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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Subject: Response to Partnership Turnaround: Year Four Report

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is grateful that our research partner, the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC), continues to conduct an independent evaluation of the Office of Partnership Districts (OPD) regarding the Partnership Model as a turnaround strategy to improve student achievement.

The Partnership Model is based on research around what works with low performing schools. EPIC has gathered data and feedback through questionnaires and surveys completed by Partnership districts. 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 MDE is engaged in this independent evaluation because we remain committed to using research and evaluation to drive our decision-making and policy implementation efforts. Consequently, MDE and OPD have contracted with EPIC for three more years to evaluate OPD's efforts to turn around low performing schools. EPIC's transparent and independent process will evaluate our efforts and allow OPD to improve based on data and evidence as we continue to implement the partnership model.

In this Year Four response, we will highlight 1) what the MDE finds especially useful in the report, 2) what the MDE is working to improve based on the report, and 3) issues that are noted in Partnership districts but that are indicative of larger concerns facing the K-12 education in Michigan overall.

What the MDE finds particularly noteworthy in the Year Four Report

Even though all Partnership Agreements end after three years, each of our Partnership districts continued to partner with the OPD and their liaison to work toward meeting their goals during the pandemic.

In most of our 97 Partnership schools, the same principal returned for the second year of the pandemic (2021-22), a trait on which the OPD has placed great emphasis, and Partnership district principals largely reported plans to remain in their positions, especially in Partnership schools. Also, it was important to the OPD that almost all Partnership districts reported receiving support from their Intermediate School Districts (ISD), because OPD fully promotes networking between Partnership districts, their ISD and the OPD.

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The OPD will continue to focus on literacy by ensuring that all partnership districts include a literacy goal in Round 4 partnership agreements. This requirement supports the MDE Strategic Education Plan Literacy Goal 8.

The EPIC Year 4 Summary report mentions the impact of teacher turnover in partnership districts. The challenges include inconsistency in the delivery of curriculum instruction; affects relationship building between educator and student and creates gaps in student learning. These gaps create serious problems for students as they move forward lacking the required foundational skills.

Two issues that need further study

Cohort 1 high schools gained enrollment during the pandemic, and Partnership educators prioritized approaches such as data-driven instruction and focusing on essential skills/strategies to a greater extent than one-on-one tutoring during the Pandemic. EPIC will continue to examine the strategies Partnership districts use to improve school and district operations and outcomes.

What the MDE is working to improve

As we approach another round of Partnership district identification in November of 2022, the OPD has rewritten the template for Partnership Agreements, and we will place each Partnership district in a level that corresponds with their reason for Partnership identification. This includes providing more intensive support for any district that is re-identified as a Partnership district.

It is disappointing that chronic absenteeism increased during the Pandemic. We need to intensify our efforts to address this issue as this was a major concern to both teachers and principals. Also, students left Michigan public schools at higher rates during the first pandemic year, and cohort 1 elementary students continued to leave at higher rates in the second year of the pandemic. We will work to understand these trends.

In the 2022/23 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, especially the goals that were determined by each district and included in their Partnership Agreement.

As the State focuses on efforts to strengthen the educator pipeline and workforce, attention should be paid to ensuring Partnership schools and districts can recruit, retain, and support teachers. Partnership districts need certified teachers in all classrooms and must work to retain these teachers. Therefore, the MDE needs to focus on increasing the percentage of certified teachers in Partnership schools and new Round Four Partnership districts.

Broader Issues: Again, in the year four report, we find one of the greatest challenges facing Partnership districts is human capital—not only to recruit and retain high quality teachers and leaders, but also to reduce teacher absenteeism and to increase the availability of substitutes. These two issues are extremely important with respect to student achievement. Districts continue to implement several strategies to address these persistent recruitment challenges, including working to improve teacher compensation and instituting “Grow Your Own” programs. The MDE continued to use 21h funds (dollars appropriated to partnership districts) to help provide retention bonuses for teachers. It is imperative that stakeholders such as the legislature, districts, schools and educator preparation programs join in efforts to enhance, strengthen and diversify the educator workforce. The year four report also found that Partnership districts focused on supporting student socio-emotional health and well-being outside the classroom. Social workers, school counselors and restorative practice programs need to play a greater role in all Round Four Partnership districts as we move out of the pandemic.

Finally, because of the pandemic and remote learning, almost all the gains that many of our districts/schools had made were erased or almost erased.

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.