Leading and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: District and School Leaders' Perspectives

Hayley Weddle, *EPIC Affiliated Faculty, University of Pittsburgh*

Ayesha K. Hashim, *EPIC Affiliated Faculty, NWEA*

Ogechi Irondi, *Researcher Assistant, University of Pittsburgh*

October 2022

EPIC
Education Policy
Innovation Collaborative
RESEARCH WITH CONSEQUENCE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DISCLAIMER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

· · · · · · · · · · ·

October 2022

Leading and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: District and School Leaders' Perspectives

Hayley Weddle, Ayesha K. Hashim, and Ogechi Irondi

Executive Summary

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU) is conducting a study of Michigan 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 (2020 PA 147, 148, 149), which tasked the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) with studying student progress toward learning goals during and beyond the 2020-21 school year, as well as understanding how schools were effective at meeting educational goals and attainment across in-person, hybrid, and remote instructional modalities.

In this report, we capture the perspectives of district, school, and teacher leaders (hereafter referred to as "local leaders") to surface best practices for supporting student learning during COVID-19. We ask:

a) What common successes and challenges did local leaders report with regards to supporting student learning?

b) How did local leaders support student learning in similar and different ways across instructional modalities?

c) What were local leaders' ongoing priorities and challenges as they navigated the 2021-22 school year?

To answer our research questions, we conducted 46 interviews with local leaders across five district cases as part of a multiple case study research design. To identify best practices for supporting student learning, we sampled districts that offered different instructional modalities (in-person, remote, hybrid), demonstrated better-than-predicted gains in student performance on benchmark assessments in the 2020-21 school year, and were situated in varied geographic contexts (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural) and different governance models (traditional public and charter schools). We asked interview participants to reflect on their priorities during the school year and their strategies for providing students access to learning opportunities, supporting the needs of special student populations, communicating with families, and providing social-emotional supports to students. We then conducted case and cross-case analyses of interview data to identify successes, challenges, and ongoing priorities.

While our sampling approach supports a rich understanding of district experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic where students performed relatively better on benchmark assessments, we cannot speak to the local policies, practices, and challenges of the majority of districts in Michigan that experienced less success in student learning.

SUCCESSES

Local leaders identified several common successes that enabled them to support student learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- readiness to navigate crises;
- community and data-informed decision-making about instructional modality;
- two-way communication with families;
- prioritizing social-emotional learning as a foundation for academic learning;
- individualizing support for students;
- increased collaboration across staff roles; and
- increased commitment to address inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We summarize these successes in Table 1 and note variation in these practices across instructional modalities where relevant.

In terms of **readiness to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic**, all districts benefited from consistent and dedicated school staff, skilled district-level leadership, long-standing relationships with families, and in some cases, a robust track record in educating special student populations. Districts also had existing curricula, instructional resources, technology tools, and scheduling structures that leaders perceived as effective for engaging students in learning and could be continued during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

While all districts engaged in **community and data-informed decision-making on instructional modality**, in-person and hybrid districts, in particular, faced varied parental preferences leading them to offer choices to families. One district site in our sample offered only remote instruction to students during the 2020-21 school year. In this case, local leaders chose to offer only remote instruction in response to heightened safety concerns from parents and staff due to high community transmission and infection rates.

Clear and consistent **two-way communication between districts and families** was a common practice. Across all cases, leaders discussed using virtual platforms to interact with parents and, based on parent input, facilitating access to resources such as food, digital devices, childcare, employment opportunities, and COVID-19 testing. In-person and hybrid districts communicated with families about safety protocols, infection rates, and exposures to build trust in district procedures for keeping children safe and to mitigate COVID-19 spread in schools. In contrast, hybrid and remote districts communicated with families about learning expectations, instructional procedures, and resources to support learning at home.

TABLE 1. District Successes and Modality Considerations			
Theme	**In-Person**	**Hybrid**	**Remote**
Readiness to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic	Consistent and dedicated school staff; skilled district-level leadership; long-standing relationships with families; robust track-record for educating special student populations; existing curricula, instructional resources, technology tools, and scheduling structures		
Community and data-informed decisions on instructional modality	Supported parent/family choice for different modalities while attending to operational constraints		Responded to heightened safety concerns due to case numbers
Increased clear and consistent two-way communication with families	Increased engagement with families through virtual communication to share updates, learn their needs, and provide access to resources such as food, devices, childcare, & COVID-19 testing		
	Communicated about COVID-19 exposures and protocols	Communicated about safety protocols, exposures, and instructional logistics and guidance	Communicated about instructional logistics and guidance
Prioritized social-emotional learning	Fostered a sense of *"normalcy"* with return to school and in-person social activities	Leveraged in-person and virtual opportunities for students to connect	Scheduled time and space during virtual school day for social activities
Provided students with individualized support to ensure engaged learning	Tailored support to address students' unique needs		
	Returned to pre-pandemic instructional and intervention approaches	Developed approaches in scheduling, small groupings, and using specialized staff to support classroom instruction	
		Offered learning labs to supplement classroom instruction	
Increased collaboration across staff	Dedicated time, structures, and tools to enable collaboration between general education teachers and specialized staff, and around tiered supports for student learning		
		Used attendance and engagement data to collaboratively identify students in need of support	
		Increased time for collaboration through dedicated planning day or scheduled block of time	
Increased awareness of educational inequities	Gained new insights into students' and families' experiences beyond the classroom which, in turn, deepened leaders' commitment to providing equitable access to educational opportunities		

All districts **prioritized social-emotional learning and individualized instructional support** to facilitate engagement in student learning, with a particular focus on building students' connection with peers and educators. For in-person and to some extent hybrid districts, this involved returning to pre-pandemic approaches to instruction and intervention, fostering a sense of *"normalcy"* for students as they returned to school, and facilitating in-person social connections among students and staff. Remote and hybrid districts used existing curricula, instructional models, and technology platforms to develop approaches for scheduling, small student groupings, and using specialized staff to support classroom instruction. These districts also offered learning labs to supplement classroom instruction.

All districts developed intentional approaches for **increasing staff collaboration between general education teachers and specialized staff**, and around tiered, intervention-based models for supporting student learning. Remote and hybrid districts also developed collaborative routines and tools for identifying students in need of support based on attendance and engagement data. These districts also leveraged flexibility in their schedules to dedicate time for staff planning and collaboration.

Finally, local leaders demonstrated **increased awareness of educational inequities** in their school systems, stemming in part from interfacing directly with students and families in their home environments. This awareness, in turn, deepened local leaders' commitment to provide more equitable access to educational opportunities moving forward.

CHALLENGES

While local leaders engaged in several successful approaches for supporting students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, they also described the 2020-21 school year as challenging and complex. Table 2 summarizes these themes and any considerations that were specific to each instructional modality.

When making decisions regarding instructional modality, all districts faced **tensions between prioritizing conflicting goals of health and safety and delivering high-quality learning experiences** to students. At times, conflicting viewpoints from stakeholders resulted in political pressure and pushback from staff, school board members, and families.

All districts faced **challenges effectively implementing remote instruction.** While only one district was considered fully remote, all five districts engaged in different levels of remote instruction during the 2020-21 school year. Local leaders experienced pervasive difficulties with student engagement across grade levels. Hybrid and remote districts encountered heightened stress for teachers who did not have prior experience with technology, as well as new student behaviors (e.g., improper Zoom etiquette) and disruptions with technology that distracted from student learning. The fully remote district case found it challenging to accurately assess student knowledge using remote or at-home assessments.

Leaders in all districts expressed concern about **leaders' and educators' heightened stress and burnout** in their school system. The COVID-19 pandemic brought on overlapping stressors such as navigating health and safety concerns, learning new technology, supporting students and families through trauma, and transitioning back and forth between instructional modalities, all of which contributed to educators feeling overworked.

TABLE 2. District Challenges and Modality Considerations			
Theme	**In-person**	**Hybrid**	**Remote**
Tensions between health and safety and delivering high-quality learning experiences	Struggled to balance beliefs about health and safety with those about providing access to high-quality learning opportunities Faced pressure and pushback from staff, school board, and families		
Challenges implementing remote instruction	Pervasive challenges supporting student engagement in remote learning		
	Faced disruptions when transitioning to periods of remote learning due to exposures/ quarantines	Encountered new disruptions with technology that distracted from student learning Stress for teachers who did not have prior experience with technology Remote districts found it challenging to assess student knowledge virtually	
Leaders' and educators' heightened stress and burnout	Stressors included navigating health and safety concerns, learning new technology, supporting students and families through trauma, and transitioning back and forth between instructional modalities		
	Educator stress from illness-related absences and mandatory transitions to remote learning	Added workload for educators to communicate with families about the logistics of instruction and to answer questions Hybrid teachers stretched thin in simultaneously delivering in-person and remote instruction Heightened stress for teachers who were not familiar with technology	

PRIORITIES FOR THE 2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR

Building off their success and challenges with supporting student learning in the 2020-21 school year, districts highlighted ongoing priorities for supporting student learning and recovery. Local leaders emphasized the need for: (a) maintaining appropriate staffing in districts and schools; (b) implementing strategies to accelerate student learning; and (c) continuing to integrate social-emotional learning in educational programming.

A consistent priority across districts for the 2021-22 school year was to maintain appropriate staffing. While local leaders relied extensively on school staff to navigate through the first year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic, they faced more challenges in filling staff positions in the 2021-22 school year. In addition to staffing, leaders also prioritized efforts to accelerate student learning by continuing the use of tiered and diagnostic-based interventions, tutoring, and learning labs to help students catch up on missed learning opportunities. They expressed caution about over-remediating student learning and instead planned to target interventions and instructional support around essential or core content standards that carried across grade-levels. Leaders remained committed to continuing social-emotional learning as a core component of educational programming, primarily to address student trauma and emotions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and discussed approaches to training and equipping staff to deliver social-emotional guidance and support to students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Local leaders' reflections on their efforts to support student learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic revealed several common strategies and successes across the state. Importantly, although these districts were selected as positive cases based on student performance, they still experienced many challenges. Based on the findings, we provide recommendations for leaders and state policymakers to inform ongoing recovery efforts:

Recommendation One: To promote high-quality learning opportunities, develop and tailor educational programs, instruction, and support to address students' individual needs. It may also be important to develop strong curricular resources to guide instruction during periods of crises and build capacity for social-emotional learning.

Recommendation Two: To ensure schools and districts have a strong workforce, prioritize long-term investments in educator pipelines, including specialized staff. Policymakers should also solicit input from educators about sources of work stress and dissatisfaction and act to mitigate these concerns. These long-term investments should be undertaken alongside short-term recruitment efforts to address immediate shortages.

Recommendation Three: To promote skilled leadership at the local level, prioritize the recruitment and retention of equity-focused education leaders. Equity-centered leadership is responsive to students' and families' unique needs, and attends to how broader structures and policies contribute to disparities in opportunities and outcomes for historically marginalized groups (e.g., Turner, 2020). When preparing, hiring, and training local leaders, it may be valuable to prioritize skills related to empathy, equity, and collaboration, as well as expertise related to supporting students' social-emotional learning.

Recommendation Four: To support collaboration across staff, consider how to best dedicate time, structures, and tools to support teachers' collaborative planning while balancing concerns about students' access to active instruction.

Recommendation Five: To strengthen district/school-family relationships, develop policies and processes that incentivize and facilitate partnerships and joint decision-making with families. This may include leveraging technology as a tool to promote clear, transparent, and consistent two-way communication.

