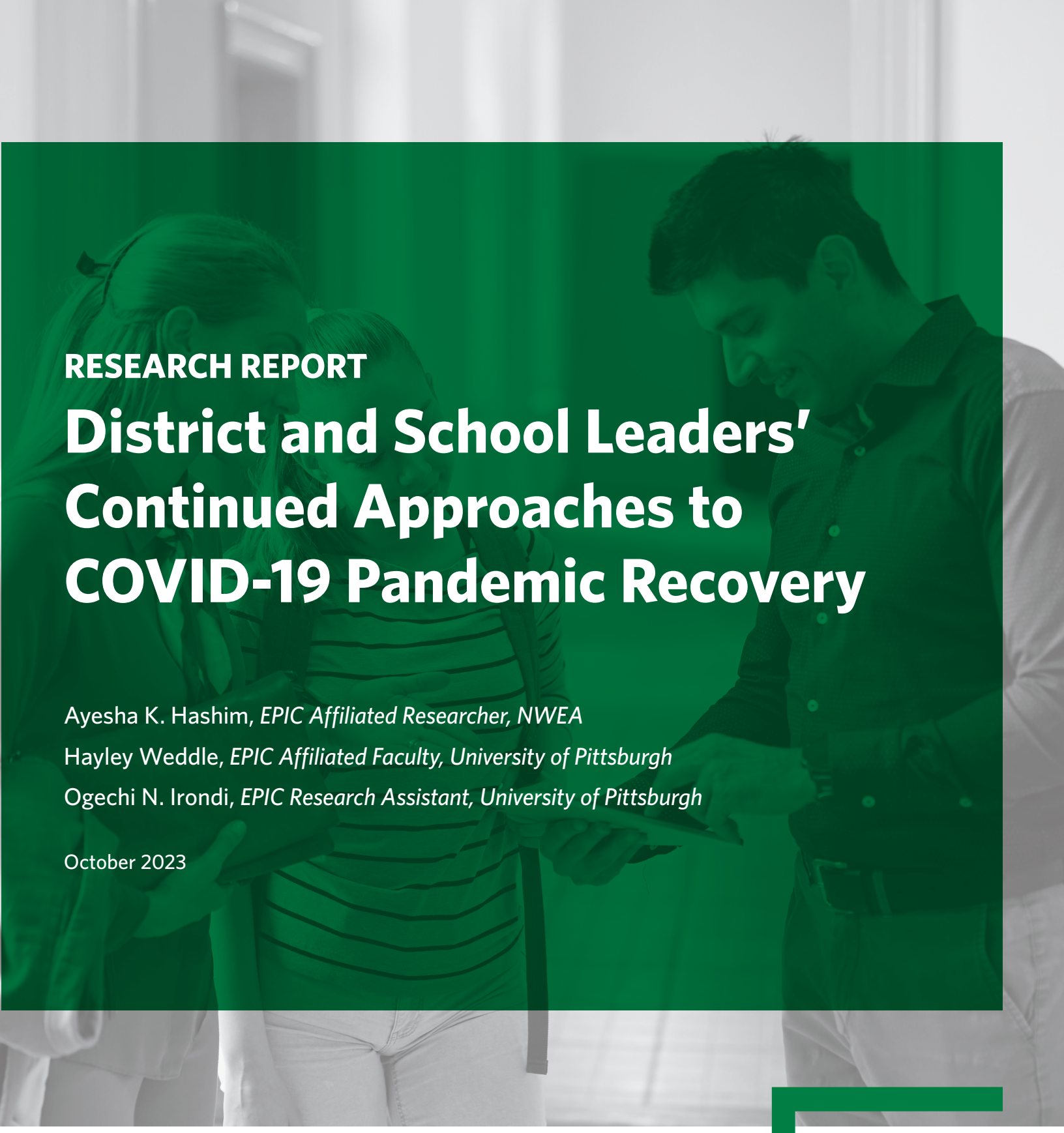

RESEARCH REPORT

District and School Leaders' Continued Approaches to COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery

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October 2023

EPIC

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the many people who graciously gave of their time in support of this effort. We are especially grateful to our partners for their collaboration and thoughtful feedback.

In particular, we would like to thank the district and school leaders in Michigan who made time to speak with us and reflect on their experiences as leaders during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We are also grateful to Dr. Katharine Strunk and Emily Mohr at the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) for their guidance and support in this research, as well as Meg Turner for her help in recruiting leaders for interviews. We would also like to thank Bryant Hopkins and Tara Kilbride for helping us to develop a sampling frame to identify our case districts. Finally, we thank Michelle Huhn for her assistance in formatting the report and Bridgette Redman for her excellent copy-editing.

DISCLAIMER

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

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District and School Leaders' Continued Approaches to COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery

Ayesha K. Hashim, Hayley Weddle, and Ogechi N. Irondi

Executive Summary

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU) is conducting a study of school district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing efforts to support student recovery efforts. This research is in response to the Return to Learn legislation (Michigan Public Act 147, 2020; Michigan Public Act 148, 2020; Michigan Public Act 149, 2020; Michigan Public Act 48, 2021), which tasked the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) with studying student progress toward learning goals during and beyond the 2020-21 school year. In this report, we continue to explore how schools and districts supported student learning and well-being as they resumed in-person schooling in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.

We capture the perspectives of district, school, and teacher leaders (herein referred to as "local leaders") to surface best practices for supporting recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask:

1. How did districts approach COVID-19 pandemic recovery of student learning and wellness in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years?
2. What strategies, if any, were common across districts or specific to local contexts?
3. What conditions enabled or challenged district success in recovering student learning and supporting student well-being?

To answer our research questions, we conducted interviews with 34 local leaders across four district cases as part of a multiple case study research design. To identify best practices for student recovery, we sampled districts that demonstrated better-than-predicted gains in student performance on benchmark assessments in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years 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 COVID-19 pandemic recovery and their strategies for supporting students' academic learning and well-being, attending to the needs of special student populations, and engaging with families. We then conducted case and cross-case analyses of interview data to identify successes and challenges.

COMMON APPROACHES TO ACCELERATED LEARNING

Local leaders described extensive student recovery needs, requiring that schools respond with comprehensive support for students and their families. In all districts, leaders were emphatic that supporting students' socioemotional well-being took precedence over academics and recovering unfinished learning. However, leaders also had a sense of urgency to improve student learning and achievement and to address growing inequities in student learning trends. Shared approaches to recovery across districts included:

- Prioritizing students' socioemotional well-being and social connectedness to school;
- Pursuing more targeted wellness strategies for students with additional needs and increasing staff capacity to support such strategies;
- Improving core instruction by identifying priority standards, adopting evidence-based curricula, and providing teacher training and instructional planning time;
- Continuing to provide access to one-on-one digital devices for learning and make instructional materials available online despite being fully in-person in 2022-23;
- Relying on multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to identify students to participate in additional programs (e.g., summer school, high-dosage tutoring, credit recovery);
- Expanding access to and repurposing summer school programs to engage students in learning through immersive experiences; and
- Prioritizing interventions during the school day and calendar year.

Table 1 describes the recovery strategies that districts implemented in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years to support COVID-19 pandemic recovery for students.

TABLE 1. Recovery Strategies Across District Cases	
Recovery Strategies	**Number of Cases Implementing Strategy**
Student Well-Being Recovery	
Hiring socioemotional support staff	4 of 4
Time dedicated to help students reacclimate to school, manage relationships, and resolve conflict	4 of 4
Attending to students' mental health and physical health and well-being (e.g., access to nutrition)	4 of 4
Home visits for chronically absent and other at-risk students	4 of 4
Academic Recovery	
Strengthening core instruction: Adopting evidence-based curricula and supporting instructional fidelity of curricula	4 of 4
Double-dosage instruction: Dedicated time in the school day for students to review and practice grade-level content	3 of 4
Improving early literacy: Providing training on evidence-based instruction or offering new reading programs for students	2 of 4
High-dosage tutoring: One-on-one or small-group tutoring offered regularly to supplement classroom learning	2 of 4
Scheduled intervention time: Dedicated time in the school for students to receive small-group instruction or other tailored intervention and supports	4 of 4
Expanded summer school: Program provided in summer months to help students stay on track academically	4 of 4
Credit recovery: Course for high school students to retake previously failed courses needed for graduation	4 of 4
Tailored strategies for special education students	2 of 4
Tailored strategies for English learners	1 of 4
Other Recovery Efforts	
Upgrading school facilities	1 of 4

Note: The table includes only recovery strategies directly discussed during interviews with school and district leaders and educators.

