



**Partnership Turnaround:
Year Four Report**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Year Four Report: Executive Summary

Overview

This report is the fourth in our multi-year evaluation of the implementation and efficacy of the Partnership Model of school and district turnaround. The Partnership Model aims to build district capacity to improve outcomes in a set of Michigan's low-performing schools and districts by providing them with resources and supports from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), and local community partners. As part of the Partnership Model, Partnership districts and charter organizations crafted Partnership Agreements that outlined their specific needs, laid out strategies to address those needs, and detailed measurable achievement and process goals. Initially, these goals were to be met within three years. However, given the immense disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Partnership districts were provided with additional years of support and given leeway in measuring their goal attainment.

This report examines the final year of Partnership Model implementation for the first three identification rounds (in two implementation cohorts) of Partnership districts, selected for intervention in the 2016-17 (Round 1, Cohort 1) and 2017-18 (Rounds 2 and 3, Cohort 2) school years. This evaluation includes analyses of student and teacher mobility outcomes, 2020-21 student benchmark assessment data, graduation and dropout rates, enrollment data, surveys of teachers and principals in both Partnership and non-Partnership schools in Partnership districts, interviews of Partnership district superintendents and charter leaders, and county-level data on COVID-19 transmission.

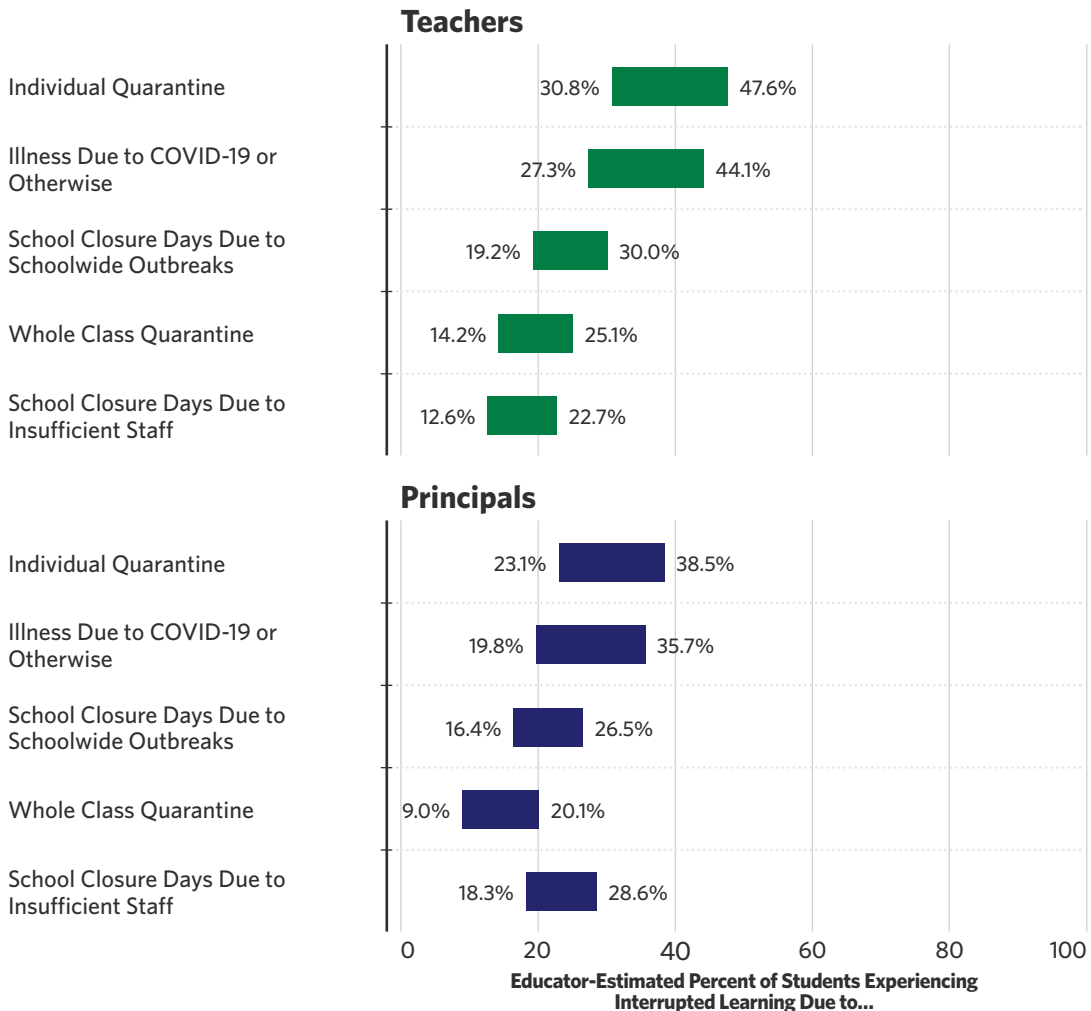
As MDE prepares to select a fourth round (third implementation cohort) of Partnership schools and districts in the fall of 2022, which will likely include schools and districts that are re-identified for Partnership due to their performance on standardized achievement tests, graduation rates, and other school outcomes, we aim to provide an updated overview of Partnership Model implementation and outcomes in Partnership schools and districts across the state. We also document how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Partnership schools and districts as they work to support students and families during this unprecedented time.