Recommendation Six: To ensure preparedness for future crises, provide districts with appropriate resources, staffing, and support to promote the safety of in-person and hybrid instruction and the quality of remote learning experiences. Supporting preparedness for safe in-person instruction may require investing in building ventilation and supplying personal protective equipment and testing. Offering high-quality remote learning would require bolstering technology infrastructure and capacity, as described below.

Recommendation Seven: To bolster technology infrastructure and capacity, expand access to the Internet and devices and provide ongoing training and support for leaders and educators on using technology both in and beyond the classroom.

Section One:
Introduction

Responding to Michigan's Return to Learn legislation (2020 PA 147, 148, 149), the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU) is conducting a study of Michigan school district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to support student learning. This includes studying student progress toward learning goals during and beyond the 2020-21 school year, as well as understanding how schools were effective at meeting educational goals and attainment across in-person, hybrid, and remote instructional modalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted district and school operations and student learning in an entirely unprecedented manner. Shortly after the first COVID-19 infections were documented in the United States, school buildings physically closed, and educators and students entered into an unprecedented environment of remote instruction. Through interviews with state leaders across roles and organizations, EPIC documented state leaders' evolving priorities for supporting districts, schools, and communities through the COVID-19 pandemic; opportunities and challenges faced at the state and local levels; and state leaders' reflections about the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating racial and socioeconomic inequities (Hashim & Weddle, 2022). In other reports, EPIC showed that student learning slowed during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years relative to rates of learning pre-pandemic, and that there was variation in student achievement growth across districts and schools that could be explained in part by instructional modality (i.e., students in remote districts learned less) (Kilbride et al., 2021a; Kilbride et al., 2021b; Kilbride et al., 2022).

This report builds on previous work by describing local conditions and practices that enabled student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and might explain the variation observed in student achievement growth across districts and schools. We document the ways in which district, school, and teacher leaders (hereafter referred to as "local leaders") supported student learning across instructional modalities (remote, hybrid, and in-person) and diverse local contexts during the 2020-21 school year. Using a multiple case study research design, we ask:

- What common successes and challenges did local leaders report with regards to supporting student learning?

- How did local leaders support student learning in similar and different ways across instructional modalities?

- What were local leaders' ongoing priorities and challenges as they navigated the 2021-22 school year?

In what follows, we first describe our approach to sampling district cases and data collection and analysis for our multiple case study research design. We then present our findings in terms of district successes and challenges for supporting student learning and, where relevant, make comparisons across districts with different instructional modalities. We then discuss districts' ongoing priorities for supporting student learning in the 2021-22 school year, along with the implications of our findings for policy and practice.

Section Two:
Data and Methods

We use a multiple case study research design to examine promising practices for supporting student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a design allows us to identify districts that were positive outliers in terms of student achievement growth on benchmark assessments during the 2020-21 school year and develop a deeper understanding of the policies, practices, and contextual factors in these districts that may have enabled student success in learning. As part of our sampling approach, we intentionally sampled outperforming districts that adopted different instructional modalities and were situated in varied local contexts. While our sampling approach supports a rich understanding of district experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic where students performed relatively better on benchmark assessments, we cannot speak to the local policies, practices, and challenges of the majority of districts in Michigan that experienced less success in student learning. Lastly, while the main priority of our analysis was to understand what worked well in outperforming districts, we also asked about challenges to understand what barriers to supporting student learning were present among these more successful districts.

CASE STUDY SAMPLE SELECTION

We first identified districts that performed better than would have been predicted in terms of their achievement growth on benchmark assessments during 2020-21, the first full pandemic-affected school year. We started by running analytical models that predicted the change in percent of students in each district who were "significantly behind grade-level" on benchmark assessments in 2020-21 as a function of district-level characteristics and the district's benchmark assessment

vendor.[1] We ran separate models for three unique analytic samples based on the instructional modality each district offered students for the majority of the 2020-21 school year. Because districts could and did offer multiple instructional modality options during the 2020-21 school year, the aforementioned groupings were defined based on the instructional modality offered to students for the majority of the school year. We tracked district instructional modality offerings through monthly Extended COVID-19 Learning (ECOL) reports districts submitted to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) (see Kilbride et al., 2021a, for more detail).

Based on the results from these models, we identified the highest performing districts for each instructional modality by test subject (reading and math) and assessment provider (sampling based on NWEA MAP Growth and Curriculum Associates, the two most common benchmark assessment providers in Michigan). We then confirmed that these districts demonstrated better-than-predicted results in reading or math based on overall test scores as well as those for student populations such as students in grade K-3, English learners, economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities. From this subset of districts, we purposively sampled districts for variation in assessment provider, student demographics (percent non-White, English learners, economically disadvantaged), location (rural, suburban, urban), and district type (charter or traditional public school). For more details on our analytic model and the identification of our sample district cases, see Appendix A.

DESCRIPTION OF DISTRICT CASES

Table 2.1 summarizes our district cases in terms of instructional modality, test performance outcomes, urbanicity, student demographics, and district governance type (local educational administration [LEA] districts are traditional public school systems and public school academy [PSA] districts are networks of charter schools). For test performance outcomes, we report the actual minus predicted change in the percent of students deemed "significantly behind grade-level" from fall-to-spring in reading and math. More negative values indicate a larger difference between the actual percent of students *behind grade-level* and the percent predicted in our models, thus indicating districts that are relatively *higher performing*.

It is important to note that instructional modalities in the 2020-21 school year were more fluid than our primary categorizations of district cases indicate. In practice, our sample districts adopted a combination of modalities throughout the 2020-21 school year. In-person and hybrid case districts offered a fully remote option to students and, in one in-person district, students were allowed to switch between modalities at any time during the school year. Our in-person case districts also had periods of remote instruction for all or sub-sets of students due to high COVID-19 case numbers. All hybrid and remote district cases offered some degree of in-person instruction for students with disabilities as well as in-person learning labs for students who did not have internet connectivity at home or needed additional academic support. Given this fluidity, we draw on evidence across district cases when making claims about instructional modality where possible. For example, in drawing conclusions about instructional design and supports under remote instruction, we leverage data from our primarily remote district (District E), as well as from in-person and hybrid districts that offered remote instruction.

District cases were situated in varied local contexts, allowing us to probe the circumstances under which different instructional modalities may have been effective for student learning and to identify distinct and common practices that supported student learning across modalities. Note, because we limited district samples to those that tested a large enough number of students to observe reliable trends in test performance, our final sample included districts in the upper tercile for student enrollment across the state of Michigan. In-person districts differ in terms of the racial/ethnic background of their student populations. District A is a large district with a majority non-White and economically disadvantaged population. By contrast, District B is relatively smaller in size and enrolls predominantly White students and a relatively lower share of students who are from economically disadvantaged families. We see similar variation across our hybrid districts. District C enrolls a predominantly White and rural student population. District D is relatively larger in size with a sizeable population of English learners and students who are economically disadvantaged. Finally, District E is a charter network in a large city with almost all non-White and economically disadvantaged students.

TABLE 2.1. Summary of District Cases						
District	Primary Modality	Reading (% diff)	Math (% diff)	District Type	Urbanicity	Student Demographics
District A	In-Person	-10.51	-7.12	LEA District	Suburb: Large	Non-White: High ED: Medium EL: High SWD: Medium
District B	In-Person	-16.73	-15.18	LEA District	Suburb: Large	Non-White: Medium ED: Low EL: Medium SWD: Medium
District C	Hybrid	-7.98	-6.63	LEA District	Rural: Fringe	Non-White: Low ED: Low EL: Medium SWD: Low
District D	Hybrid	-2.33	-7.78	LEA District	City: Small	Non-White: Low ED: Medium EL: High SWD: Low
District E	Remote	-3.51	-4.91	PSA District	City: Large	Non-White: High ED: High EL: Medium SWD: Low

Note: Reading and math performance reported as the actual minus predicted change in percent of students significantly below grade-level from fall-to-spring in the 2020-21 school year. Negative values indicate a larger actual decline in the percent of students behind grade-level than predicted in our models and hence districts that are relatively higher performing. District E is a charter network with each school identified as a separate district. In Table 1, we summed enrollment and averaged all other data across charter schools in the network for which assessment data are available. LEA means "local education agency" and PSA refers to "public school academy," or a charter district. Size refers to total enrollment. Non-White refers to the percent of students in the district who are Black, Asian, Hispanic or Latino/a/x, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. SWD indicate the percent of students who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, and who are identified as having a disability. To summarize the size and proportion of different student populations in each district, we divide all Michigan districts into terciles based on each respective characteristic (i.e., small, medium, and large). The boundaries for each tercile and district characteristic are provided in the second section note.[2]

CASE STUDY METHODS

EPIC interviewed 46 local leaders across five districts between February 15th and May 27th, 2022. Table 2.2 summarizes information on interview participants for each district site. Participants included district superintendents[3] and directors, school administrators, and in some cases, teacher leaders. At the district level, we recruited interview participants from senior leadership (superintendents, assistant superintendents) as well as those overseeing departments relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic response such as English language development, special education, instructional technology, curriculum, and elementary and secondary education. School leaders included both school principals and assistant principals, whereas teacher leaders included teachers' union representatives and those identified by district leadership as contributing to the COVID-19 pandemic response efforts. Because Districts C and E were the smallest in size across our district cases and had fewer leadership positions in the district central office, we conducted more interviews at the school level to capture leadership perspectives in these districts.

Throughout this report we refer to the district cases as "districts" and the broader set of participants as "local leaders." We make distinctions between cases and roles when appropriate.

Table 2.2. Interview Participants		
District	**Primary Modality**	**Interview participants**
District A	In-Person	District leaders = 5 School and teacher leaders = 3
District B	In-Person	District leaders = 5 School and teacher leaders = 4
District C	Hybrid	District leaders = 4 School and teacher leaders = 7
District D	Hybrid	District leaders = 6 School and teacher leaders = 4
District E	Remote	District leaders = 3 School and teacher leaders = 5

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interview questions focused on leaders' priorities to support staff, students, and families while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic; opportunities to collaborate with other stakeholders in pursuit of shared goals; and each district's instructional modality and shifts in modalities offered over time (largely to confirm our classification of district cases as observed in ECOL reports). In addition, we asked about each district's approach for providing student access to learning opportunities, supporting student engagement in learning, supporting the needs of special student populations, communicating with families, attending to social-emotional learning, and providing other support and resources for teaching and learning (as defined by interview participants). For each of these approaches, we asked participants to reflect on specific strategies that worked well, those that did not, and any perceived barriers and challenges. We also asked participants to elaborate on their district's priorities for the ongoing 2021-22 school year and to reflect on their growth as education leaders.

We transcribed and coded interviews based on broad conceptual categories as identified in our interview protocol (e.g., priorities for supporting student learning; instructional modality; ensuring access to learning opportunities; supporting engagement in learning; social-emotional learning; communication with families; barriers and challenges; opportunities for collaboration with educators, leaders, families, and other stakeholders; etc.). We met as a research team to build out the coding tree in close alignment with our interview protocol, and then sorted our interview data in these codes. We met weekly to review coding and identify inductive codes that emerged from our initial reading of the data. For example, we observed that strategies around staffing and for supporting staff were prominent themes discussed by local leaders and agreed to code for this theme in our initial sorting of the data.

We then analyzed coded data for emergent themes and documented themes in case memos for each district case. These memos elaborated on the local context of each district case; design of instructional modality; effective strategies, resources, and practices for supporting student learning; the role of collaboration and family-school relationships in shaping student learning; challenges in implementation; and ongoing priorities for the 2021-22 school year. We included supporting excerpts for each theme to establish a chain of evidence. Drawing on these district case memos, we next wrote cross-case memos on similarities and differences within and across instructional modalities which informed the findings presented below.