VARIATION ACROSS RECOVERY APPROACHES

Despite many shared approaches, the scope of recovery efforts did vary across districts. This variation depended on district context, which ultimately informed local leaders' recovery approaches. We found that recovery efforts **varied depending on achievement levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the amount of time in which students were learning remotely**. One district was relatively higher achieving prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and did not discuss implementing as many new academic recovery programs, whereas the other three districts offered at least one or more new academic recovery programs. Another district experienced long-standing challenges with funding for facilities, and thus used a portion of federal COVID-19 relief funds to upgrade their infrastructure. Finally, leaders in two districts provided detailed examples of tailoring recovery efforts to special student populations, including students with disabilities and English learners.

CONDITIONS ENABLING SUCCESS

Across district cases, we observed common conditions that enabled student recovery. Each district had **strong superintendents who were described as student-centered, collaborative, and intentional.** They also had committed staff who had strong connections with students and were invested in COVID-19 pandemic recovery. Many participants had worked in their districts or schools for several years. **Staff also collaborated across roles to create networks of support** to meet student needs. It was especially critical for content teachers to collaborate with professionals such as special education teachers, English learner educators, school counselors, interventionists, and instructional coaches. Leaders and educators **prioritized engagement with and support for families** as a foundation for supporting student success, including eliciting feedback from families to inform decision making.

CHALLENGES HINDERING RECOVERY EFFORTS

Despite successful approaches to supporting student recovery, district cases continued to face a range of systemic challenges. All districts struggled with **increased staff shortages and vacancies.** Participants in every district described staffing challenges, including difficulties finding substitute teachers, and how navigating the persistent stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery efforts resulted in **pervasive burnout and stress** for many educators and leaders. Considering pervasive burnout and constrained time, districts made **difficult trade-offs** that limited the number of recovery initiatives they could feasibly support. In addition, local leaders expressed **concerns about the financial sustainability of recovery initiatives.** Across cases, federal COVID-19 relief funds were used to pay teachers for additional time and duties related to academic recovery in addition to supporting new positions (e.g., teachers, counselors, specialists).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Local leaders' reflections on their efforts to support student recovery from 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 local leaders and policymakers to inform ongoing recovery efforts:

- To provide a strong foundation for ongoing recovery, continue to incentivize and fund efforts for improving student wellness, physical and mental health, sense of safety, and social connectedness to school.
- To promote high quality learning opportunities and accelerate student learning, expand support to strengthen core instruction (e.g., using evidence-based curricula, assessment data, and scaffolding strategies, identifying essential content standards across grade levels), improve early literacy, and bolster layered interventions based on student needs (e.g., high-dosage tutoring, push-in support, small groups). State policymakers may need to continue to weigh funding in favor of districts where student achievement was most adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- To attend to the complexities of recovery efforts (e.g., challenges with staffing and student participation, limited time), carefully consider expectations and how best to measure the effect of recovery efforts as implementation and outcomes will likely take longer than COVID-19 federal relief funding timelines. It may also be important to evaluate which strategies are moving the needle most for students so that they can be prioritized in the long-term..
- To ensure all students receive needed supports, prioritize strategies to support COVID-19 pandemic recovery for students with disabilities and English learner students. Implementation of such supports likely depends on the presence of strong staff, including specialists, as well as collaboration across roles.
- To promote a strong workforce in districts and schools, continue working to strengthen leader and educator pipelines and support collaboration across roles. To sustain recovery efforts, it may also be important for leaders to proactively address complex issues such as educator burnout and staffing shortages.
- To ensure decision-making is reflective of students' and families' needs, such as connecting families with resources (e.g., food, technology), expanding in-person meetings and events, offering child care during engagement opportunities, and providing ongoing communication through email and text updates.
- To support ongoing recovery, develop a sustainable funding plan to support effective approaches. As reflected in this report, recovery efforts are complex and time-consuming to implement. With federal COVID-19 relief funding sunsetting, state support for ongoing recovery efforts will be critical. It will also be important for leaders to plan and prioritize approaches that best support student learning and well-being.

Section One: Introduction

Responding to Michigan's Return to Learn legislation (Michigan Public Act 147, 2020; Michigan Public Act 148, 2020; Michigan Public Act 149, 2020; Michigan Public Act 48, 2021), the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU) is studying how schools districts have continued to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes examining their efforts to support student recovery due to unfinished and interrupted learning. By examining trends in student learning progress during and beyond the 2020-21 school year and then interviewing local leaders, we gain a better understanding of how districts and schools met educational goals and attainment across instructional modalities and, in this current report, explore how districts and schools are supporting recovery for students as they resume in-person schooling in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had long-lasting consequences for school and district operations as well as student learning and wellness. Previous reports have shown that student learning slowed during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years relative to rates of learning pre-pandemic, but that schools and districts are making progress to recover student learning. In particular, rates of student learning were greater in 2021-22 relative to 2020-21, and learning disparities for economically disadvantaged, Black, Latino, and special education students decreased in magnitude. Despite these gains, many students who are far below grade-level proficiency continue to demonstrate little to no achievement growth (Kilbride et al., 2022).

As a complement to their benchmark assessment reports, EPIC researchers have been interviewing district, school, and teacher leaders to make sense of student learning trends and differences across varied district contexts. In an earlier report, we shared findings from a multiple case study of five school districts that demonstrated better-than-predicted gains in student performance on benchmark assessments in the 2020-21 school year. Those findings from 46 interviews with district, school, and teacher leaders (herein referred to as "local leaders") across district sites were shared to identify best practices for supporting student learning across instructional modalities and in varied local contexts while also documenting local leaders' ongoing priorities and challenges (Weddle et al., 2022).

The findings in the present report come from the second year of our study, during which we visited three of the district sites from the first year of data collection in addition to sampling a new district case. Sampled school districts either continued to demonstrate better-than-predicted test scores

on benchmark assessments in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (our three continuing district cases) or demonstrated notable positive gains in student achievement between the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (our new district case). Across district cases, we interviewed 34 local leaders to identify common and distinct approaches for recovering student learning and attending to student well-being, as well as enabling and constraining conditions that have shaped this critical work. Specifically, we ask:

1. How did districts approach pandemic recovery of student learning and wellness in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years?
2. What strategies, if any, were common across districts or specific to local contexts?
3. What conditions enabled or challenged district success in recovering student learning and supporting student well-being?

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 on district approaches to recovering student learning and supporting student well-being and, where relevant, make comparisons across districts to identify common and distinct approaches across contexts. We then discuss local conditions that enabled or challenged districts' recovery efforts, along with implications of our findings for policy and practice.

Section Two: Data and Methods

Findings in this report come from a longitudinal multiple case study approach that first examined promising practices for supporting student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (year one of data collection focused on the 2020-21 school year) and has since evolved into describing district approaches for recovering student learning and supporting student well-being in the COVID-19 pandemic's aftermath (year two of data collection focused on the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years). For year two of the study, and in accordance with evaluation criteria specified in the Return to Learn legislation, we identified districts that were positive outliers in terms of student achievement on benchmark assessments during the 2020-21 or 2021-22 school years. Through interviews with local leaders at these sites, we continued to develop a deeper understanding of the policies, practices, and contextual factors that may have supported recovery in student learning and well-being. While the main priority of our analysis was to understand what has worked well in outperforming districts, we also asked about challenges to understand what barriers to supporting student learning and well-being were present among these more successful districts.