MAIN FINDINGS

The COVID-19 Pandemic Continues to Disproportionately Affect Partnership Schools, Districts, and Communities

Although some of the pandemic-induced challenges that affected Partnership schools, districts, and communities during the 2020-21 school year eased over time, 2021-22 brought new COVID-19-related difficulties to the fore. Partnership educators reported that students struggled more with behavior and reported that as many as one-third of their students were absent from school each day in late winter of 2021-22. Partnership schools and districts faced frequent school and classroom closures that required unplanned shifts in instructional modality and led to interrupted teaching and learning. As is shown in Figure 1, the majority of Partnership district principals reported school and classroom closures by late winter of the 2021-22 school year that resulted from COVID-19 outbreaks and quarantines as well as insufficient instructional staff and a lack of available substitute teachers and staff.

FIGURE 1. Partnership District Educator-Estimated Share of Students Experiencing Interrupted Learning for Selected Reasons, 2021-22



Note: Bars provide teacher- (first panel) and principal- (second panel) estimated range of students experiencing interrupted learning due to each reason based on responses to the question, “In the 2021-22 school year, approximately what proportion of your students have experienced interrupted learning due to each of the following?” Response options were <10%, 10-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-90%, and >90%. To create estimated ranges, we assign the minimum value of the selected response option as the lower bound and the maximum value as the upper bound. We then take the weighted mean of the lower and upper bounds, respectively. The figure to the left of each bar represents the estimated mean lower bound and the figure to the right of each bar represents the estimated mean upper bound.

Partnership Schools and Districts Provided Several Services Intended to Address Interrupted Learning as Well as Support Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Partnership districts implemented several strategies intended to support and accelerate student learning during the 2021-22 school year. Although there has been a great deal of national attention paid to the strong evidence base that supports the use of one-on-one or small group tutoring, and the majority of Partnership principals reported providing tutoring, relatively few principals believed that tutoring was a priority for their districts. Instead, they described using strategies that were popular prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, including data-driven instruction, focusing on Essential Skills, and culturally responsive teaching. In addition, Partnership educators prioritized students’ socioemotional, mental health, and behavioral needs during the 2021-22 school year by providing more social workers, counselors, mentoring initiatives, and restorative justice programs.

Despite Pre-Pandemic Growth, Students in Partnership Districts Struggled Academically and Improvements in Graduation Rates Stalled During the COVID-19 Pandemic