SECTION TWO NOTES

1. We select on districts' status as "significantly behind grade level" because the "Return to Learn" legislation required MDE to identify the number and percentage of students in the state who are "significantly behind grade level" (2020 PA 149). Each assessment provider recommended slightly different ways to define "significantly behind grade level." For NWEA, we used the MAP Growth score thresholds from their Michigan-specific linking study (which used test scores from assessments completed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) for students who are projected to fall within the "Not Proficient" category on the M-STEP assessment at the end of the year (NWEA, 2020). Curriculum Associates recommended that we use the score ranges from their grade placement tables to identify students who are two or more grade levels below their chronological grade (Curriculum Associates, 2018). Renaissance Learning's recommendation was to use their existing benchmark for the Star 360 assessments for students who are performing below grade-level expectations, based on their percentile ranks relative to the norming sample for the appropriate grade level and subject area (i.e., with percentile ranks of 24 or below; Renaissance Learning, 2021a, b). DRC recommended that we use the lowest of the four achievement level categories established for the Smarter Balanced ICA assessments (Level 1: "Did not meet standard"). as a proxy for "significantly behind grade level" for 3rd-8th grade (DRC, 2021).

2. The terciles boundaries for total enrollment are 451 and 1295 student. Similar boundaries for the percent non-White, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and English learners are 12.1% and 39.5%, 52.8% and 74.3%, 12.4% and 16.6%, and 0.2% and 2.2%, respectively.

3. Of the five superintendents who participated, four had been in their roles for three years or less at the time of the interviews.

Section Three:
Findings

Findings reveal how local leaders supported student learning across instructional modalities and diverse local contexts during the 2020-21 school year. In the following sections, we highlight seven successful approaches and three common challenges, making comparisons across districts with different instructional modalities when relevant. The findings conclude with a discussion of districts' ongoing priorities in the 2021-22 school year.

SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES ACROSS CASES DURING THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR

Local leaders identified common successes that enabled them to support student learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic:

- readiness to navigate crises;

- community and data-informed decision-making about instructional modality;

- two-way communication with families;

- prioritizing social-emotional learning as a foundation for academic learning;

- individualizing support for students;

- increased collaboration across staff roles; and

- increased commitment to address inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Districts Had Common Strengths Supporting Their Readiness to Navigate the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior studies suggest that districts' and schools' organizational readiness enables policy implementation and success (e.g., Scaccia et al., 2015). Little is known, however, about the dimensions of organizational readiness that matter for districts and schools when navigating a crisis. Our findings suggest that districts shared several organizational strengths that prepared them for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included consistent and dedicated school staff, skilled district-level leadership, long-standing relationships with families, a robust track record supporting special student populations, and effective curricular and scheduling structures.

Districts Began the COVID-19 Pandemic With Consistent and Dedicated School Staff

Many leaders connected successes during the COVID-19 pandemic to the presence of dedicated staff coming into the crisis. One district administrator shared that *"the best thing"* about the district were *"the people who work in our school system."* A school principal commented on the tremendous commitment from staff to support students, sharing how they were willing to go above and beyond to support students' success. Reflecting on staff commitment, this principal explained, *"We had that from day one—I think that is what made the difference with our students."*

Staff commitment to supporting student success stemmed in part from working in their districts for many years and forming close work relationships with colleagues pre-pandemic. Nearly all interview participants who were school leaders and teachers had several years of experience in their school system. A school principal shared that most of this teaching staff joined their school at the same time and many were about to retire together. Similarly, a school leader in a different district noted that they had worked closely with their principal for many years and were *"like two peas in a pod."* This shared history and commitment to their schools provided a foundation for staff to work extensively to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Successful Districts Benefited From Superintendents Who Were Responsive, Communicative, and Empathetic Leaders

Participants across cases described district-level leadership as strong. An administrator shared that they worked most of their career in the same district because of the student-centric mindset of previous and current superintendents:

> *The reason why I have always stuck around in [District] is because I believe the leaders have always had the right mindset [which is] students first. I think our superintendent truly embodies that. […] [They are] great to work for, very understanding, [an] empathetic individual who fights for students' rights. Who wouldn't want to be part of that, right?*

The administrator quoted above appreciated how leaders' mindsets carried over into the COVID-19 pandemic such that senior leaders showed empathy for students and staff who were navigating new challenges. This student-centered leadership enabled district and school staff to prioritize student needs during a crisis. Similarly, a teacher from another district shared how their superintendent was integral to building relationships between school and communities and

between administrators and teachers which, in turn, drove how their school responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared, *"The way our school handled this pandemic, I thank God every day that I was under our current superintendent."*

Districts Had Long-Standing Relationships With Students, Families, and the Broader Community

As reflected in our earlier report concerning state-level stakeholders' priorities during COVID-19 (Hashim & Weddle, 2022) as well as in prior studies (e.g., DeMatthews et al., 2016), strong existing relationships can be helpful for navigating crises and responding to family and student needs. Across the districts included in this study, pre-existing relationships promoted trust and partnership. For example, a district leader noted that having *"strong relationships"* with families was a *"consistent priority"* long before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Further, relationships with families were founded on a strong understanding of parent and student preferences and needs.

> **Leaders shared that success they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic wouldn't have been possible without existing relationships with parents.**

Many leaders shared that any success they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic would not have been possible without existing supportive relationships with parents. A school principal noted, *"We are successful and...a huge reason that we are is that we get support from parents outside the classroom. That has been the expectation since I have been here."* Another principal commented on the benefits of having strong relationships with families coupled with dedicated staff. They shared, *"Our families are great. We have teachers that teach because they care and they want their kids to do well. That makes [the pandemic] so much easier to navigate through."* Therefore, existing relationships between schools and families was a critical input that shaped districts' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Three Cases, Districts Also Had a Robust Track Record for Supporting Special Student Populations Such as English Learners and Special Education Students

This history implied the presence of internal expertise and know-how for supporting special student populations that proved useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. An administrator explained, *"It does not matter what is being thrown at us [...] We have a good system in place to [support] English language learners."* Relatedly, another district was described as having a *"fantastic reputation for helping special education students"* that attracted families to the area. One school principal shared, *"people go 'You have to move [here] because...they are the best that can help all special education students.'"* These deep proficiencies in working with special student populations enabled districts to respond to their needs more easily during the COVID-19 pandemic as they faced new adversities.

Districts Had Effective Curricula, Instructional Resources, and Scheduling Structures in Place Pre-Pandemic

These existing structures provided a strong foundation for developing approaches to instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the remote district, leaders continued an existing practice of scheduling an hour of intervention-based instruction during the school day. As one school leader

explained, *"One thing that I believe our school has always done well—at least for the past four to five years that I have been here—we have intervention built into our schedule."* By continuing this structure during remote instruction, leaders leveraged an existing strength to support student learning amidst crises.

Similarly, leaders in another district relied on their existing curriculum and instructional model to build out a virtual instructional program for students who opted for remote learning. One school principal shared that educators felt best equipped to support student learning when relying on familiar curricula and teaching practices that had contributed to students' prior academic success:

> *We were going to take our curriculum, our existing resources [...] we were trying to think how we could take that instructional model and implement it remotely.... [We] just try to keep doing what we have been doing because we feel like our academic success was there prior to the pandemic, so we did not want to veer off course.*

Hybrid districts also relied on existing curriculum maps to identify essential standards for orienting instruction for the shorter duration that students were in school. An administrator explained that their district had engaged in curriculum mapping pre-pandemic which allowed them to identify *"power standards—essentials in different departments and grade-levels"* to guide instruction. As these examples demonstrate, local leaders leveraged curricular and scheduling structures that had contributed to their academic success before the COVID-19 pandemic to build effective educational programs during crises.

Across Both Remote and Hybrid Districts, Leaders Relied on Technology Tools That Were Familiar to Educators and Students

A school principal described how they deliberately avoided adopting new online platforms amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as they did not want teachers to have to learn new software, course structures, or lesson content. Instead, the district allowed teachers to build virtual instruction with online tools that they were already using. Similarly, educators in hybrid districts discussed using existing online tools to support student learning at home. One teacher in District C shared how everybody in their building was already using the Google platform which helped tremendously in the rollout of instruction:

> *There was this level of, okay, we have used it. We might not be pros but we have enough of an understanding to deliver content [and] the students have had enough experience and exposure that they will be able to...navigate instruction.*

In addition to having common organizational strengths coming into the COVID-19 pandemic, local leaders also engaged in several new approaches to promote success during the 2020-21 school year. These are described below, beginning with how leaders approached decision-making on instructional modality.

Educators felt best equipped to support student learning when relying on familiar curricula and teaching practices that had contributed to students' prior academic success.

Local Leaders Engaged in Community and Data-Informed Decision-Making to Select and Implement Instructional Modalities for the 2020-21 School Year

Consistent with prior studies highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement in district decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Grissom, & Condon, 2021), local leaders collected data and solicited input from relevant stakeholders as they selected, implemented, and refined instructional modalities. Local leaders described soliciting feedback from a range of stakeholders including educators, students, union representatives, families, and public health officials. Reflecting on this collaborative approach, a principal explained, *"No plan or decision was made without involving all of our stakeholders."* Another leader expressed appreciation for their superintendent, who considered multiple perspectives when making decisions. They explained:

> *[They were] phenomenal…[They've] done a great job balancing what parents say they need and what teachers and students say they need. [They] always [go] by data. [They ask] for input, analyze it, come to us with the results, and we all collaborate and work together as a team to do what's best for kids. That's [their] ultimate outcome and yes, the leadership is key.*

To support collaborative decision-making, leaders brought together groups of stakeholders with participants ranging from district-level leaders to community members. For example, a hybrid district leader described convening a committee of over 100 stakeholders to determine the instructional modality that would be offered for the 2020-21 school year. This collaborative process allowed district leaders to make transparent decisions about instructional modality that were attentive to a range of priorities and considerations.

"No plan or decision was made without involving all of our stakeholders."

In-Person and Hybrid Districts Managed Varied Family Preferences by Offering Choices in Modality and Attending to Operational Constraints

In-person and hybrid districts faced varied parental preferences for instructional modality, leading them to offer families choices between in-person and hybrid versus remote instruction. A leader described supporting families' decision-making about their children's education and described communicating to families that *"the safety and comfort for your family is what is best."*

In District A, strong family demand for remote instruction freed up operational capacity within the district to offer in-person instruction to all remaining students while mitigating risks of COVID-19 infection. In districts that offered hybrid instruction, it was simply not possible to bring all students back while adhering to risk mitigation practices such as social distancing. One leader shared how their district's decision to implement hybrid instruction was informed by parents' strong preferences for in-person instruction as well as data about local COVID-19 case numbers, risk mitigation, and operational capacity (e.g., access to physical space, ventilation, protective equipment). They explained, *"Hybrid is the only thing I could do to keep [risk] mitigated."* As this

example demonstrates, leaders balanced multiple factors—including family preferences, safety, and operational capacity—when making decisions about modality.