CASE STUDY SAMPLE SELECTION

Following the Return to Learn legislation, we identified districts that were effective at meeting educational goals. We defined effectiveness as districts performing better than would have been predicted on benchmark assessments in 2020-21, the first full pandemic-affected school year, or in 2021-22, the first full school year of pandemic recovery when most schools in Michigan had resumed in-person instruction. We started by running analytic models that predicted the average standardized benchmark assessments score for each district in the spring of each school year as a function of their average score in the fall of the same school year, M-STEP summative test score performance in 2019, district location and student demographics, and the type of benchmark assessment the district administered. We then calculated the difference between districts' actual average scores on their spring benchmark assessments and their model-predicted average scores.

We ran separate models by subject area (reading and math), with grade and district-level fixed effects, and analyzed model results for three unique 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). 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, districts adopted a combination of modalities throughout the 2020-21 school year. More details on the instructional modality of district cases in 2020-21 can be found in our previous report.

Based on the results from these models, we identified "positive outlier" districts (i.e., districts that achieved higher scores than our models predicted) 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). To prevent noisy estimates from biasing district sampling, we restricted sampling to districts that enrolled at least 100 students. To be considered as positive outliers, districts had to demonstrate a difference between predicted and actual test scores that was at or above the 85th percentile of the distribution for districts in the same instructional modality. We also confirmed that districts demonstrated similar results in reading or math based on test scores for all students and for most student populations such as students in grade K-3, English learners, economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities. From this subset of districts, we purposely sampled districts for variation in assessment provider, student demographics (percent non-White, English learners, economically disadvantaged), locale (e.g., rural fringe, small town, small city, large city), and district type (charter or traditional public school).

It is important to note that we designed our sampling approach to avoid exclusively sampling districts that have always been high performing, as these entities could operate in particular local contexts that are not representative of all Michigan school districts. By comparing actual to predicted test scores on benchmark assessments within the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, we identified districts based on progress on student learning within school years rather than identifying districts based on absolute levels of student performance. As such, districts included in our final sample include those with relatively low average test performance and those with relatively high average test performance.

Based on our sampling approach, we re-identified and re-sampled three districts from year one of data collection as performing better-than-predicted in either reading or math in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. By revisiting these districts for another year of data collection, we sought to deepen our understanding of each case site and examine how COVID-19 pandemic response strategies in the 2020-21 school year informed recovery approaches in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. The other two districts in our sample from year one of data collection changed assessment providers between 2020-21 and 2021-22 and hence could not be included in our sampling framework for year two of the study. In addition, we identified one new district (District F) that did not perform better-than-predicted in either reading or math in 2020-21 but did demonstrate growth in reading test scores in the 2021-22 school year. While not in the 85th percentile of the distribution of the difference between actual and predicted reading test scores in 2021-22, District F was close behind at the 80th percentile of the distribution. By adding this

additional case to our sample, we sought to understand how recovery approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic might vary in school districts that were adversely affected in the 2020-21 school year but showed evidence of rebounding in subsequent years. 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 in 2020-21, whether districts were positive outliers in reading or math performance in 2020-21 and 2021-22, and whether they were traditional public school (TPS) systems or a public school academy (PSA)—also known as a charter network or school[1].

TABLE 2.1. Summary of District Cases

District	Primary Modality	Positive Outlier Years and Subjects	District Size, Sector, and Urbanicity	Student Demographic Composition (2021-22)
A	In-person	Reading and math (2020-21), reading only (2021-22)	Large TPS in large suburb	Enrollment: High Non-White: High Economically disadvantaged: High English learners: High Students with disabilities: Medium
C	Hybrid	Math only (both years)	Medium-sized TPS in rural area	Enrollment: Medium Non-White: Low Economically disadvantaged: Low English learners: Low Students with disabilities: Medium
E	Remote	Reading only (both years)	Medium-sized charter network in large city	Enrollment: Medium Non-White: High Economically disadvantaged: High English learners: Low Students with disabilities: Low
F	Hybrid	80th percentile reading (2021-22 only)	Medium-sized TPS in large suburb	Enrollment: Medium Non-White: High Economically disadvantaged: High English learners: High Students with disabilities: Medium

Note: District modality was 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). Enrollment refers to the total size of the student population in the district. Non-White refers to the percent of students in the district who are Black, Asian, Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, or two or more races. 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., low, medium, and high). The boundaries for each tercile and district characteristic are as follows: enrollment (low = 0-450, medium = 451-1,300, high = 1,301 or more); non-White (low = 0-11%, medium = 12-40%, high = 41% or more); economically disadvantaged (low = 0-52.6%, medium = 52.7-75%, high = 75.1% or more), English learners (low= 0-0.26%, medium = 0.27-2.4%, high = 2.5% or more), and students with disabilities (low= 0-12.8%, medium = 12.9-17.0%, high = 17.1% or more).

Table 2.2 reports the actual minus predicted change in average standardized spring test scores for each district by subject and year. More positive values indicate a larger difference between the actual change in test scores and the predicted change in our models, thus indicating districts that are relatively higher performing. We denote with a star (*) districts that demonstrated differences between predicted and actual test scores in the top 85th percentile of the distribution of districts in the same instructional modality.

TABLE 2.2. Average Test Score Difference (Actual – Predicted)

District	Reading		Math	
	2020-21	2021-22	2020-21	2021-22
A	0.16*	0.23*	0.42*	0.16
C	-0.02	0.05	0.17*	0.22*
E	0.17*	0.35*	-0.09	0.07
F	-0.16	0.13	-0.34	-0.02

Note: We denote in stars (*) districts in the top 85th percentile of the distribution of differences in actual minus predicted test scores for districts in the same instructional modality.

As shown, district cases were situated in varied local contexts (e.g., locale, sector, student demographics), allowing us to probe circumstances that may lead to different approaches for recovering student learning and supporting student well-being. 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 medium and upper terciles for student enrollment across Michigan. Our three repeating district cases from year one of data collection are Districts A, C, and E. We used the pseudonyms from our earlier report to support continuity in findings. The other two districts in our sample from year one of data collection (districts B and D) changed assessment providers between 2020-21 and 2021-22 and hence could not be included in our sampling framework for year two of the study.

District A, sampled based on reading and math test scores in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, is a large district with a majority non-White, English learner, and economically disadvantaged population. District A's primary instructional modality for the 2020-21 school year was in-person. District C, sampled based on math test scores during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, is a medium-sized district with a predominantly White and rural student population. Its primary instructional modality for the 2020-21 school year was hybrid. District E, identified based on reading test scores in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, is a large-sized charter network in a large city with almost all non-White and economically disadvantaged students. The district's primary instructional modality during the 2020-21 school year was remote.

District F is the newest case added to our sample based on reading spring test scores in the 2021-22 school year only. It is a medium-sized district with almost all non-White and economically disadvantaged students. The district enrolls a relatively high proportion of English learners and its primary instructional modality for the 2020-21 school year was hybrid.

CASE STUDY METHODS

Findings in this report draw primarily on interviews conducted in the second year of data collection given the unique focus on COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts in this phase of the study. Where relevant, we draw on interview data from the first year of the study to provide context for district recovery strategies, but only for our longitudinal case sites. Throughout this report, we refer to the district cases as "districts" regardless of whether they are a TPS or charter school and the broader set of participants as "local leaders." We make distinctions between cases and roles when appropriate.

In total, researchers interviewed 34 local leaders across four districts in the second year of data collection between November 22, 2022 and April 26, 2023. Table 2.3 summarizes information on interview participants for each district site. Given the focus on both student learning and wellness recovery, the research team interviewed a broader range of stakeholders in year two of data collection than in year one. To describe implementation of recovery efforts, we also intentionally interviewed more school-level than district-level actors in the second year of the study.

Participant roles varied in accordance with the local priorities of each district. At the district level, we recruited interview participants from senior leadership (district 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 additional school staff included social workers, school counselors, socioemotional coordinators, intervention coordinators, and instructional coaches. Teacher leaders included teachers' union representatives and those district leadership identified as contributing to the COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts. Table 2.3 provides a breakdown by population group across district cases in the second year of data collection.