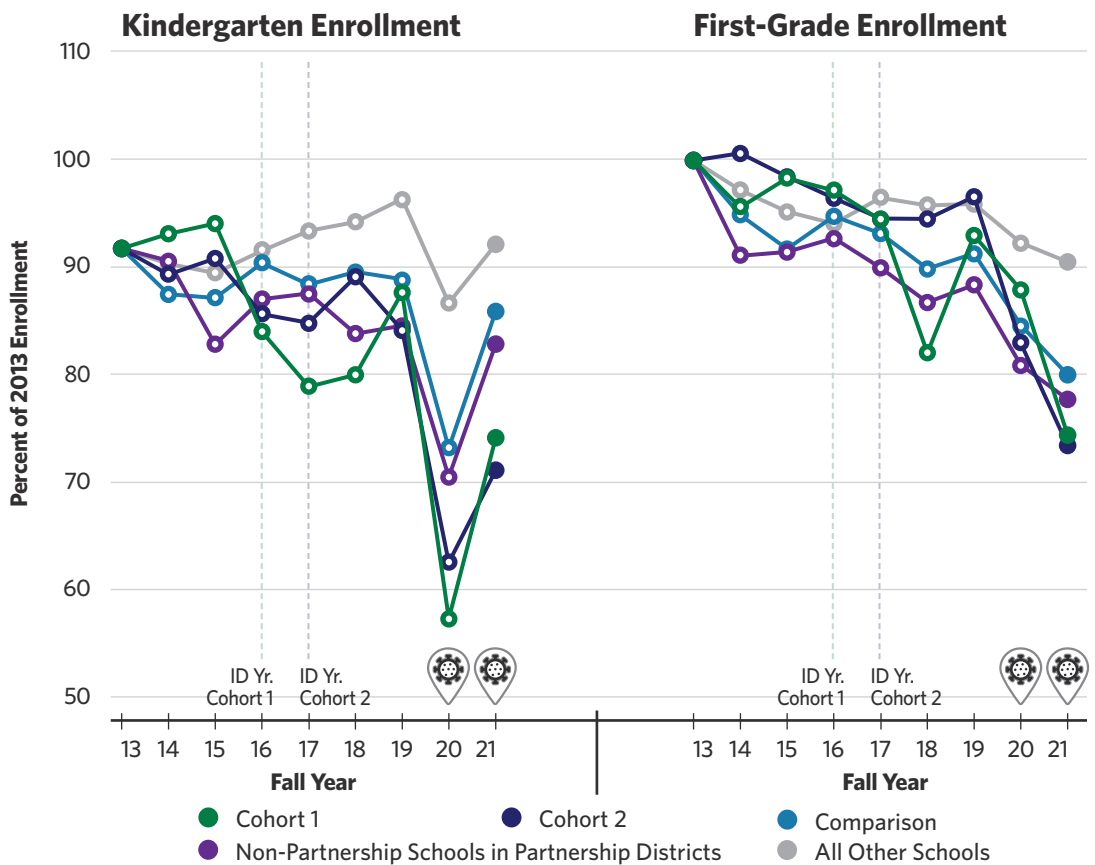
Given the many challenges experienced by students and educators in Partnership districts, it may be unsurprising that previous gains in student outcomes stalled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partnership districts on average exhibited less growth than others throughout the state on benchmark assessments over the course of the 2020-21 school year and 80% of Partnership district teachers reported that their students were struggling with academic content because of pandemic-related disruptions to learning during the 2021-22 school year. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic stalled progress toward increasing some Partnership schools’ graduation rates and had the most deleterious effects on graduation rates in schools and districts that were already struggling the most before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, students in Partnership districts made similar and, in some cases, greater gains on their benchmark assessments than did students in demographically and academically similar districts across the state. This suggests that while the COVID-19 pandemic generated immense challenges for student learning, the many services and supports Partnership schools and districts offered may have mitigated some of the negative effect.

Partnership District Enrollment Continued to Decline as Student Exits Remained Elevated and the Pandemic Kindergarten Cohort Did Not Return in Fall 2021

Student mobility and enrollment plagued Partnership districts during the 2021-22 school year. Although all Michigan districts experienced reduced rates of between-district transfer after the

2019-20 school year, district exit rates rebounded after the 2020-21 school year, and student exits from Michigan public schools altogether remained high. Moreover, Partnership districts experienced steep declines in kindergarten enrollment in the 2020-21 school year, and these students did not appear to return to Partnership districts in the fall of 2021, either as kindergarteners or first graders (shown in Figure 2). Together, these patterns spell out declining enrollment and increasing churn in Partnership districts that may persist in the years to come.

FIGURE 2. Kindergarten and First Grade Enrollment in Partnership Schools, Districts, and Comparisons Over Time



Note: Figures represent the share of total 2013-14 enrollment in the listed grade level for the year. A value above 100 indicates that enrollment is higher than in 2013-14, while a value below 100 indicates that enrollment is lower. Treatment is assigned as ever treated (e.g., a school that was in Cohort 1 but exited would be counted as Cohort 1 across all years). Sample restricted to 1,407 schools that served kindergarteners (left panel) and 1,431 schools that served first-graders (right panel) in all nine years of the period from 2013-14 through 2021-22. Placemarkers on the horizontal axis denote years affected by COVID-19.

Partnership Districts Experienced Substantial—and in Some Cases Exacerbated—Human Capital Challenges

Pandemic-related challenges around sickness and quarantine led to increased teacher absenteeism in the 2021-22 school year, and substitutes were often unavailable to fill in. In addition, teacher turnover and recruitment challenges continued to afflict low-performing schools across the

state, and in some cases were exacerbated in Partnership schools and districts. These staffing challenges heightened already-existing human resource constraints and difficulties, including decreased teacher morale and increased teacher reports of intentions to leave Partnership schools and districts in the coming year.