In the Remote District, Local Leaders Considered High Case Numbers and Heightened Community Concerns Related to Health and Safety When Selecting Their Instructional Modality

District leaders described collaboratively approaching the decision to offer remote instruction following the passage of the Return to Learn legislation in the summer of 2020. Stakeholder surveys of teachers and students suggested that over 50% of parents in District E would not send their children to school in-person. Survey data also demonstrated that school-based staff overwhelmingly preferred the remote option. Describing the initial efforts to explore instructional modalities, one leader shared, *"We went through every option. [...] the decision came down to, like I said, the stakeholder surveys."*

The final decision to remain remote through the 2020-21 school year stemmed from community concerns about COVID-19 rates when vaccines were not available. One district leader noted that schools in the district were in the hardest hit COVID-19 areas in the state. They went on to explain that this meant that most staff and families did not feel safe engaging in in-person instruction. Despite these community concerns, a school leader described having to contextualize the modality decision for board members who lived in different communities than the students and were encouraging in-person schooling. They explained, *"The death rate was the highest in this particular zip code, and that's where our students live. That's why they do not want to come to school. It's not like where you live."* As this quote suggests, district leaders not only solicited input from parents and staff to inform decision-making, but also advocated for these preferences with school board members.

> **"We survived a pandemic because we became a family, and our kids succeeded because we became family."**

Local Leaders Engaged in Clear and Consistent Two-Way Communication With Families to Share Updates, Learn About Family Preferences and Needs, and Provide Access to Resources

Consistent with evidence that communication between schools and parents can enhance parental involvement in education and students' academic outcomes (e.g., Doss et al., 2019), leaders and educators described communication with families as central to their efforts to engage students in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This involved communicating with caregivers about class schedules, learning expectations and materials, and answering questions about course content and assignments.

Leaders used multiple channels to ensure on-going communication with families such as newsletters, texts, phone calls, town halls, Zoom meetings, and home visits. One superintendent described prioritizing this *"two-way communication"* through multiple formats so that families could have many opportunities to share feedback. In districts with English learner families, leaders

described providing translation and interpretation services in multiple languages. Describing the effect of these services on English learner family engagement, a leader from District D shared, *"They fully participated. They were in-the-know because we had translators."*

When discussing engagement with families, leaders often highlighted the importance of caring relationships. One school-level participant explained how these relationships helped to support student success amidst many pandemic-related challenges, sharing:

> *We all made sure that that whole entire family was taken care of [...] it really showed me, again from top to bottom, how we care about each other and how that goes so much further than any mandate, any pandemic. We survived a pandemic because we became a family, and our kids succeeded because we became family.*

Thus, communication between schools and families went beyond academics and instruction to address well-being. These caring exchanges supported students to learn and succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across Cases, Family Engagement Increased as Virtual Opportunities Made Connecting More Accessible

Leaders described increased engagement with families through virtual town halls and meetings as a *"silver-lining"* of the COVID-19 pandemic, even in districts offering in-person instruction. Across all districts, leaders described virtual engagement opportunities as easier and more convenient to attend, particularly for families with multiple work and caretaking responsibilities or limited transportation. One leader explained that offering virtual engagement opportunities on Zoom greatly increased families' participation in meetings, sharing that, *"the amount of parents that were showing up was fantastic."* A leader in a different district expressed a similar sentiment, noting that parents' attendance at meetings *"went up quite a bit when it was remote."* Another local leader commented that technology-enabled communication with families would likely persist in the future:

> *We can meet more with parents now because we can do Zoom. Even though some things were thrust upon us, it's going to be a new way of life [...] because it is going to help our students in the long run.*

As noted earlier, districts serving large English learner populations relied on technology to translate district communication to families. Interestingly, leaders in these districts also noticed an improvement in families' comfort navigating technology to engage. Reflecting on the positive effect of this trend, a principal shared, *"Our families had to learn how to navigate technology and learn to use some of the tools. [...] Staying connected to our families and building those relationships was huge."*

Engaging in two-way communication with families also helped leaders better understand family needs.

Local Leaders Used Information Gleaned From Communication With Families to Provide Students and Families With Access to Critical Resources

These resources included food, digital devices, internet, childcare, employment opportunities, and COVID-19 testing. Reflecting on the range of resources provided to families during the COVID-19 pandemic, one leader shared:

The pandemic really hit a lot of our families. I had many, many students that lost family members, and that was very hard. We had to create this student support network that we used if families needed to be connected with the social worker, or if families were not able to get food, or if families didn't have internet or if their Chromebook broke.

Several leaders noted that their deep existing relationships with families enabled them to help families access needed resources. Leaders across districts also described offering food pick-ups throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and connecting families with community organizations for additional services as needed. In some districts, leaders described promoting access to COVID-19 testing.

Consistent two-way communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed districts to meet students' and families' wellness and resource needs and support student learning across districts.

Leaders in the In-Person and Hybrid Districts Communicated Extensively With Families About Tracking COVID-19 Infections and Exposures

The purpose of this communication was to help build trust in school safety protocols, minimize COVID-19 spread, and help families prepare should schools need to transition back to remote instruction. One leader emphasized the importance of communicating these protocols with families, sharing, *"Regular postings were sent out [to parents]... We tried to follow what was available in Michigan through the health department."* Another leader explained how their school closely monitored and immediately disclosed cases of COVID-19 exposures to families so that they could minimize infection spread and keep school buildings open. They said, *"There were protocols in place regarding communication to students who either were in close contact or were infected themselves."* District and school leaders also communicated with families to support continuity should they need to transition to fully remote instruction. This included providing information and materials for parents to help support student learning at home (e.g., classroom schedules, worksheets with instructions, recording asynchronous lessons), and supporting students with access to devices and the internet.

Educators in Remote and Hybrid Districts Communicated Extensively With Families About Instructional Logistics and How to Support Learning at Home

Across cases, educators were available beyond the typical school day to answer questions, help students to complete assignments, and keep students engaged in learning. Educators also described extensive communication with families about each week's instructional plan and schedule, as well as directions for assignments. Commenting on the extensive communication and resources shared with parents, one high school teacher noted, *"There were lots of questions. That is why I felt the need to communicate every single week. [...] I invited parents to join my Google Classroom so they had access to the platform that I was using."*

Similarly in District E, an elementary school teacher described communicating weekly with parents to set expectations for student learning. They described sharing a "Peek of the Week" with a list of Zoom links and assignments for each day and follow up with reminders and emails for parents to submit assignments. This ongoing and detailed communication was necessary to engage parents as partners in supporting student learning at home.

Leaders Prioritized Social-Emotional Learning as a Foundation for Academic Learning

Efforts to promote students' social-emotional learning were central to leaders' work during the 2020-21 school year. Notably, districts did not adopt new programs to cultivate social-emotional competencies in students. Rather, district approaches to social-emotional learning were largely in response to student needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders focused on identifying and responding to student trauma and emotions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic during regular classroom instruction, as well as strengthening staff-student relationships to foster students' sense of belonging.

One leader described the importance of supporting teachers with implementing trauma-informed approaches, sharing:

> *We wanted to make sure that it was not just our social workers or psychologists or counselors, but everybody truly had that understanding of what it meant to go through some trauma, and how to approach that in the classroom and how to build a trauma-informed, resilient classroom.*

Similarly, other leaders shared examples of teachers incorporating mindfulness activities and exercises to identify emotions into their instruction. One leader described efforts to disrupt the belief that social-emotional learning is a separate entity from academics and encouraged teachers to prioritize social-emotional learning as an interwoven aspect of their content instruction.

Leaders also referenced the importance of fostering caring relationships with and between students. Reflecting on the positive influence of strong relationships, one leader in District C shared, *"Our attendance rate was fantastic [...] Our kids are engaged. I've got to believe that [was because] of relationships formed by the teachers and the students."* Similarly, leaders described creative efforts to support students' social connectedness with peers. For example, leaders described offering virtual assemblies, game days, and outdoor events.

"We know climate and culture is what really drives academics."

Describing relationships as an important foundation for supporting student learning, one leader explained, *"We know climate and culture is what really drives academics."* Local leaders made schools a safe place where staff recognized and supported students' trauma and emotional needs as a precursor to learning. How this looked in practice varied based on district's instructional modality.

In-Person and Hybrid Districts Prioritized Establishing a Sense of Normalcy and Fostering Social Connection as Students Returned to School in the Fall

In District A, leaders focused on resuming electives that brought joy to students and would motivate them to be at school and learn. Sharing how they ran band classes outside, one leader pointed out, *"In all of the chaos, we wanted to make things as normal as possible for students so that that wasn't constantly weighing on their minds and interfering with their learning."*

School principals also described meeting with students in-person to build relationships that could motivate learning. One high school principal shared that they organized bi-weekly lunch meetings with students who were academically struggling so they could discuss how to improve their academic performance. Similarly, a middle school principal described their school's emphasis on positive behavior, team building, and social activities:

> *I wholeheartedly believe if you pay more of your energy, your physical dollars, and all of that towards positive behavior and focus and promote that, you'll spend less on the negative. [...] [Students] are going to be successful in the classroom because they're going to want to be at school. That's probably 85 percent of the battle.*

Local leaders in hybrid districts also emphasized that relationship building enabled student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In District C, educators and students benefited from smaller class sizes since only half of the student population attended school in-person at a time. A middle school principal shared that behavioral issues and student discipline referrals were *"almost non-existent"* during the school's hybrid schedule, which they attributed partly to the district's smaller class sizes and students' stronger social connections with staff and peers. Another teacher shared that she enjoyed having more time to connect with students and form relationships with them. They explained, *"We really got to have a lot of really nice discussions that we do not usually get to have...It was a little family that we had in here."*

Leaders in Hybrid and Remote Districts Intentionally Created Space Within Students' Schedules to Connect With Peers and Educators

A school administrator in the remote district described using social-emotional learning activities to start the virtual school day. Within individual Zoom classrooms, they described, *"We did a virtual morning meeting, community circle-type stuff. We did a mindfulness thing."* A school administrator at a different school recounted using virtual morning school assemblies or *"huddles"* with 5th-8th grade students to address social-emotional learning while also increasing student engagement. These morning huddles also served as mini workshops to address challenges around Zoom etiquette.

The principal who engaged in these huddles shared, *"I would say that's been the most helpful. I loved doing that huddle in the morning [...] just to embrace those kids in the morning and help them get their day started off on a good note."* Across the remote and hybrid districts, these opportunities for students to connect with teachers and peers helped to support their engagement in school.

School Leaders and Teachers Provided Students With Individualized Support to Promote Engagement in Learning

Consistent with prior studies suggesting that shifting teacher practice to individualize instruction can improve student achievement (e.g., Little, McCoach, & Reis, 2014; Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015; Slavin, & Lake, 2008), leaders and educators promoted student success amidst the COVID-19 pandemic by tailoring instruction and support. Districts individualized support by attending to students' unique needs, supplementing regular instruction with learning labs, and developing personalized structures and routines specific to their instructional modality.

School Staff Tailored Support to Students' Unique Needs

Student needs varied based on their instructional modality (e.g., remote versus in-person), school level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school students), existing academic needs (e.g., students that were not on track for completing high school), presence or absence of resources at home to support student learning, and the social, economic, and health concerns of families. The need for differentiated support was sometimes more pronounced in districts in which students were learning at least partially remotely. One district administrator described teachers' efforts to support students with vastly different needs, sharing, *"I think teachers just had to get creative as to how they were going to engage their students at the different levels and what worked for them."* In another district, a school leader shared examples of how their staff regularly checked in with students at home to help them focus while learning remotely. Teachers would check that students were awake, had eaten food, and were participating in class.

All Districts Used Learning Labs to Supplement Regular Instruction for Remote and Hybrid Students

These on-site labs allowed students to log into lessons or assignments online while socially distanced in a school building and under the supervision of school staff. While the majority of the school year was virtual, leaders in the remote district introduced an in-person learning lab model when COVID-19 cases decreased in spring 2021. Though learning labs were open to all students, school leaders described using them intentionally to increase student attendance and engagement for students who might benefit from more connection. A district leader said, *"We had some families that really did not show up all year, maybe once every couple of weeks. We tried to intentionally invite those families because their students were not engaging any other way."* They emphasized that for some families, learning labs also served as "childcare," filling an important need.