TABLE 2.3 Interview Participants

District	District Leadership and Directors	School Leaders	School Staff	Teacher Leaders
A	4	3	2	1
C	3	1	2	3
E	1	3	2	0
F	2	3	4	0

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interview questions focused on local leaders' priorities for COVID-19 pandemic recovery, collaboration and engagement of families and educators in recovery efforts, and targeted questions on the design, implementation, and funding for programs focused on students' academic recovery and wellness (e.g., targeting of programs to students, content or wellness area(s) covered, scheduling, recruitment and training of staff, perceived benefits, implementation barriers). Interviews concluded with opportunities for local leaders to reflect on political pushback or tensions surrounding their recovery efforts and important lessons for guiding future work.

We transcribed and coded interviews based on broad conceptual categories as identified in our interview protocol (e.g., student learning recovery programs; student wellness programs, implementation barriers, collaboration, educator engagement, family engagement). 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 (e.g., burnout). During these team meetings, we collaboratively refined code definitions to ensure consistent application.

We then analyzed coded data for emergent themes related to our research questions and documented themes in case memos for each district case. These memos elaborated on the local context of each district case, the district's main priorities for COVID-19 pandemic recovery, approaches for recovering student learning and wellness, implementation barriers, and relevant connections across these conceptual categories. We included supporting excerpts in case memos to establish a chain of evidence. We next wrote cross-case memos on similarities and differences across district case memos, which informed the findings presented in the rest of this report.

LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations to our findings. As part of our sampling approach, we intentionally sampled outperforming districts situated in varied local contexts, including sampling districts that varied in terms of adopted instructional modality during the 2020-21 school year (i.e., remote, hybrid, and in-person districts). 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. Additionally, certain decisions in our sampling approach, such as requiring districts to enroll 100 or more students, may have precluded us from documenting COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery strategies among smaller, rural districts in Michigan.

We further acknowledge that we can only speculate, based on insights learned from interviews with local leaders, on the local conditions that contributed to better-than-predicted spring test scores among sampled districts. In other words, while these interviews offer rich description of on-the-ground conditions that mattered for student well-being and learning, we do not provide causal evidence to definitively link these conditions to student achievement. Lastly, given the explicit focus on student learning and well-being in the Return to Learn legislation, our interview protocols for engaging local leaders largely centered around these facets of COVID-19 pandemic recovery. As such, it is possible that districts pursued other strategies to recovery that we did not capture in our data collection and analysis.

Section Three: Findings

Findings reveal how local leaders supported student learning across diverse local contexts during the 2021-22 school year and beyond. In the following sections, we present priorities and shared approaches for recovery across the four district cases, followed by district-specific variations. We then address conditions that enabled success across districts, followed by shared challenges. We conclude with recommendations for policy and practice.

PRIORITIES FOR RECOVERY

Students' Socioemotional Well-Being, Physical and Mental Health, and Safety Are Foundational to Recovery

Local leaders described extensive recovery needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring that schools respond with comprehensive support for students and their families. In all districts, leaders were emphatic that supporting student's socioemotional well-being, relationship skills, physical and mental health, sense of safety, and home stability took precedence over academics. Reflecting on these priorities, the superintendent from District A shared, *"Our priorities were socioemotional, physical, mental wellness of our children. That was first and foremost. Then it would be academic supports and recovery."* Leaders also discussed the importance of understanding their students and families to inform recovery efforts. A school administrator in District E explained:

> *The first priority is making sure that I am being aware and conscious of what the new norm is and helping everyone just get acclimated with that emotionally. Then secondly, helping people where they are so that they can get to the academic levels that they want to achieve.*

Reflecting a similar focus on well-being and re-acclimating to school, the superintendent in District F explained that diving into academics was not an option for students who carried emotional scars from the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing that schools *"had to meet [students] where they were emotionally."* Indeed, many students faced pandemic-related traumas, such as the loss of a family member, and were still suffering in terms of mental health and emotional well-being. In calling out the disconnect between public expectations for schools to catch up on unfinished learning and the

emotional vulnerability of students returning to school, a teacher leader in District A shared, *"It was just very, very obvious, that first 2021-22 year, that everyone tried to act like it was supposed to be a normal year, and [it] just was not."* Another school leader in District F shared:

> *One thing that people do not talk about that has a huge impact on education [is whether] your kids [are] mentally healthy and prepared to learn? Because if there is a block anywhere, no matter how great your curriculum is, they will not be able to learn it.*

Other students were returning to in-person schooling after long periods of disengagement from their educators and peers while learning remotely. In early elementary grade levels, entire cohorts of students were returning to school without any prior exposure to formal schooling. At middle and high schools, participants shared concerns about the impact of the pandemic on students' emotional development and maturity, particularly for students who were remote during critical transition grade-levels (e.g., sixth for middle school students and ninth for high school students). Across these scenarios, leaders had to reacclimate students to school routines, re-establish expectations and norms for positive behavior, and re-build community and relationships between staff and students to create a supportive school climate where academic learning could then take place. As a school principal in District C explained:

> *[Students] took a few steps back in maturity, and we had seen that for probably the year, that full [2021-22] year. We are just now getting back on track where students are making solid decisions, and it does not appear, this year anyway, that they are needing as much.*

Leaders expressed concern about how conditions such as students' physical health, sense of safety at school, and home-life stability contributed to not attending school. In addition to quarantine procedures and social norms resulting in students missing days of school due to illness, leaders discussed recent events such as the Oxford High School shooting in November 2021 as disrupting families' sense of trust in schools as safe and secure spaces. Other leaders noted declining school enrollment due to shifting family preferences and new barriers hindering student access to schools such as loss of household employment or lack of transportation to and from school. Developing proactive solutions for regular school attendance was critical to COVID-19 pandemic recovery. As a district administrator in District F put it:

> *One of the priorities for me was bringing the babies back to school…under the lens of, yes, we want them to learn, of course, [but we also] want to connect them with resources to help them and their families with support. If they are not here, we cannot help them.*

Urgency to Support Students' Academic Learning

While supporting student wellness and establishing a sense of normalcy at school were top priorities, leaders also had a sense of urgency to improve student learning and achievement. Relatedly, leaders were concerned about growing inequities in student learning trends within their school systems. A director in District A shared that their top priority was *"to close the achievement*

gap between our African American students and our White students…within the next three years" and that they did not want educators to get comfortable with these widened gaps as part of the status quo moving forward. Other leaders were alarmed by how far behind grade-level students were in terms of knowledge and skills. These learning gaps were perhaps most salient in District F where fall-to-spring test score trends did not start to improve until the 2022-23 school year. Speaking about second- and third-grade students in the 2021-22 school year who had received most of their prior education in a remote or hybrid context, an instructional coach from District F shared, *"there was that vacuum [or] void for a little bit… we saw things that we had never seen before, like someone who could fluently read but could not write their name or hold a pencil."* This coach went on to explain that they were committed to understanding students' learning needs and helping them to move forward. Commenting on gaps in math knowledge, another coach in the same district shared that sixth-grade students struggled to understand third or fourth grade-level concepts. The coach stressed the importance of drawing on evidence-based practices to support recovery. They shared:

> *It was very difficult for them. I mean, fractions are difficult anyway, but then to see that struggle […] I was able to experience like, 'wow, this was really hard for the kids.' Then just thinking about what can we do, as a staff, that will allow students to still be working at their grade level, but also getting in those bits of support that are needed to make grade-level work doable. […] What does research say about how students are learning? […] It is not in a timed test. It is not in worksheets. It is in daily practice where they are being the thinkers and the doers of math.*

As discussed in the following sections, districts implemented several shared approaches to support these expressed priorities for recovery.

COMMON APPROACHES TO RECOVERY

These shared priorities amongst case sites then informed the steps that districts took to address student recovery, which continued to be focused on student well-being and academics. Both were addressed through programs and resources, building up district or staff capacity, and a monumental effort by all educators involved.

Student Well-Being

As previously mentioned in the district leaders' priorities, they hoped to not only attend to students' socioemotional well-being but also have the staff available and trained to support such efforts.