COVID-19 Relief and State Turnaround Funding Helped to Mitigate Pandemic-Induced Challenges

Partnership district leaders cited state turnaround dollars as fundamental to their turnaround efforts as they used these monies to improve technology access, address staffing challenges, and promote educator development. While substantially fewer Partnership educators believed that financial constraints were a significant hindrance to their improvement efforts during the 2021-22 school year, Partnership leaders reported that available funds were still insufficient on their own to fully address ongoing staffing challenges, in large part because of an insufficient supply of educators in their local labor markets.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue Supporting Partnership and Other Low-Performing Schools and Districts

The outsized effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on Partnership communities, educators, students, and school systems has made school improvement—always a difficult task—even harder. Moreover, statewide challenges with teacher recruitment and retention continue to be felt more acutely in Partnership districts. Partnership educators and leaders are working to provide the necessary academic, mental health, and socioemotional support services to help their students succeed. But these initiatives are costly—both in terms of dollars and the time and emotional toll on Partnership educators. While state turnaround dollars and one-time COVID-19 pandemic recovery funds have gone a long way to help Partnership schools and districts, the road to recovery will be long. State policymakers will need to continue funding Partnership and other low-performing schools and districts and providing them with assistance to help them build on early progress, accelerate learning, and continue to support their students. Current estimates suggest that a greater number of districts will be identified for Partnership in Round 4. However, the current budget appropriation maintains the state’s investment of \$6 million a year for 21h funds. These funds will likely be insufficient to adequately support an increased number of Partnership districts, especially as COVID-19 pandemic relief funds are exhausted and districts work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Policymakers should allocate additional funds to Partnership districts in the coming years to better support their improvement efforts for the duration of the three-year intervention period.

Assist Partnership Educators and Leaders in the Use of Evidence-Based Interventions to Accelerate Learning

While students in Partnership districts experienced achievement growth on par with—and sometimes at higher rates than—students in similar districts, they are nonetheless performing

at levels far below average in Michigan. Principals reported implementing several important strategies in the 2021-22 school year intended to help accelerate student learning. It will be important to support Partnership school and district leaders as they continue to work to accelerate learning, in particular providing them with resources to enable the use of evidence-based interventions—such as one-on-one or small group tutoring—that hold the greatest promise to foster achievement growth.

Provide Districts Exiting Partnership with Additional Resources to Ensure Continued Improvement

The 2022-23 school year will be the first in which districts will exit turnaround status after undergoing the full Partnership intervention. Some of these districts will be re-identified for Round 4 (implementation Cohort 3) of the intervention, but a subset of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 Partnership districts will exit Partnership entirely. These exiting districts are still among the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and they still serve large populations of historically disadvantaged students. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic undercut progress toward improvement goals and even districts that are exiting did not make as much progress toward school and district improvement as they had planned for pre-pandemic. By district and school leaders' own accounts, Partnership supports and resources helped them to improve. Losing the opportunity to access these resources and supports after more than two years of pandemic-related challenges might endanger their progress. Of course, over the past two years, school systems across the state have received considerable one-time federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, as well as increased state per-pupil funding as a result of the updated school funding formula. But one-time funds by definition will not be available in the long -run, and increased per-pupil funding may not be enough to sufficiently address the substantial needs of exited districts as they work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and continue making progress. Policymakers should continue to support these newly exited districts—financially and through additional operational and developmental assistance.

As the State Focuses Efforts on Strengthening the Educator Pipeline and Workforce, Pay Particular Attention to Ensure Partnership Schools and Districts Can Recruit, Retain, and Support Teachers

Partnership schools and districts have higher rates of teacher turnover than wealthier and higher-performing school districts, and substantial proportions of Partnership educators reported low morale and greater intentions to leave in the coming years. Partnership teachers cited leadership, culture, climate, and their students as reasons to *stay* in their positions and cited pay and workload as reasons to *leave*. Policymakers should target efforts to retain and grow the educator workforce in Partnership districts in particular, focusing on improving pay, reducing workload, and retaining effective leaders who can in turn build and maintain productive and welcoming schools with supportive working conditions.

Support Partnership Schools and Districts in Efforts to Reduce Student Absenteeism

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges related to student absenteeism and in particular chronic student absenteeism—reducing opportunity to learn among students who may already be grappling with significant challenges impeding their learning. Policymakers and district leaders should consider ways to decrease student absenteeism. For instance, schools can leverage existing resources (e.g., the Michigan Department of Education’s ENGAGE program) to make connections with students who are facing challenges that impede their ability to consistently attend class, support student success, identify the barriers to attendance and engagement, and provide supports to mitigate those barriers. If and when absenteeism stems from required quarantine protocols, districts should continue to work to abate the negative effects of missed in-person learning (for example, through resources for engaging quarantining students and high-quality virtual engagement opportunities).