Leaders in a hybrid district developed learning labs initially for students with disabilities to meet with service providers and to receive interventions outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The learning labs were then expanded to students who did not have adequate conditions to learn at home during off-days in the hybrid schedule, such as students with limited access to quiet space, food, or guardian supervision. In another district, learning labs were described as providing additional interventions for special student populations and opportunities to re-teach or pre-teach academic content. A district leader explained, *"We wanted to create a model for all of our students who struggle in the district [so] they can get some of that individualized attention."*

While all districts engaged in strategies to individualize student learning, efforts varied based on the instructional modality of districts.

In-Person Districts Returned to Pre-Pandemic School Routines to Individualize Instructional Support for Students

One school principal shared that they did not formally adopt any intervention program but rather relied on teachers having autonomy in their classrooms to assess student skills and tailor instructional support just as they had done before the COVID-19 pandemic. In another in-person district, an administrator stated that resuming in-person instruction allowed their team of English learner specialists to continue with their regular support practices. These practices included a balance of designated English language development instruction and push-in support through co-teaching. They shared, *"We just continued with our schedule."*

It is important to note that even in the hybrid and remote districts, local leaders made some in-person services available to students with disabilities. However, remote and hybrid districts had to develop additional strategies to engage students while learning remotely.

Remote and Hybrid Districts Tried New Approaches in Scheduling and Small Student Groupings to Better Engage Students While Learning Remotely

As noted earlier, District E relied on regular intervention blocks during the school schedule to differentiate instruction; a practice that was in place pre-pandemic. An administrator shared how the district maintained a school schedule that was slightly shortened to allow for added intervention blocks. To prepare for these blocks, *"each teacher created for their students' individual student learning plans [...] to try to meet the students where they were."* They further explained that if students were working on the same standard, they were then grouped together during the intervention time. The district was also intentional about scheduling more time for math and reading instruction (and intervention) than for science and social science.

To further promote individualized support, leaders reduced class sizes in remote and hybrid settings when possible. A school principal in a hybrid district shared that small class sizes made a huge difference in the quality of teaching and learning, stating, *"The teachers were actually able to keep pace where they would not have normally with their curriculum. [Students] feel more comfortable asking questions in a classroom of 10 than in a classroom of 30. It really worked out well."*

Local Leaders In Remote and Hybrid Districts Also Designed Schedules to Limit Screen Time, Enable One-On-One Meetings Between Teachers and Students, and Provide Time for Collaboration With Peers

One school administrator shared how their school principal was *"a genius"* for thinking through an instructional schedule that was cohesive but also included extended lunch periods and regular breaks so that students could have some *"breathing room"* between classes. In another district, leaders developed a master schedule for its remote program where students would meet as a whole class but then break out into small groups for *"productive group work or collaborative time,"* allowing teachers to *"engage with four or five kids at a time."* The district also shortened the regular school day by an hour so that teachers could meet one-on-one with remote students. Similarly, leaders in the hybrid districts scheduled time for independent work to minimize screen time and allow students to practice and re-learn material introduced at school. Teachers also had scheduled time to meet with students one-on-one or in small groups.

Finally, Remote and Hybrid Districts Relied on Specialized Support Staff to Provide Additional Instruction to Students In the Virtual Classroom

In the remote district, several participants shared that it was easier for resource teachers such as special educators or speech therapists to do push-in interventions in general education classes during virtual instruction. One principal commented, *"I've never been able to have students [receive] that much intervention, ever."* Similarly, a leader in another district who specialized in services for English learners shared that an advantage of remote instruction was the ability for resource teachers to directly support students in the virtual classroom. This leader shared, *"[Support staff] are now suddenly actually in those learning environments more than they were before."* Following a hybrid schedule, another district used its virtual days for special area teachers, instructional coaches, early childhood specialists, English language instructors, and other resource teachers

to provide direct instruction and one-on-one support to elementary students. Across modalities, specialized staff helped to provide additional support to students beyond class-wide instruction.

Local Leaders Prioritized Collaboration Across Staff

Collaboration among education leaders and staff is an integral feature and condition of high-functioning schools and school systems (e.g., Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Our analysis suggests that collaboration was central to district efforts to support student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders supported staff collaboration across roles by prioritizing time for teacher collaboration, implementing student support systems and tools that brought together general educators and specialized staff, and, in the case of remote and hybrid districts, monitoring data on student attendance and engagement.

Teacher Collaboration Was Essential to Supporting Students' Success

Across the five districts, leaders dedicated time for teachers to collaboratively plan and reflect on instruction. Leaders in three districts described using teacher professional learning communities as an approach for supporting collaboration. One leader explained that professional learning communities' meetings were spaces for planning instruction and *"highlighting best practice."*

Another framed the purpose of professional learning communities as improving practice through reflecting on what is working well and what is not.

> **"We are a community that serves the needs of all of our students."**

Several leaders described shifting master schedules to ensure teachers had time for collaboration regardless of instructional modality. Reflecting on the importance of collaboration, a leader shared, *"We are a community that serves the needs of all of our students [...] It is the connection that we have to each other that ultimately is a win for students."* This quote is representative of perspectives shared across cases; having structures in place to support collaboration was a key aspect of how districts promoted student success.

In the Remote and Hybrid Districts, Leaders Described Increased Time for Collaboration as Helping Them Improve Support for Students

This *"gift of time"* was especially helpful for special education and English language development staff to connect with general education teachers about supporting their students. A curriculum leader explained that having dedicated time for teachers' instructional planning made a huge difference. They added, *"Having our Fridays available for teachers, grade levels, and departments to meet weekly across the district—that, hands down, was probably the most meaningful."*

Although valuable, leaders described challenges sustaining the amount of time dedicated to teacher collaboration once they transitioned from remote or hybrid instruction to in-person learning. For example, an administrator from District C shared that it was not possible to maintain the weekly planning day during the 2021-22 school year due to requirements related to student attendance and teachers' contracts. Similarly, the teachers' union representative for the district shared that some parents took issue with teachers having an *"off-day"* in the week and were concerned about students receiving sufficient instructional time with their teachers. The union representative explained that after receiving this pushback, *"The school board decided that that Friday [planning day] was an issue."*

Despite the challenge highlighted above, collaboration was strong across districts throughout the 2020-21 school year.

Leaders and Staff Collaborated to Implement Tiered Support for Students, Which Was Critical for Learning

Within these tiered approaches, all students received a baseline of support through full-class instruction and activities focused on social-emotional learning. Additionally, collaborative processes were in place to identify students who needed additional outreach, resources, or services. Leaders shared examples of teachers requesting outreach and support from social workers, counselors, English language development specialists, and special education teachers. Such connections often focused on re-engaging students who were absent or not participating, or providing access to resources such as food, devices, and the internet. Leaders noted the importance of sharing responsibility for student learning across roles, as opposed to depending solely on core content teachers. Describing the benefits of engaging multiple staff in tiered approaches, one educator explained:

> I never felt like I was doing it alone. I would have the support of my special education teacher. I would have the support of the school counselor. [...] Even our building principal was reaching out to parents. [...] I think that whole-group approach was really helpful.

Several leaders described how these tiered outreach and support approaches helped to ensure students did not *"fall through the cracks"* amidst shifts in instructional modality and periods of remote instruction.

Collaborating With Specialized Staff Was Particularly Important for Supporting Special Student Populations

Leaders described the critical role specialized staff (e.g., special education educators, interventionists, staff providing supports for English learners) played in implementing appropriate supports for students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the positive effect this had on special student populations such as English learners and students with disabilities. Leaders noted that specialized staff engaged in home visits and provided support during and after class. Describing home visits conducted by specialized staff, one teacher explained, *"The special ed resource teacher, the speech teacher, the psychologist—all of those individuals were like godsends for the families and students."* Consistent with these accounts, our data on district test performance suggests that special student populations performed comparably to the general student population in district cases. Collaboration between general education and specialized staff in delivering tiered supports may have contributed to these achievement trends.

Local Leaders Developed Collaborative Tools for Tracking Which Students Needed and Received Support

To ensure effective implementation of tiered outreach and support approaches, leaders described using shared online forms and spreadsheets. These tools were used to identify students who would benefit from outreach and track what support was provided. Identifying students often began with tracking absences or limited participation during class or noting a perceived need for additional resources. One leader described how creating a shared referral form at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic helped to ensure any staff could recommend students and families

who may need additional resources and support. The school leadership team reviewed these forms collaboratively during weekly team check-ins to determine who should follow up and how. Similarly, a leader in a different district described using shared spreadsheets to document all outreach to students so that anyone following up was informed of prior context. Across districts, leaders noted that these processes for documenting outreach and support helped to promote consistent and timely action.

Leaders in the Remote and Hybrid Districts Used Data Related to Attendance and Engagement to Collaboratively Identify Students in Need ff Additional Support

School leaders in District E shared examples of the ways in which staff monitored attendance and engagement during morning virtual assemblies and promptly followed up with students and families as needed. After engaging in morning huddles with students, the leaders met for 15 minutes. These daily meetings included the principal, two school administrators, the school counselor, and the school social worker. The principal described these discussions as focused on, *"What are we dealing with today? Which students have not been in the classroom? Which students are having problems with their Chromebook, their technology?"* They also explained how teachers used a support referral form to share concerns about students with the school administrators, who would then reach out to families to *"let the parents know the vision—that we're here to support you."* Similarly, leaders in both hybrid districts described drawing extensively on attendance and engagement data to collaboratively inform outreach and support.

> **"I feel like the pandemic really highlighted a lot of the inequities that our district is now more cognizant of."**

Local Leaders Became More Aware of Inequities During the 2020-21 School Year, Deepening Their Commitment to Providing Equitable Access to Learning Opportunities

While there has been growing concern about the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating educational inequities for students (e.g., Domina et al., 2022; Kilbride et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020), conversations with local leaders revealed a more nuanced understanding of these inequities and a strong commitment to promote equity. This finding tracks with prior reports from EPIC showing growing awareness among state leaders about inequities in educational opportunities for students (Hashim & Weddle, 2022).

Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Periods of Virtual Instruction, Leaders Gained New Insight Into Students' and Families' Experiences Beyond the Classroom

Across districts, leaders shared examples of developing increased awareness about inequities, many of which existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic. One leader noted, *"I feel like the pandemic really highlighted a lot of the inequities that our district is now more cognizant of."* Specifically, leaders highlighted disparities in access to devices, speaking frequently about the digital divide. Leaders also shared examples of students who did not have access to quiet places to learn during virtual learning, and of students working to support their families financially. Several leaders and educators talked about how remote instruction provided them with an unprecedented view of students' lives outside of the physical classroom, helping them better understand students' needs. One leader shared:

*Oh, wow, the pandemic [is] an eye-opener when it comes to how students are able
to access instruction…. It's different when the kids come to the building. When they
Zoom in, and you see their background and their home environment, you just wonder,
'what are we doing? How are we supporting this student?'*

In addition to reflecting on inequities related to students' living environments, some participants also discussed how their awareness of systemic racism increased throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One leader shared, *"Everything that happened in 2020—in May, with George Floyd and all of that—that also impacted teaching and what the priorities of families were."* When discussing both racial and socioeconomic inequities, almost all participants described how the COVID-19 pandemic increased their awareness of issues that were pervasive long before 2020.