All Districts Dedicated Time to Help Students Reacclimate to School and to Learn How to Manage Relationships

District approaches to supporting students' socioemotional well-being, sense of safety, and social connectedness to school included a range of school-wide strategies. For example, in District F, teachers taught exclusively on socioemotional learning for the first two weeks to a month of the 2021-22 school year. By starting the school year with an exclusive focus on socioemotional learning, leaders and educators could build relationships among students and staff and establish norms of positive behavior. They also continued to incorporate socioemotional strategies into instruction of

content. As one school principal shared, students *"needed a lot of structure or support of 'this is how you go about being a friend with other people in the classroom' [or] 'this is how you go about sharing things, and maneuvering through the classroom.'"*

Similarly, District A implemented restorative practices as a proactive strategy for reducing instances of conflict and disciplinary referrals in schools and to also help build community among staff and students. As part of this approach, teachers were required to facilitate restorative circles with students once a week in their respective classrooms. The superintendent explained:

> *We also implemented restorative practices district-wide as another tool in the belt to build deep, meaningful relationships, but, also, to help with healing and restoration. One of the challenges we have had is social-emotional needs of students, but oftentimes, just rooted in some behavioral challenges. If we can provide not only teachers with those tools to manage but, ultimately, our first ring of support is to help with self-management…how can we equip students with those tools and resources so that they can intervene, first, on their own so they don't need those additional layers of support?*

In general, local leaders continued to refine and scale socioemotional strategies in the 2022-23 school year. In District E, one district leader discussed building out district-wide socioemotional learning strategies as a proactive approach to fostering inclusive learning environments and positive student behavior and to phase out the current practice of school staff issuing suspensions or discipline referrals to correct student misbehavior. In District F, leaders discussed adopting district-wide policies (e.g., no cellphones on campus) and new curricula to better support the socioemotional well-being of students. Rather than continuing to carve out exclusive time for socioemotional learning at the start of the school year, school and district leaders worked on integrating socioemotional learning lessons with core instruction and existing school schedules throughout the 2022-23 school year.

Investing time to support student well-being and positive behavior on campus in the 2021-22 school year promoted learning and enabled a more normal return to school in the 2022-23 school year. Students and staff felt better equipped in terms of skills and practices to address student needs. Leaders also noticed more buy-in amongst school staff on the foundational role of socioemotional learning in facilitating students' academic success. In fact, almost all districts discussed ongoing efforts to further refine and plan out socioemotional strategies in the 2022-23 school year and to ensure consistency in implementation across schools and classrooms in their district. A teacher leader in District C shared, *"This [2022-23] year, that transition has been a little smoother. We are still adapting…we have strengths and weaknesses [but] the kids seem a little bit more comfortable with where they are at."* This leader went on to explain that they saw a shift in both academics and students' relationships with peers. Similarly, district and school leaders in District F attributed their approach to socioemotional learning as re-engaging a substantial share of students who were chronically absent, decreasing disruptive behavior from students, and increasing students' self-regulation of their emotions. As a district director put it, *"I'm seeing growth in our students, growth in their academic numbers, and growth in behaviors, social behaviors that students are displaying."*

In addition to dedicating instructional time for socioemotional learning, districts resumed or expanded after-school programming to facilitate social connectedness among students based on

common interests. District E increased after-school offerings, such as theater, sports, and robotics, which one school principal described as *"a big shift after being virtual for a year."* Similarly, District C started multiple peer programs such as after-school clubs *"for students to connect more."* The district also partnered with local community organizations to offer students art therapy, physical education therapy, and cooking classes as another way for students to *"hang out with friends, [and] build connections."*

Districts Pursued More Targeted Wellness Strategies for Students with Additional Needs

All districts continued to conduct home visits with families for students who were chronically absent or truant to help connect families with resources and partner with families in other ways to support student learning. Districts also relied on specific staff members, such as social workers and school counselors, to run groups or classes for students who needed additional support. In District C, leaders described counselors as a crucial arm to their socioemotional support strategy for students, as they were constantly meeting with students and running groups based on evolving student needs. Much of the work of school counselors initially started out with included building relationships and trust with students during the 2019-20 school year, with counselors gradually offering more targeted programs and support based on student needs. Additionally, in all districts, leaders discussed piloting socioemotional curriculum, such as the Transforming Research into Action to Improve the Lives of Students (TRAILS) program in collaboration with the University of Michigan, to support students with high rates of absences and behavioral referrals. A district leader in District F described these programs as providing teachers with *"short but very impactful"* lessons, as well as offering teachers resources to address issues that arise during conversations with students, such as *"hotlines to share with students who might need additional support in after hours and on weekends."*

All District Cases Increased Specialized Staff to Support Student Well-Being and Re-Engagement Efforts

Districts hired additional staff at both the central office (or charter network) and school levels. For example, District F hired a socioemotional learning coordinator in the 2021-22 school year to establish district-wide expectations of socioemotional learning, help embed socioemotional learning with daily instruction, and provide ongoing professional development to teachers. District C benefited from a new mental health consultant hired at the intermediate school district or regional educational service agency (ISD/RESA)[2] level to provide therapy to students and help students in crisis. A leader from the district described this consultant as a *"game changer."* Additionally, districts described using emergency relief funding to hire a range of positions, including additional school counselors, social workers, school nurses, behavioral specialist staff, liaison officers, and student advocates. Leaders stressed the importance of hiring candidates who were from the community, who already had relationships with students, and could quickly be influential in motivating positive behavior and in providing support to students on issues that were, at times, very personal and required staff to demonstrate empathy and compassion for students. In describing the effect of social workers on student well-being in their district, a district administrator in District A explained:

> *They were the most effective, because they were the most personal. You could really get a close connection with individual students and families to understand what the needs were [...] So you really can make sure that students and families*

> *were not being missed or looked over, because you had such a personal connection. When you have one individual in a building, and their sole role—or one of their main roles—is connecting with families through a well-being lens, I think that commitment has dividends.*

Student Learning

Districts approached student learning in a multitude of ways. First, they relied on well-established programs and supports. Second, districts continued foundational efforts that were established during remote learning in the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, they creatively sought solutions to newly arising problems, like summer school attendance and engagement or how to implement additional interventions within the constraints of the school day or calendar.

All Districts Focused On Improving Core Instruction in 2021-22 and 2022-23 to Support Student Learning

Focusing on core instruction allowed leaders to reach all students, which was important given that most students in their school systems had suffered interruptions to their learning. In arguing that improving core instruction was the most effective approach to COVID-19 pandemic recovery, a leader in District E shared:

> *[The pandemic] highlighted, for a lot of our building-level leaders, how important high-quality tier one instruction is, and that we cannot rely on supplemental tutoring or Title 1 teachers or special ed teachers to fix our problems. That we have to make sure that the classroom instruction is right from the beginning. That the quality of instruction [and] who is in front of our kids every single day—their primary teachers—is so much more important.*

Echoing this sentiment, a school principal from District A shared, *"We were trying to be very connected to our core curriculum. That was very important to me, that we were believing in what we were doing [with instruction] as opposed to some program that is disconnected."*

Efforts to strengthen core instruction included identifying priority standards that aligned across grade levels, adopting evidence-based and accessible curricula, and providing teacher training and instructional planning time. Our previous findings from year one of this study suggest that districts relied on priority standards that could support student learning across grade levels to narrow curriculum to the most essential content for students to learn while being remote or hybrid. This same approach continued to guide local leaders' efforts to accelerate student learning upon returning to school. As one teacher leader from District C shared, *"We are still working on priority standards. [...] We have tried to provide more time in staff meetings and scheduled professional development and provided half-day substitutes for teachers to meet and review standards."* Similarly, a school principal from District A shared that a *"remedial approach was not going to be successful"* at recovering student learning. Claiming that their school already had access to a high-quality curriculum and instructional model, the leader *"leaned into that"* as a recovery strategy. In so doing, their staff *"relied heavily on assessment...followed pacing charts, [and] used resources to close the gaps [in student learning] while continuing to teach the planned curriculum."*

Leaders across districts also discussed re-evaluating existing curricula and instructional approaches based on new evidence and research. District F made many of these changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 2020-21 school year, the district adopted a new curriculum for literacy instruction in elementary grades that came with scripted lesson plans for teachers and digital materials that could be accessed by students remotely. An instructional coach in the district explained that the new curricula would help ensure equitable student access to learning opportunities by lowering the burden for teachers to make new materials. They explained, the curriculum *"is pretty scripted for teachers…everything you need is there. They were very, very thoughtful in terms of putting the program together."* District F also provided intensive professional development to teachers in the 2021-22 school year. Another district administrator explained, *"we just reset last year…[and] provided additional professional development for the elementary…curriculum…we did several walkthroughs to ensure that we were implementing with fidelity."* In District C, the superintendent considered implementing co-teaching as an instructional model moving forward and changing curricula through use of federal COVID-19 relief funds.

