds were being used in evidence-based ways. One state leader explained, "I think that is where a lot of districts get hung up, right? Like how do we assess whether or not we are doing the right thing?" Another leader added, "Is there an evidence base behind this [spending to suggest] that this works?...Does this work for all students?" This leader described effective use of funds as an ongoing challenge for schools.

State Leaders' Efforts to Lead Effectively in Crisis Came at the Cost of Emotional Burnout and Stress

As the pandemic continued, state leaders mentioned feeling emotionally exhausted. One participant commented that "At the state level, we are also feeling some mental health issues, part because of navigating unknown territory and trying to figure out what to do that's best for schools and districts and our kids." Another shared, "Well, you know...leaders are leaders and everybody [in my organization] is amazing. They'll do whatever they can to keep pushing, but we just have to...stop. No more pushing. Like you just need to step back."

Many of the barriers that state leaders navigated during the 2020-21 school year continued into 2021-22. As explored in the following section, the 2021-22 school year also posed distinct challenges.

State leaders described the 2021-22 school year as surfacing new and emerging challenges primarily at the local level.

These challenges included increased uncertainty in local decision-making amidst strong local control, heightened politicization of schools, pervasive staff shortages, and the ongoing effect of the pandemic on the well-being of local leaders and educators.

Almost All Participants Described Local Leaders Having to Navigate More Uncertainty During the 2021-22 School Year Than During the Year Prior

Several leaders shared that while the 2020-21 school year was "state-directed" and "more defined," shifts back to stronger local control and flexibility meant that approaches to navigating

the 2021-22 school year were less cohesive. One leader described 2021-22 as “more chaotic” explaining, “When we did all-virtual, you had a pathway [...] Now, it's just sort of a tossup. We're in a very big crisis right now in public education.” Another leader reflected on the effect of this uncertainty on local leaders, sharing:

This year, one day we're in [person], next day we're out [...] The decision is in the district's lap and that has created a lot of tension. To be honest, it is just a tremendous amount of pressure to ask educators and leaders to be health officials and make these decisions.

Increased Politicization at the Local Level Heightened Challenges for Schools and Districts

Reflecting on political pressures, several participants shared examples of local-level leaders being harassed or threatened because of pandemic-related decisions about instructional modality and face mask requirements, and even decision-making in other areas such as curriculum content that were unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic and previously unchallenged by local communities. This increasing politicization of schools was described by many participants as complicating leaders' work across the state. As one state leader commented:

The masking issues and all the rest has played right into that [along with] critical race theory. Masking just falls right into that because 'it is our personal liberty,' and 'we don't want to talk about these difficult issues,' and 'we want to be able to do whatever we want to do without restriction.' It's very troubling that we've gotten to that point.

Schools and Districts Faced Pervasive Staff Shortages

In addition to navigating pressure from the community, leaders described pervasive staff shortages across roles and regions. One participant shared, “We have a tremendous shortage of staff [...] it is coming to a critical point where school buildings are closing because they don't have enough staff to supervise the students or to transport their students or to feed their students.” Participants shared examples of principals and, in some cases, superintendents, covering classes amidst shortages. Reflecting on the potential effect of this pattern, a leader noted, “people are praising superintendents for subbing in classrooms, but then what is not getting done?”

The Ongoing Pandemic Affected Staff and Leader Well-Being

Reflections about staff shortages were closely intertwined with comments about feeling burned out. Importantly, shortages and feelings of burnout were unfolding across both state and local levels. Several state-level leaders described the significant toll of the pandemic on their own leadership capacity, as well as on colleagues across the education system. Illustrating the pervasiveness of these issues, a state leader reflected on a recent meeting with a large group

of school principals, during which all the leaders shared that they had recently considered leaving their positions.

Reflections about burnout and staff shortages were often accompanied by concerns that these challenges are currently under-addressed. One leader explained, “Nobody wants anyone to know that kids are not getting pre-pandemic instruction and normalcy.” Another leader shared that “system-stress” needs to be grappled with more directly across the state to develop more innovative and resilient approaches to education.

CONCLUSION

State leaders’ reflections on their work amidst the pandemic provide a deeper understanding of the factors that shaped teaching and learning across the state. Reflecting on the challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, state leaders also expressed a commitment to act on lessons learned and build a stronger and more resilient education system. Recognizing the need for systems-change, a leader stated, “If we do not develop the systems and processes that address our new reality, then we are going to continue putting out fires and not make any progress [...] We have to accept where we are and figure out new ways.”

Based on findings discussed above, we highlight the following lessons learned and policy implications to inform ongoing recovery efforts.

Lesson One

State leaders’ efforts to provide safe access to education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic required taking on multiple pressing responsibilities such as informing new legislation, issuing guidance, and building local capacity. Their efforts were complicated by the limited bandwidth and authority of state-level agencies, organizations, and associations, mounting uncertainty and political tensions over time, and inconsistent implementation of state-issued guidance at the local level due to Michigan’s tradition of tremendous local control.

Policy implication.

To bolster education in Michigan and prepare for future crises, state leaders may want to dedicate additional resources within state-level organizations to crisis management, as well as attend to preparation and training of state and local leaders in crisis response. In light of uncertainty and variability stemming from acute local control, it may also be beneficial to consider changes to roles, responsibilities, and authority to promote cohesion during future crises.

Additionally, state leaders may want to pursue legislation that bolsters education and prepares the system for future crises. Such legislation should prioritize increased school funding; continued investments in technology access and internet connectivity; initiatives to develop and sustain educator and leader pipelines; expanded mental health supports for leaders, educators, families and students; professional development for educators on technology use; and supports for student recovery. Such investments will improve education systems and outcomes now and can serve as protective factors to help weather future crises.

Lesson Two

While state leaders worked collectively to improve educational systems for navigating crises, this collaborative work was challenging to sustain due to political tensions and conflicting priorities. School and community-level stakeholders such as educators, students, and parents were often not widely included in state-level collaboration, reflecting a potential area for increased collaboration.

Policy implication.

Engagement in state-level partnerships will be important to help Michigan districts and schools rebound from future crises. State leaders should intentionally develop and grow these partnerships. In addition, state leaders may want to consider opportunities to increase representation and perspectives of local-level educators, students, and families in these collaborations. Given political tensions and complexities, it is also important to work towards a more collaborative environment to enable greater cohesion and cooperation among state-level leaders.

Lesson Three

In a historical context of racial inequality and underfunding of K-12 education in Michigan, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequities in ways that state leaders have been unable to fully resolve to date (e.g., 'lost' students, persistent gaps in internet connectivity).

Policy implication.

Proactive legislation to prepare the educational system for future crises can begin to address pandemic-related inequities (see Lesson 1). In addition, our findings suggest that state leaders were committed to using state-level partnerships to support student recovery and to attend to racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic inequities exacerbated by pandemic. These objectives will take time to achieve and should continue to receive adequate attention and support as state-level partnerships evolve in the future.

Lesson Four

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on stakeholders' well-being across levels of the education system. Additional support will be needed as district and school leaders respond to the ongoing effects of the pandemic amidst staff shortages, burnout, and political pressures.

Policy implication.

To address issues of leader and staff burnout, state leaders may want to consider legislation to strengthen leader and educator pipelines across all levels of the educational system. In addition, state leaders may want to continue empathizing with and showing support for the many challenges that leaders and educators have faced during the pandemic.

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