Many Leaders Described the COVID-19 Pandemic as Deepening Their Commitment to Providing Equitable Access to Learning Opportunities, Particularly for Special Student Populations

As leaders reflected on inequities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, they often discussed their sense of responsibility to promote equity in their roles. This aligned with our recent report on state education leaders' efforts to promote equity in Michigan, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Hashim & Weddle, 2022), reflecting a shared commitment across levels of the education system.

Describing their district's commitment to equity, one leader shared how the COVID-19 pandemic gave *"more real-life stories to why [equity] was important for us to work on."* When discussing this commitment to equity, several leaders highlighted special student populations, such as students with disabilities and English learners. Leaders shared examples of intentionally developing supports to align with students' varied needs. One leader described promoting equity as tailoring instruction and support, sharing:

*What will social-emotional supports look like for our [newcomer ELs] who have
been in school or been in this country for two weeks look like? It might not be the
exact same as every other student, so we really needed to pay particular attention
to the needs and the challenges of our kids and connecting school and home.*

Across districts, local leaders attended to inequities while engaging in several other successful approaches including community and data-informed decision-making, clear two-way communication with families, and prioritizing social-emotional learning. Local leaders also provided individualized support for students, which required increased collaboration across staff. Together, these successful approaches helped to promote student learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHALLENGES ACROSS CASES DURING THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR

Although local leaders engaged in several successful approaches for supporting students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, they also described the 2020-21 school year as challenging and complex. Pervasive challenges across cases included: (a) tension between prioritizing conflicting goals of health and safety and delivering high-quality learning experiences, (b) effectively implementing remote instruction, and (c) leaders' and educators' heightened stress and burnout.

Local Leaders Faced Tension Between Prioritizing Conflicting Goals of Health and Safety and Delivering High-Quality Learning Experiences, Resulting in Pressure and Pushback

It Was Challenging to Balance High-Quality Instruction With Health and Safety Concerns

Across all interviews, leaders referenced health and safety as one of their top concerns during the 2020-21 school year. Reflecting on this shared priority, a district administrator said:

> I don't know that our focus was any different than anybody else's globally. For us, it was definitely safety, and really safety of our staff, our students, our parents, our community members. At that time…I think it's safe to say nobody had ever felt that level of fear, and then to feel it collectively… You're worried about people's safety.

Another leader similarly described widespread fear about sending students to school in-person amidst a global COVID-19 pandemic. Summarizing concerns they heard from families, they shared, *"If this is a disease we can't see, we don't know what's going on, and people are dying from it, I'm not sending my child to school!"*

While leaders worried about the health and safety risks of in-person schooling, many expressed concerns about the quality of learning opportunities available through virtual instruction. One leader explained, *"For the vast majority of students, virtual learning environments are not ideal. That's not where they're going to learn the best and develop the most."* Another leader expressed concerns about whether a shift to remote instruction would constrain learning opportunities, asking, *"How much are they actually learning in that [remote] time?"*

Leaders Faced Pressure and, in Some Cases, Strong Pushback From Staff, School Boards, and Families About Selecting and Implementing Instructional Modalities

As noted earlier, leaders were dedicated to making decisions based on input from a wide range of stakeholders. However, stakeholders had strong and conflicting opinions about what was best for kids, with leaders across all cases describing decisions about instructional modality as *"difficult,"* *"polarizing,"* and *"stressful."* This polarization frequently led to tensions for leaders at all levels about which instructional modalities to implement. A teacher described local leaders receiving pushback after selecting a modality, sharing, *"[Leaders] are getting grief from the school board. They're getting grief from all sides."*

Stakeholders had strong and conflicting opinions about what was best for kids…

An administrator from another district noted that superintendents across the state received the brunt of the pressure related to selecting and implementing instructional modalities. They explained, *"A lot of superintendents are leaving… They're taking the heat politically."* These anecdotes echo state leaders' reports about local leaders being harassed and threatened because of pandemic-related decisions about instructional modality and face mask requirements (Hashim & Weddle, 2022).

Further illustrating heightened tension amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a union representative described challenges with school board leadership after transitioning from remote to in-person learning at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. They shared:

> *The president of the school board said, 'Well, if you don't like it, find a different job.'*
> *That was the point where they were. Things became very adversarial when we came*
> *back full time, and they really did not want to listen to us, at all.*

Finally, a subset of participants in one of the in-person districts shared examples of tension with families stemming from stressful transitions between modalities during the 2020-21 school year. A principal described receiving substantial criticism about how the school navigated a mandatory closure due to COVID-19 case numbers, sharing, *"Phone calls and texts and emails...parents were upset with how we transitioned and that we were not prepared... it was awful."*

Implementing Remote Instruction Was Challenging and Ultimately Less Effective Across Multiple Aspects of Schooling

Across cases, leaders navigated challenges to implementing remote instruction. These challenges included promoting student engagement, navigating new disruptive behavior issues, supporting staff with using technology, and providing effective assessments.

Districts Found it Challenging to Support Student Engagement During Remote Instruction.
While only one district was considered fully remote, all five districts engaged in some remote instruction during the 2020-21 school year. For example, one of the in-person districts had a large strand of fully remote students (approximately half of students were remote at the start of the school year). In the other in-person district, instruction switched to the remote modality during periods of mandatory school closure due to high COVID-19 case numbers.

Across cases, participants noted that it was difficult to determine whether students were listening and participating during remote instruction, especially when cameras were off or students did not consistently log into Zoom. One principal summarized challenges with remote learning as, *"I don't think last year we did a very good job supporting student engagement."* In another district, a teacher explained, *"Kids could not sit at the computer all day long nor did they want to."*

Reflecting on the unique challenges of supporting remote instruction at the lower elementary grade levels, a principal shared:

> *As you know, parents have to work. They have to take care of home, and it's very*
> *difficult. We found it to be quite challenging for children to be able to access*
> *the learning and to also do their work afterwards, because they needed a lot of*
> *assistance. When we're in person, it's easy to help, and assist, and tutor, and guide,*
> *but virtually, it was tremendously challenging.*

Leaders expressed different but similarly concerning perspectives about supporting student engagement at the secondary level. One leader shared, *"Our high school students were the most challenging. I would say that kudos to the teachers because they just reached out to them every day, sometimes more than once a day, just trying to encourage them to engage."* Within the same district,

a high school teacher shared that many students had started part-time jobs during the hybrid schedule and thus were absent frequently.

Reflecting on the effect of these challenges to student learning, a leader who oversaw the virtual strand of instruction in their district described *"widening learning gaps"* between students receiving instruction in-person and those receiving virtual instruction. These concerns have been borne out in the data both nationally (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Halloran et al., 2021) and in Michigan (Kilbride et al., 2021a; Kilbride et al., 2021b; Kilbride et al., 2022).

School Leaders in the Hybrid and Remote Districts Described Student Behaviors and Disruptions With Technology That Distracted From Student Learning

Several participants described the interruption of virtual instruction due to Zoom bombings where *"random people... would try to jump into the Zoom links."* At times, these interruptions affected student learning. One charter leader shared, *"we had what were called those Zoom bombers. They'll come in, and they yell out obscene things. It just got really wild."* Participants also reported difficulty with students' Zoom etiquette or their ability to navigate Zoom chat, microphone, and video features appropriately. When describing how students struggled with Zoom etiquette, one participant said, *"You're constantly saying, 'We can't hear you. Turn on your mic,' or 'We can hear your whole family... We need you to turn off your mic.'"* In hybrid districts, leaders commented on the challenges of cyber-bullying and the need to educate students on digital citizenship with the increased use of technology in schools. They also discussed developing ways for teachers to monitor students' use of technology during and outside of class which, while important for student safety, was an added burden for teachers and distracted from instruction.

Leaders in Remote and Hybrid Districts Described Heightened Stress for Teachers Who Did Not Have Prior Experience With Technology

For example, leaders in the remote district described a distinct digital divide between teachers familiar with Google Classroom, i-Ready, and other digital platforms and those who were not. A school principal explained, *"Teachers and staff who didn't have that familiarity with certain technology—it was very challenging for them.... I don't understand how those teachers survived because it was horrible."* While leaders described efforts to collaboratively support these teachers, this was made complicated by the fact that educators were working from separate locations. One leader explained, *"At home, they've got to figure this out by themselves. Even trying to do a Zoom session to teach them was challenging."* Similar challenges were noted for teachers in the hybrid districts who suddenly had to deliver part of their instruction online.

Leaders in the Remote District Also Found it More Challenging to Provide Effective Assessment for Students Virtually

In District E, some leaders shared challenges with assessment data that were used to inform student learning during general instructional and intervention times. One director in the district expressed concerns about the validity of students' remote test scores. They wondered, *"Are the kids really learning? We had a student in kindergarten take the i-Ready test and score at the fourth-grade level. That's unheard of."* The leader went on to share concerns that the student had received help while taking the assessment and questioned the usefulness of the data. These findings are consistent with other reports suggesting that test-taking at home may have inflated student test performance, labeled the *"at-home testing advantage"* (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Kilbride et al., 2022).

As Teachers and Leaders Went Above and Beyond to Support Students and Families, They Experienced Heightened Stress and Burnout

Regardless of Instructional Modality, Leaders Described the 2020-21 School Year as Taking a Toll on Themselves, Their Teachers, and Their Staff

The COVID-19 pandemic brought on overlapping stressors such as navigating health and safety concerns, learning new technology, supporting students and families through trauma, and transitioning back and forth between instructional modalities, all of which contributed to educators' overload.

Several leaders described teachers as experiencing significant stress and anxiety from trying to support student learning during such a challenging year. One principal explained, *"[Teachers] really took it to heart when students were failing or weren't showing up.... It's that kind of stuff that stresses them out and makes the burnout horrible."* Similarly, a district leader described teachers as being under *"pressure"* to *"be available all the time"* during the 2020-21 school year. Reflecting on the toll the COVID-19 pandemic had on educators, a school leader summarized, *"They did an amazing job keeping afloat [but] they were tired. They were tired at the end of the year, for sure."*

> **"They did an amazing job keeping afloat [but] they were tired."**

In addition to describing the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers, leaders also reflected on their own well-being. Describing the negative effect of navigating multiple stressors, one principal shared:

> *There were so many different layers. In my position, trying to make sure that we're giving the right attention to each layer was a juggling act, for sure.... My focus was supporting others, whether that be teachers, whether that be students [...] What didn't go well is my own level of social-emotional wellbeing. There just was no time for myself.*

This quote is representative of a sentiment we heard across all districts; leaders were concerned about well-being. A school leader explained, *"We want to make sure everyone is taken care of. We want to make sure our students are good. We want to make sure our parents are good, but we have to make sure we are good as well."*

In the In-Person Districts, Illness-Related Absences, Rolling Quarantines, and Transitions to Remote Learning Caused Additional Stress for Leaders and Educators

Leaders described navigating rolling quarantines because of COVID-19 transmission and students becoming sick. Reflecting on challenges navigating these transitions, one principal shared, *"That was really difficult [...] It was a constant flow of children, and there [was] no consistency in their teaching and their learning."*

Another elementary school principal reflected on the immense stress of suddenly transitioning the school to remote instruction in November 2020 due to a COVID-19 outbreak on campus. They shared:

I tested positive. I had three teachers in a day and a half test positive. And then our superintendent was like, 'We are going remote.' Talk about stress. Getting devices to kids and making sure that they had what they needed...I had six teachers, and they were sick, like sick where they could not even do remote learning. I was sick. All I wanted to do was sleep and [I was] trying to do virtual meetings with teachers and phone calls and texts and parent emails.