Educators Provided Access to One-to-One Digital Devices and Made Instructional Materials Available Online

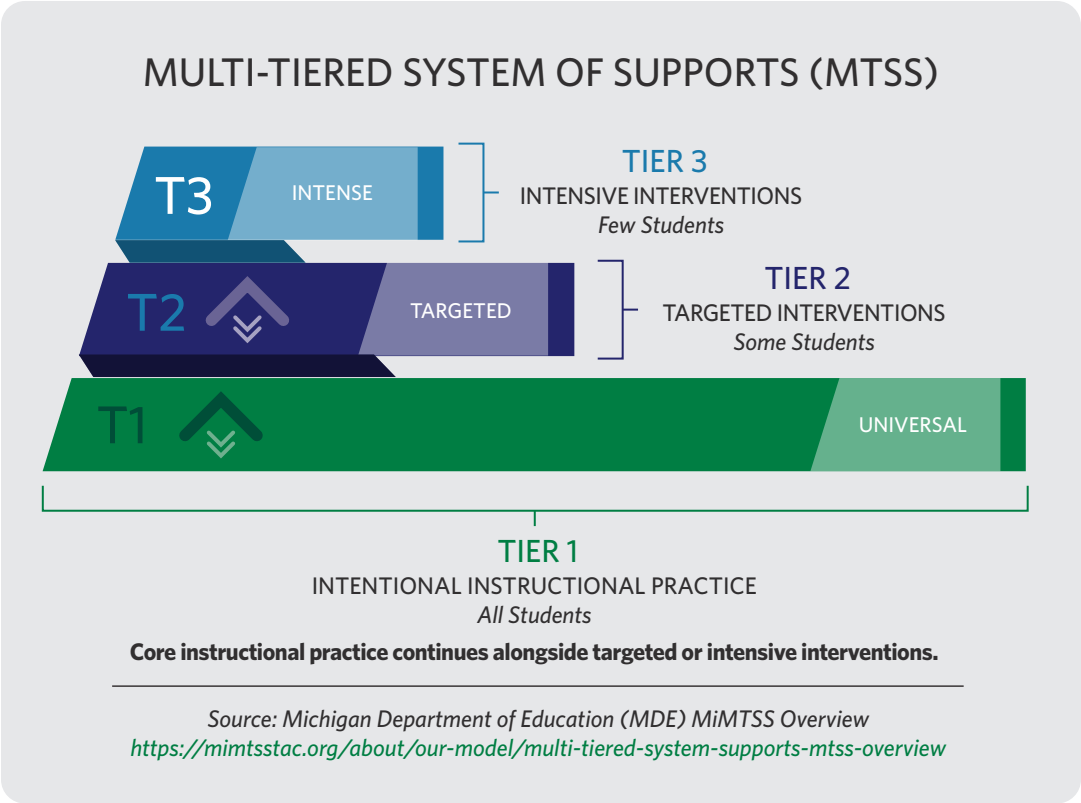
Leaders shared that one of the *"silver linings"* of the COVID-19 pandemic was that teachers became more proficient in using technology and continue to use online tools to keep students engaged in learning when not at school. As such, all districts continued to make one-to-one access to digital devices available to students and used these devices as part of core instruction. As a school principal from District C put it:

> *Online learning and Google classroom usage. There are a lot of good things that came from COVID. I mean, we were forced into it… We are [now] in a traditional setting, but if a student gets sick or if they're absent for a few days, it is not as big a loss because they can access everything that they need online. It is huge for being able to stay on track academically.*

Similarly, District F developed a consistent template for communicating weekly learning materials and assignments to families across grade levels so that parents could remain involved in their children's education and support learning at home. Referring to this communication tool, a school principal shared that it supported families to keep students caught up on work when absent from school. They noted, *"it is huge that we provide the work online […] Have [the student] log into the Google Classroom and they can complete their assignments."* They went on to explain that this approach was much easier than preparing and distributing hard copies.

Districts Relied on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for Identifying Students to Participate in Additional Programs

All districts described MTSS and different tiers of academic need as dictating how academic programs were allocated to students. According to MTSS, Tier 1 programs are intended to serve all students in the school, whereas Tier 2 programs provide supplemental support to students who are behind grade level and Tier 3 programs provide intensive support to students who are farthest behind grade level. Notably, districts considered efforts to support socioemotional learning for all students and to strengthen core instruction (see earlier sections) as Tier 1 strategies.



Source: Michigan Department of Education (MDE) MiMTSS Overview
https://mimtsstac.org/about/our-model/multi-tiered-system-supports-mtss-overview

As another example of Tier 1 strategies, three out of four of our district cases offered double-dose instruction through the use of virtual learning tools to all students. Double-dose instruction can be an additional course or a scheduled time during the school day where students can review or practice grade-level content with differentiated support. In all three district cases, leaders relied on digital programs to develop differentiated study plans for students based on interim assessment scores. For example, a school principal in District A shared that students used i-Ready to complete 45 minutes of math and reading each week. They said, *"it is one of the tools that we use here to help our students and our staff with differentiation when we are thinking about instruction."* At other times, districts relied on digital programs closely paired with curriculum content to provide additional practice and review for students. In general, schools scheduled double-dose instruction during core instructional blocks, or incentivized students to complete study plans at study halls (during lunch) or before and after school where schools would provide free food and snacks.

Leaders described layering academic support for students with Tier 2 and 3 needs and relied on a range of data to allocate supports to students. Additional supports included supplemental and intensive interventions for students behind grade level (under a MTSS framework), summer school programs, high-dosage tutoring, push-in support and small-group instruction during core instruction, and credit recovery for high school students. Leaders argued that these different programs worked together, alongside improvements in core instruction, to individualize support for students who were further behind grade level.

Leaders noted that these programs were evidence-based academic interventions, such as high-dosage tutoring (Nickow et al., 2020) and summer school (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Lynch et al., 2022).

They further recognized that staffing programs with qualified and certified educators were critical to their efficacy and eventual effect on student achievement, resulting in all districts relying on district and school employees to support academic programs as opposed to depending on external providers. For example, an elementary school principal in District A shared that their interventionists and paraprofessionals provided individualized academic support to all their students.

Districts relied on course grades, teacher input, and interim benchmark assessments (NWEA MAP Growth and Curriculum Associates iReady) as screening tools to assess students' baseline knowledge and need for supplemental (Tier 2) and intensive (Tier 3) support. Districts relied on different programs to meet the needs of students who fell along the continuum of Tier 2 to Tier 3 needs. For example, in the two districts that implemented high-dosage tutoring (Districts A and F), tutoring was implemented at a very small scale and only for *"bubble"* students who were just behind grade level. In these districts, the number of students participating in high-dosage tutoring was a small fraction of the overall population.

Districts offered a combination of push-in support, small-group instruction, or pull-out interventions, with a particular focus on students performing further behind grade level. As noted earlier, leaders perceived many of their students to be behind grade level in learning when they returned to in-person schooling. As such, leaders discussed making push-in and small-group intervention strategies available to most, if not all, students. One district administrator in District C described their school's approach to push-in support as a co-teaching model where specialist staff work with general education teachers to differentiate instruction for all students so as not to identify, stigmatize, or isolate students who were struggling academically. As they explained, *"When they push in, they do not necessarily have to work with one particular student [...] it is more of a co-teaching model where they are supposed to help anybody."* This leader went on to explain, *"we did not want certain kids always targeted."* Leaders in Districts E and F relied on a similar combination of push-in support and small-group instruction for reading and math. One district leader in District E shared that push-in support was part of the district's standard approach to instruction, with interventionists scaffolding grade-level content and providing just-in-time assistance for students who needed help.