The compounding challenges of distributing digital devices, communicating with frustrated parents who had lost childcare, and working while sick took a significant toll on this leader's well-being.

Leaders in Remote and Hybrid Districts Described Added Workload for Educators

While leaders in both remote and hybrid districts lauded the efforts of teachers to communicate with families about the logistics of instruction, they noted that this communication was time intensive. In District D, leaders discussed the added burden for teachers who were responsible for teaching both in-person and remote students simultaneously and shared that this contributed to teacher burnout. A school principal framed hybrid as *"tricky."* In particular, she noted the challenges teachers faced trying to attend to remote and in-person students at the same time indicating that *"it was challenging but we got it done."* Comparatively, District C primarily did not offer synchronous virtual and in-person instruction, and instead often engaged students asynchronously on their virtual days to minimize the burden on educators.

> "We don't have subs. I'm always subbing during my planning period, so the shortage is there, and it's exhausting."

PRIORITIES FOR THE 2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR

Building off their success and challenges with supporting student learning in the 2020-21 school year, districts highlighted ongoing priorities for supporting student learning and recovery. In particular, local leaders emphasized the need for (a) maintaining appropriate staffing in districts and schools, (b) implementing strategies to accelerate student learning, and (c) continuing to integrate social-emotional learning in educational programming.

Participants Continued to Focus on Maintaining Appropriate Staffing In Their Districts and Schools

District leaders were concerned about maintaining appropriate staffing amidst broader trends of educator shortages. Several leaders shared challenges finding substitute teachers during 2021-22, with one teacher noting, *"We don't have subs. I'm always subbing during my planning period, so the shortage is there, and it's exhausting."* Other leaders talked about having fewer candidates for vacant roles than in prior years. Consistent with national trends, some leaders described depending on teachers with less training (e.g., educators in the process of becoming certified). One school leader discussed the importance of supporting such teachers, explaining:

*We are not sitting around [waiting for] a certified person to show up because that
kid will never get another third-grade year. What are we doing with the person that
is in front of them in third grade right now? Trying to build up their skills so that
kids still get serviced…. That's been a huge focus of our building leaders this year is
working with those non-certified folks.*

Further exemplifying leaders' focus on maintaining appropriate staffing, a school leader in
a different district described engaging in creative recruitment efforts to fill vacancies, such as
encouraging parents to get certified. While this was a unique approach to teacher recruitment and
hiring, all leaders described appropriate staffing as central to efforts to support student learning
during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local Leaders Worked To Accelerate Student Learning by Focusing Instruction on Essential Content Standards, Targeting Skills During Intervention Blocks, and Offering After-School Tutoring

Describing the importance of efforts to accelerate student learning, one district leader shared, *"We're
going to lift the student up to the grade level…. That can only happen through the acceleration of learning.
Acceleration meaning that you increase the scaffold instead of decreasing the level."* Across all districts,
leaders spoke of the challenges of re-teaching content while also advancing student learning. As one
principal in District B explained, *"The teachers know that they have to go back and do a lot of reteaching
[but] it is really quite unrealistic to have an eighth-grade teacher teach fourth- and fifth-grade material."* In
response to this challenge, all districts focused general, Tier 1 instruction on core or essential content
standards that are shared across grade-levels. As one superintendent explained:

*We are trying to avoid the mindset of 'I have to go back to previous grade levels and
reteach previous content.' With that mindset, kids will perpetually be behind. What
we have tried to identify is 'what are [the] standards that endure? What is essential
to the discipline?' Let's look at the vertical articulation of the curriculum and identify
where those skills reappear.*

For students who needed further support, district and school leaders used interim assessments
to identify needs and provide instruction during intervention blocks. In addition, some districts
extended learning labs and other after-school tutoring programs implemented during 2020-21 into
the 2021-22 school year. As these examples suggest, districts remained committed to accelerating
student learning through multiple and overlapping strategies.

Leaders Continued to Integrate Social-Emotional Learning Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery

Promoting social-emotional learning as an integrated aspect of student learning was a consistent
priority across recovery efforts. However, district leaders cautioned that many of their efforts
were still reactionary to challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a director from District D

commented, *"Unfortunately a lot of what we have been doing is reactive to a lot of the things that are coming our way."*

To sustain and build on these efforts, several leaders described efforts to bolster staff and capacity related to social-emotional learning. One school principal shared how they hired additional staff focused on social-emotional learning and encouraged current staff to attend district-wide professional development. This leader explained, *"[This training] gave us a lot of tools. It helped us understand what we needed to do as professionals to meet the needs of our students."* In another district, an administrator discussed the importance of ensuring all staff had a shared understanding of social-emotional learning. They explained, *"We're creating systems in our district now to develop a shared understanding of what [social-emotional learning] is."* Across districts, increasing staffing, providing appropriate training, and promoting shared understandings of social-emotional learning were integral to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts.

Section Four:
Key Takeaways and Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Local leaders' reflections on their efforts to support student learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic provide an in-depth understanding of successes and challenges across the state. Importantly, even though these districts were selected as positive cases based on student performance, they still experienced many challenges. Based on the findings discussed earlier, we highlight lessons learned and provide recommendations for policy and practice to inform ongoing recovery efforts. We conclude with implications for future research.

LESSONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Lesson One: Providing Individualized Support for Student Learning and Attending to Social-Emotional Needs Enabled District Success

Across all studied districts, leaders and educators addressed students' unique needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, supplemented classroom instruction with learning labs, and developed structures, routines, and practices within their modalities to tailor instruction and academic support. Districts also relied on existing curricula to identify essential standards for instruction. Districts continue to leverage these approaches as part of recovery efforts to target areas to accelerate student learning. Beyond academics, districts addressed student trauma and emotional needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and fostered caring relationships between students and staff as a precursor to academics and learning.

Lesson One: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Districts should **develop and tailor educational programs, instruction, and support to address students' individual needs**, while also fostering caring relationships. As noted below, districts may need to invest in educator capacity to enable such approaches (Lesson Two), and build systems and structures that promote collaboration across staff to provide individualized support to students. It may also be important for policymakers to **support districts and schools by developing strong curricular resources.** These resources could identify essential standards around which to orient instruction during periods of crises, as well as to guide recovery efforts. Finally, leaders and policymakers should continue to **build districts' and schools' capacity for addressing social-emotional learning** as a necessary foundation for academic learning, especially as students experience the effects of trauma and challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lesson Two: Recruiting, Supporting, and Retaining Educators is Critical for Ensuring the Implementation and Sustainability of Recovery Efforts

The promising approaches described in this report, as well as several of the recommendations for policy and practice, depend on a healthy school workforce. Across cases, local leaders described how sustained employment of school staff enabled a student and family-centric response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders discussed the need to be responsive and empathetic to staff needs, as well as to provide structures, resources, and training, to support teacher practice and instruction. At the same time, they cautioned that COVID-19 pandemic efforts took a significant toll on leaders' and educators' well-being. They also identified challenges in recruiting for new positions and maintaining appropriate staffing for 2021-22.

Lesson Two: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To help districts and schools develop a workforce that is prepared for future crises, policymakers should **prioritize long-term investments in educator pipelines, including specialized staff.** Including specialized staff is important given the role they played in collaborating with general educators to provide students with support (see Lesson Four). Initiatives to bolster the educator pipeline will likely require attending to educator and leader preparation, work conditions in schools, professional development, workload, and compensation. Given concerns of heightened stress and burnout and recruitment challenges, it is critical that policymakers **solicit input from educators** about sources of work stress and dissatisfaction and act to mitigate these concerns.

Lesson Three: Responding to the Continued Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic Will Require Equity-Centered Leadership Approaches

In light of persistent inequities and trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need for empathetic, collaborative, and responsive leadership. Findings demonstrate the importance of deeply understanding what students, staff, and families are experiencing outside of the classroom, as well as partnering with a range of stakeholders to inform decision-making. Further, leaders in these districts understood the importance of prioritizing students' social-emotional well-being and access to resources (e.g., food, devices, the internet, etc.) as critical foundations for academic learning.

Lesson Three: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Just as a strong educator pipeline is essential to bolstering the education system in Michigan (see Lesson Two), policymakers should **fund and implement initiatives to recruit and retain equity-centered education leaders**. Equity-centered leadership is responsive to students' and families' unique needs, and attends to how broader structures and policies contribute to disparities in opportunities and outcomes for historically marginalized groups (e.g. Turner, 2020). When hiring local leaders, it may be valuable to prioritize skills related to empathy, equity, and collaboration, as well as expertise related to supporting students' social-emotional learning. These skills may also be important to attend to in leadership preparation programs.

Lesson Four: Collaboration Across Roles Was Essential for Providing Students With Support in and Beyond the Classroom

Local leaders described school-based collaboration across roles as essential to promoting students' access to learning opportunities. Educators benefited from structures enabling collaboration, such as dedicated time to plan instruction and identify students in need of additional support. It was especially important that these collaborations brought together general educators and specialized staff.

While there were many successful examples of collaboration in the districts studied, some cases experienced challenges. For example, in hybrid districts where in-person learning opportunities for students were more limited, leader decisions to protect time for teacher planning and collaboration was met with pushback from parents who were concerned about students' reduced active learning time. Districts also struggled to maintain scheduled planning time for teachers upon resuming in-person instruction for all students.

Lesson Four: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Attending to the educator pipeline is a necessary precursor for promoting collaboration across roles (see Lesson Two). Leaders may also **consider how to best dedicate time, structures, and tools to support teachers' collaborative planning and students' access to instruction**. To inform these decisions, it may be beneficial to have open and honest conversations across stakeholder groups (e.g., leaders, educators, families) about the benefits and drawbacks of particular collaboration structures and schedules. Leaders may also consider how virtual opportunities to communicate (see Lesson Five) can be leveraged to support collaboration amidst recovery efforts.

Lesson Five: Long-Standing Strong Relationships With Families Are an Essential Foundation for Navigating Crisis

The districts included in this study had strong relationships with family coming into the COVID-19 pandemic. These relationships, in turn, afforded leaders a deep understanding of families' needs and provided a foundation for educators to work in partnership with families to continue educating students amidst disruptions and transitions. Families were included in district leaders' decision-making about instructional modality, promoting transparency as well as parent and student support for these modalities.

Lesson Five: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Supporting engagement with families will require strengthening the workforce (see Lesson Two) so that local leaders and staff can develop relationships with families in their school communities over time and maintain these relationships during times of crises. In addition, policymakers should **develop policies and processes that incentivize and facilitate school-family partnerships and joint decision-making**. For example, in addition to collecting data and monitoring student test performance, policymakers could gather data on districts' and schools' engagement with families and allocate resources to support these efforts.

Lesson Six: Remote Instruction Was Offered to Promote Health and Safety Amidst Crisis, but Was Challenging to Implement. Leaders Expressed Concerns About Student Learning in Remote Settings

Leaders' decisions to offer remote instruction were driven by staff and community concerns about health and safety. However, it was more challenging for educators to individualize instruction and offer social-emotional support remotely. Educators experienced added challenges with teaching virtually that made it harder to connect with students and engage them in learning. These challenges included disruptions with technology, student exhaustion from screen time, limited teacher capacity to use technology for instruction, and concerns about the effectiveness of online assessments. These challenges align with research demonstrating that students had slower achievement growth in remote settings (Kilbride et al., 2021a; Kilbride et al., 2021b; Kilbride et al., 2022), as well as differences in the quality of instruction between remote and in-person schools (Strunk et al., 2022).

Lesson Six: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

In the event of future crises, in-person or hybrid modalities of instruction should be made available for students and families if such modalities are able to be implemented safely. Policymakers should **provide districts with appropriate resources and support to promote the safety of in-person and hybrid instruction** (e.g., invest in building ventilation, supply personal protective equipment and testing, etc.). If fully remote instruction is necessary, policymakers should **provide appropriate resources, staffing, and support to ensure high-quality remote learning experiences** (see Lesson Seven).

Lesson Seven: While Technology Can Be a Powerful Tool for Increasing Communication With Families and Supporting Innovative Instruction, There Were Also Challenges With Using Technology Across Districts

Findings demonstrate several benefits of technology, including increased virtual opportunities to connect with families. Local leaders leveraged technology to provide clear and consistent two-way communication, providing updates to families and learning about their needs. Further, many leaders described leaders and educators as becoming more comfortable with using technology to support collaboration and instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite promising uses of technology across cases, leaders and educators experienced pervasive challenges with promoting

students' engagement and learning during virtual instruction (Lesson 6). Some leaders and educators were inadequately prepared to use online learning tools and communication platforms.

Lesson Seven: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To ensure technology is used effectively during and beyond recovery efforts, additional resources are needed to bolster infrastructure and capacity. To advance this recommendation, state leaders and policymakers could **expand access to the internet and devices**, as well as **provide ongoing training and support for leaders and educators on using technology** both in and beyond the classroom (see Lesson Two regarding educator training). Such training should attend not only to the effective use of technology for instruction and learning, but also to how technology can be used to promote strong two-way communication and partnership between schools and families (see Lesson Five regarding school-family relationships).

FUTURE RESEARCH

While findings from this report provide critical insights into the successes and challenges local leaders faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional research is needed. Our next phase of research will examine district and school leaders' approaches to pandemic recovery, including initiatives to accelerate student learning, integrate social emotional learning into educational programs, address teacher shortages, and leverage technology to support learning and family engagement. The longitudinal nature of this research will also allow us to examine the implementation of effective practices to support student learning over time, and implications for equity.

REFERENCES

Curriculum Associates. (2018, March). i-Ready Assessments technical manual: March 2018. Curriculum Associates Research Report No. RR 2018-47. North Billerica, MA.

Data Recognition Corporation (DRC). (2021, April). Smarter Balanced: Interpretive guide for English language arts/literacy and mathematics assessments. https://portal.smarterbalanced.org/library/en/reporting-system-interpretive-guide.pdf

DeMatthews, D. E., Edwards Jr, D. B., & Rincones, R. (2016). Social justice leadership and family engagement: A successful case from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *52*(5), 754-792. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X16664006

Domina, T., Hashim, A., Kearney, C., Pham, L., & Smith, C. (2022, April 28). COVID-19 and the system resilience of public education: A view from North Carolina. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/covid-19-and-system-resilience-public-education-view-north-carolina

Doss, C., Fahle, E. M., Loeb, S., & York, B. N. (2019). More than just a nudge: Supporting kindergarten parents with differentiated and personalized text-messages. *Journal of Human Resources*, *54*(3), 567-603. http://jhr.uwpress.org/content/54/3/567.short

Goddard, Y., Goddard, R., & Kim, M. (2015). School instructional climate and student achievement: An examination of group norms for differentiated instruction. *American Journal of Education*, *122*(1), 111-131. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1083885

Goldhaber, D., Kane, T. J., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2022, May). The consequences of remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic. *American Economic Review: Insights*. https://www.nber.org/papers/w30010

Grissom, J. A., & Condon, L. (2021, June). Leading schools and districts in times of crisis. *Educational Researcher*, 50(5). https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211023112

Halloran, C., Jack, R., Okun, J. C., & Oster, E. (2021, November). *Pandemic schooling mode and student test scores: Evidence from US states* (NBER Working Paper No. 29497). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w29497

Hashim, A. K., & Weddle, H. (2022, July). *State education leaders' perspectives on leading and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. https://epicedpolicy.org/state-education-leaders-perspectives-on-leading-and-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/

Kaufman, J.H., & Dilberti, M.K. (2021). Divergent and inequitable teaching and learning pathways during (and perhaps beyond) the pandemic: Key findings from the American Educator Panels spring 2021 COVID-19 surveys. Data Note: Insights from the American Educator Panels. Research Report. RR-A168-6. *RAND Corporation*. https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA168-6

Kilbride, T., Hopkins, B., & Strunk, K.O. (2021a, August). *Michigan's 2020-21 benchmark assessments*. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. https://epicedpolicy.org/michigans-2020-21-benchmark-assessments/

Kilbride, T., Hopkins, B., Strunk, K.O. & Imberman, S. (2021b, December). *K-8 student achievement and achievement gaps on Michigan's 2020-21 benchmark and summative assessments*. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EPIC_BenchmarkII_Rptv2_Dec2021.pdf

Kilbride, T., Hopkins, B., Strunk, K. O., & Yu, D. (2022, April). *Michigan's fall 2021 benchmark assessments*. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Benchmark_Report_April2022.pdf

Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E., & Liu, J. (2020, October). Projecting the potential impact of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. *Educational Researcher*, *49*(8), 549-565. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20965918

Little, C. A., McCoach, D. B., & Reis, S. M. (2014). Effects of differentiated reading instruction on student achievement in middle school. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, *25*(4), 384-402. https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X14549250

Michigan Public Act 149 of 2020, MCL 388.1606 (2020)

Moolenaar, N. M., Sleegers, P. J. C., & Daly, A. J. (2012). Teaming up: Linking collaboration networks, collective efficacy, and student achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *28*(2), 251-262. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.10.001

REFERENCES *(continued)*

NWEA. (2020, December). Linking study report: Predicting performance on the Michigan state assessment system in grades 3–8 based on NWEA MAP Growth scores. NWEA. https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2016/12/MI-MAP-Growth-Linking-Study-Report_NWEA_2020-12-22.pdf

Renaissance Learning. (2021a). Renaissance: Star assessments for math technical manual.

Renaissance Learning. (2021b). Renaissance: Star assessments for reading technical manual.

Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S. O., McQueen, K., & Grissom, J. A. (2015). Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 52*(3), 475-514. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215585562

Scaccia, J. P., Cook, B. S., Lamont, A., Wandersman, A., Castellow, J., Katz, J., & Beidas, R. S. (2015). A practical implementation science heuristic for organizational readiness: R = MC². *Journal of Community Psychology, 43*(4), 484-501. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26668443/

Slavin, R. E., & Lake, C. (2008). Effective programs in elementary mathematics: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research, 78*(3), 427-515. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40071135

Strunk, K. O., Wright, T. S., Westall, J., Zhu, Q., Kilbride, T., Cummings, A., Utter, A., & Mavrogordato, M. (2022, February). *Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law: Year two report.* Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/RBG3_Rpt_Yr2_Feb2022.pdf

Turner, E. O. (2020). *Suddenly diverse: How school districts manage race and equity.* Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Vangrieken, K., Dochy, F., Raes, E., & Kyndt, E. (2015). Teacher collaboration: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review, 15*, 17-40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.04.002

APPENDIX A: ANALYTIC MODELS AND SAMPLING OF DISTRICT CASES

To highlight specific practices and approaches that may have contributed to student learning during the 2020-21 school year, we first identified "positive outlier districts" with better-than-predicted performance across instructional modalities (in-person, remote, and hybrid). To do so, we estimated the following model:

$$Yd = \alpha + \beta 1 DCHARd + \beta 2 VENDORd + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Where Yd is the district-level fall-to-spring change in the percentage of students in district d scoring significantly behind grade level on Michigan's mathematics and reading benchmark assessments during the 2020-21 school year, $DCHAR$ is a vector of district characteristics for district d (i.e., the percentage of non-White students in a district [Black, Asian, Hispanic or Latino/a/x, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander], the percentage of students considered economically disadvantaged, the percentage of students receiving English learner or special education services, and urbanicity), and $VENDOR$ is a vector of indicators showing which of the four pre-approved benchmark assessments were offered by district d (see Kilbride et al., 2021a, for detail about approved vendors used by Michigan districts to measure student achievement growth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic).

We estimated this model (1) separately using three unique analytic samples which were created based on the instructional modality each district offered for the majority of the 2020-21 school year (in-person, hybrid, or remote). Since districts could and did offer multiple instructional modality options during the 2020-21 school year, the aforementioned groupings were defined based on five mutually exclusive modality categories: in-person only (planned to offer only in-person instruction in a given month), in-person option (planned to provide fully in-person instruction to some students and hybrid or fully remote instruction to other students), hybrid only (planned to provide hybrid instruction to all students), hybrid option (planned to provide hybrid instruction to some students and remote instruction to others), and fully remote only (planned to provide all instruction remotely). If a district was classified as in-person only or in-person option for a majority of the school year, they were included in our in-person sample (n=407). Districts that were classified as hybrid only or hybrid option for a majority of the school year were included in our hybrid sample (n=97). Finally, districts classified as fully remote only for a majority of the school year were included in our remote sample (n=99).

We next compared each district's actual change in the percentage of students scoring significantly behind grade-level from fall-to-spring with each district's predicted change as observed in our models. We further limited sampling to districts using the Curriculum Associates and NWEA MAP growth assessments, the two most common benchmark assessment providers in Michigan, and to districts that tested at least 100 students (to eliminate noisy estimates from our sampling process). To be classified as a "positive outlier district," districts had to demonstrate a larger drop in the percent of students significantly behind grade-level than what we predicted in our models.

Consistent with research documenting the many challenges districts faced when providing remote and hybrid instruction (see, for examples, Kilbride et al., 2021a; Kilbride et al., 2021b; Kilbride et al., 2022; Halloran et al., 2021; Kaufman & Dilberti, 2021), as well as the broader economic and health concerns in urban school communities offering remote and hybrid modalities in Michigan (Kilbride et al., 2021a), we observed fewer positive outlier districts in both remote and hybrid categories relative to in-person. In addition, remote and hybrid districts outperformed our predicted test results by a smaller margin than in-person districts. For in-person instruction, we identified 199 "positive outlier districts" that exceeded our predicted values in reading or math. These districts lowered the percent of students significantly behind grade-level in reading or math by 0.83 to 10.81 percentage points (Curriculum Associates) and 0.01 to 19.44 percentage points (NWEA) more than the percentage point change predicted in our models. In comparison, we identified only 68 positive outlier hybrid districts. These hybrid districts lowered the percent of students significantly behind grade-level in reading or math by 2.20 to 7.07 percentage points (Curriculum Associates) and 0.04 to 13.12 percentage points (NWEA) more than the percentage point change predicted in our models. Finally, for remote instruction, we

APPENDIX A: ANALYTIC MODELS AND SAMPLING OF DISTRICT CASES *(continued)*

identified 53 "positive outlier districts" that lowered the percent of students significantly behind grade-level in reading or math by 0.16 to 6.52 percentage points (Curriculum Associates) and 0.08 to 10.51 percentage points (NWEA) more than the percentage point change predicted in our models.

From these groups of districts, we identified the three highest performing districts by tested subject (reading and math) and assessment provider. We then confirmed that these districts demonstrated better-than-predicted results in reading or math based on overall test scores as well as those for student sub-groups such as K-3 grade students, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students. From this sub-set of districts, we purposively sampled districts for variation in assessment provider, student demographics (percent non-White, English learners, economically disadvantaged), location (rural versus urban), and LEA type (PSA versus LEA). While we planned to have two district cases for each instructional modality, only one of the recruited case sites for remote instruction agreed to participate in our study.

RESEARCH WITH CONSEQUENCE