In general, districts scheduled pull-out interventions for students needing more intensive support. Intervention time was typically scheduled outside of core instruction blocks to avoid disrupting student exposure to grade-level content. As an example, District F scheduled 30 minutes of daily intervention time when elementary school students could work with interventionists on specific reading skills in student-to-staff ratios of eight-to-one or less. For middle and high school students, intervention courses in reading and math were scheduled during elective periods, again with smaller student-to-staff ratios to help differentiate instruction to student needs. In Districts A and C, leaders relied on pull-out interventions for their lowest performing students, staffed these interventions with smaller student-to-staff ratios, and scheduled pull-out interventions outside of core instructional periods.

Expanding and Repurposing Summer School to Focus on Experiential Learning

All districts expanded summer school offerings in the summers of 2021 and 2022 to recover student learning. Consistent with an MTSS approach, these programs were generally targeted to students who were behind grade level and in need of Tier 2 or 3 academic support. However,

districts had mixed experiences with student participation in summer school programming and its observed effects on student learning, resulting in three out of four districts repurposing summer school programs to focus less on academics and to instead engage students in learning through hands-on, immersive experiences.

A district administrator in District E described their summer school program as a *"failure"* due to poor student attendance in summer of 2022, adding that, for next year, they were developing a program focused on athletics and physical education to improve program registration and attendance. District A experienced higher levels of participation in its summer programming but, through an internal evaluation of student test scores, detected minimal effects on student achievement. As the superintendent explained, *"summer school adds value for parents that need childcare, for students that are looking for enrichment, and it creates an opportunity for deepening relationships. There are benefits of summer school. They're just not academic."* Based on these insights, District A re-designed summer school in 2022-23 to be experiential, project based, and as a program where educators could innovate with instruction instead of focusing on traditional academics. District F also developed project-based and STEM-focused summer program for its elementary school in 2021-22 and drew high levels of participation from students and families. In explaining this approach, the district's curriculum director shared, the district *"made it very immersive, which included reading, but we also blended in STEM. [We] even had an experiential activity at the end of the week that was based on what they learned...Really trying to tie it all together. It went really well."*

Prioritizing Interventions During the School Day or Calendar Year

As evidenced in such experiences over the summer, districts found that academic programs occurring outside of the school day or year were more challenging to implement, resulting in the prioritization of interventions during the regular school day and academic year. As previously noted, one district found it more challenging to garner student participation and attendance in academic programming during the summer. Similarly, several leaders discussed challenges with staffing and ensuring student participation for programs scheduled outside of the regular school day. For example, District F found it challenging to scale and sustain its after-school high-dosage tutoring program, which required educators to work additional hours. As the district's superintendent explained:

> *We are going to take a little different approach this year with our tutoring. We are still offering after-school tutoring services. It is not as robust as it was last year simply because teachers are tired, and I do not think it is a sustainable model in the first place, to place all of the accelerated learning efforts solely on your teachers.*

Given these staffing challenges, the district considered contracting with an external provider to deliver tutoring to elementary school students during the school day in the 2022-23 school year.

In addition, districts had to implement additional measures to ensure student participation in after-school activities, such as providing food and snacks and transportation. Even with these additional resources, student participation was not guaranteed. In District C, leaders noted that student attendance in after-school programs ebbed and flowed based on student demand and schedule conflicts with extracurricular activities. As such, school leaders made after-school programming optional and avoided programs like high-dosage tutoring that would require students to stay after school consistently for extended periods of time.

For these reasons, leaders described academic interventions occurring during the regular school day as more effective and increasingly prioritized these kinds of interventions in the 2022-23 school year. However, scheduling interventions during the school day posed its own set of challenges, as leaders struggled to find time to implement all the interventions necessary to recoup student learning and often ran into scheduling conflicts with core instructional blocks or other school activities. This issue is explored more deeply later in the report.

VARIATIONS IN RECOVERY APPROACHES

While the districts had much in common as far as priorities for COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts and even shared approaches to address students' unfinished learning, some variation in recovery approaches were apparent when looking across cases. This variation may be explained by the district's context, such as the district's demographics, their pre-pandemic achievement and funding, and their instructional approach during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student Achievement Levels Pre-Pandemic and Amount of Time in Which Students Were Learning Remotely Affected Recovery Efforts

The district in our sample that was relatively higher achieving compared to other districts in the state pre-pandemic (District C) did not discuss implementing as many new academic recovery programs. This district was largely focused on returning to pre-pandemic school routines. In contrast, districts that entered the COVID-19 pandemic with lower levels of student achievement—and where students had participated in mostly remote learning in the 2020-21 school year—implemented a wider range of new efforts to individualize academic support. As noted, all three districts offered double-dose instruction using virtual learning tools to all students. Districts A and F also implemented high-dosage tutoring programs to recover learning for students who were at the cusp of being proficient at grade level.

Additionally, in Districts E and F, tailoring academic support included a focus on literacy as a foundation for recovery. Interestingly, this matched our sampling method which highlighted both of these districts for better-than-predicted reading test scores, suggesting that tailored strategies to support early literacy can possibly help districts recover student achievement in reading. In both districts, leaders pursued strategies to tailor reading support and instruction according to student needs (e.g., extended literacy blocks, small-group push-in instruction, pull-out supports with reading specialists). The district literacy coach in District F explained how assessment data was central to these efforts, sharing, *"We've spent the last two years really going through the [literacy] assessments, so everybody knows how to give them, everyone knows how to interpret them, everyone knows what to do with the results."* In District E, initiatives focused on reading included support from interventionists during the school day, an optional after-school program for 3rd graders to prepare for the state reading exam, and a workshop series with families. A school leader shared that these family workshops included food and childcare, provided books, and gave guidance to support children with reading at home.

Leaders in District F Focused On Upgrading School Facilities Alongside Their Academic Recovery Efforts

District F had experienced long-standing challenges related to funding for facilities pre-pandemic. Specifically, the last infrastructure bond for this district was passed several decades ago. To address the infrastructure issues, leaders used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to make capital upgrades to school facilities that had been in disrepair. The district superintendent shared that these facility upgrades helped provide a foundation for their other academic recovery efforts by *"improving the learning environment."* Reflecting on the value of using some of their federal relief funds to bolster physical infrastructure, the superintendent said:

> *The flow of ESSER dollars and how they are being used and targeted has provided a lot of hope not only for our students and parents, [but also] staff who have been here through the lean years. [...] With the sense of direction that we have, we understand what our focus is. We have overcome some significant challenges. The financial and facilities issues, these issues are being addressed and [we are] coming through a pandemic together and emerging even stronger than before.*

As demonstrated in the quote above, recovery efforts in District F included a broader range of improvements than our other cases due to different pre-pandemic conditions.

Leaders in Two Districts Provided Detailed Examples of Tailoring Recovery Efforts to Special Student Populations

Leaders in Districts A and C described implementing tailored approaches to support students with disabilities. For example, leaders in District C focused on supporting students receiving special education services by ensuring that strong staffing was in place. Leaders described how federal COVID-19 relief funds and resources from the ISD were used to support special education teachers, behavior specialists, and case workers focused on special education. In one elementary school, leaders reduced the class sizes of their special education classrooms by half. In addition to prioritizing special education staffing, local leaders also described the importance of collaboration across roles. A general education teacher explained, *"We work really closely with our special education teams [...] We're working together to communicate and [...] to make sure that [students'] needs are being met."*

In District A, leaders emphasized that all academic recovery efforts were tailored to the needs of their large English learner population in addition to students with disabilities. The superintendent in District A described a focus on inclusion, stating:

> *With special education and English learners, what our data has demonstrated is that at elementary, they performed a little bit higher because there are higher levels of inclusion. As those students transition to secondary, there is more sheltered instruction, and performance has waned. Our push has been for more inclusionary practices with, in particular, our students with disabilities and students receiving English-learner services.*

In addition to promoting inclusive instruction, leaders in District A also discussed the importance of having an English learner-focused leader integrated into the district leadership team. This helped to ensure that English learner students and families were *"elevated"* during decision-making.

CONDITIONS ENABLING SUCCESS

Across district cases, we observed common conditions that enabled student recovery. Aligning with our year one research examining effective approaches to navigating the COVID-19 pandemic (Weddle et al., 2022), we found that strong leadership, committed and collaborative staff, and engagement with families continued to help support recovery efforts.

Strong Leaders Who Were Student-Centered, Collaborative, and Intentional

Across cases, local leaders trusted their district superintendents and believed in their ability to navigate COVID-19 pandemic recovery. For example, a school leader in District C described the superintendent as easy *"to just go have a conversation with."* This participant went on to explain, *"There are no times where [they] making decisions without [our] input. [They] want to keep us in the loop and see what our concerns are or any roadblocks."* Similarly, the superintendent in District F was described as a *"phenomenal"* and *"supportive"* leader equipped to handle a crisis. The superintendent shared that they were committed to communicating transparently to coordinate COVID-19 pandemic efforts, support school staff, and mitigate any potential challenges to response efforts. They stated, *"We needed to have well-coordinated efforts to not only navigate the pandemic and all the politics that surrounded it, but to keep people encouraged as they went through their own personal challenges."*

Committed Staff Who Had Strong Connections With Students and Were Invested in COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery

Many participants had worked in their districts or schools for several years, which speaks to their commitment and connections to their respective districts. For example, participants in District C described the district as a desirable place to work with less staff turnover than other contexts. Indeed, analysis of 2021-22 staffing data on teacher turnover in Michigan demonstrated this district and two of our other cases experienced low turnover, while one (District E) experienced above average turnover compared to other districts in the state. In District F, school administrators and teachers had worked in the district for an extended period of time and knew the community well. Reflecting on the value of consistent staff, the superintendent shared, *"We have a very 'veteran' staff, about 40% of staff have 15 years or more of experience. [They] know the community very well—students and families. Many of our parents were students in the school at one point."*

Across cases, deep relationships among staff provided a strong foundation for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery efforts. A principal in District A explained:

> *I've worked in the district for a long time [...] I would always say, "We are in this together because our work is far too important and far too difficult to go about it any other way." When it came to COVID, I was able to say, "All right. For the past few*

> *years, we have all been saying 'we're in this together, we're in this together.' Now is a time to see, is that true or not?" [...] I think the fact that we really were living it during good or normal times is what helped us be able to sustain it during the most challenging of times.*

Aligning with these sentiments, several local leaders in District E described the district as a *"family"* that supported one another during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaboration Across Staff Roles Helped to Create Networks of Support

Across cases, local leaders recognized that classroom teachers could not be expected to meet students' needs on their own. Therefore, it was critical for classroom teachers to collaborate with roles such as special education teachers, community liaisons, school counselors, interventionists, and instructional coaches. Additionally, collaborative approaches to decision-making helped generate support for student recovery approaches. For example, participants in District F described how grade-level meetings that brought together teachers, school counselors, and support staff provided opportunities to discuss specific students' needs and create plans to move forward. One participant described this as a *"holistic team approach."* Similarly, District C had structures in place to support collaboration between educators and principals. A teacher leader shared, *"We have a principal advisory committee [PAC] which meets the week before the staff meeting. That's one teacher per grade level, the principal, vice principal. [...] Sometimes, we can make a decision just within our PAC group. Sometimes, it's something we have to bring to the whole staff meeting."*

Engagement With and Support for Families as a Foundation for Supporting Student Success

Local leaders prioritized engagement with families, providing a foundation for recovery. Engagement with families took on many forms and included, but was not limited to, providing access to resources, such as food and technology. Across cases, community and school liaisons, in addition to partnerships with community-based organizations (e.g., organizations promoting food and housing security, after-school art programs), helped to promote family engagement. For example, a district administrator in District C described the role of a mental health team that served caseloads of students as well as *"linking parents with supports outside of school that are community-based to help the whole family."*

Further reflecting the importance of staff to support family engagement, several local leaders in District A highlighted the valuable role school-community liaisons have played in recovery. The District A superintendent shared, *"Our primary priority is having this 'navigator' in each school that helps teachers to help families create opportunities for engagement."* Likewise, a principal in District A explained, *"I think nothing can really replace the importance of authentic, meaningful relationships, both with your students and your families."* Aligning with this view, a principal in District F described strong relationships with families as a critical foundation for learning. They explained, *"If a student or a family is not feeling that relationship, feeling that comfort level, then the academics will never happen."*

Local leaders discussed the importance of eliciting feedback from families to inform decision-making and were committed to improving engagement. Leaders described how meetings and events with families were opportunities to share academic requirements and at-home learning strategies, learn about families' needs and challenges, and to build relationships. A principal in District E noted that strong relationships with families helped provide a foundation for sharing important information or facilitating harder conversations. They explained:

> *People have to know that you care before they want to hear what you have to say to them. Then it makes it easier to have those hard conversations, because you speak to me every morning when I'm outside, or you see me when we have these family nights.*

Several participants also discussed the need to continue improving family engagement in their districts. For example, a school administrator from District E shared, *"I think we are not doing as much as we should be…I think more surveys of what families need are helpful."* A principal in District A also discussed the importance of ensuring family engagement approaches are inclusive. They shared an example from the district's recent strategic planning process, stating:

> *What we found is through some of our town halls and focus groups that the parents that were attending weren't representative of our entire demographic. We reached out to a community partner [focused on Refugees] and asked, "Hey. When's a good time for us to come and meet?" They said, "Well, Sunday morning is our best time to engage families." Sunday at 10:00am, we had a team show up there. We had about 30 families, speaking, I think, seven different languages, and provided some feedback and a focus group. That was really helpful.*

Across districts, other examples of improving family engagement included expanding the number of in-person meetings and workshops, providing childcare at meetings, and providing ongoing communication through email and text updates to families.

CHALLENGES ACROSS CASES DURING RECOVERY

Despite successful approaches to supporting student recovery, district cases continued to face a range of challenges. Four shared challenges were: growing staff shortages and vacancies, educator burnout and stress, limited staff capacity, and concerns about the financial sustainability of student recovery efforts.

Growing Staff Shortages and Vacancies

In most of our cases, local leaders described staffing challenges as less acute than the extreme teacher shortages taking place in other districts in Michigan and states across the country. As noted earlier in this report, 2021-22 data on teacher turnover in Michigan reflect that three of our district cases experienced low turnover and one (District E) experienced above average turnover compared to other districts in the state. Nonetheless, participants in every district described some staffing challenges, including difficulties finding substitute teachers. For example, in District C, local leaders had to draw on physical education or elective teachers to fill in as substitutes. The

classroom teachers would then be responsible for leading gym class for their students in place of their planning period. A district-level administrator explained:

> *We are feeling a staffing pinch. We won't have subs sometimes. At certain levels, we rely on our teachers to sub and cover other classes. And I know this year particularly, we've had teachers flat out say, 'No, I'm not. [...] I need time to myself. This is my hour of planning. I'm not going to sub.' I'm assuming that's from burning out. They're tired.*

As reflected by the leader above, the effect of staffing shortages was layered on top of educator burnout from navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, which is discussed more in the next challenge.

In District F, leaders shared concerns about what staffing will look like when many of their current teachers retire. The high school principal explained, *"I have a very seasoned staff. They are professional. They are the best prepared staff I have ever worked with. But now many of them are getting ready to retire [...] I am expecting to replace 2-3 teachers a year."* The school leader went on to share how challenging it is to find teachers, and that applications for vacant roles have been low. They also discussed reaching out personally to potential applicants to encourage applications. In addition to retirements, local leaders in District F shared that some teachers were leaving for better offers in other districts. A math coach said:

> *There is a close[by] district where they are offering a lot more money, and teachers are leaving and going to this district. It is a difference for some of $10,000, which is significant, so we have lost many teachers to this other district. This year, I feel like teachers could go wherever they want to go, and they're going to get hired. [...] Teachers are leaving mid-year. It's making it really, really difficult for the kids, first of all, having guest teachers, multiple different guest teachers. And then for the administrators, my gosh, where you've got four classrooms without a regular teacher, it is hard.*

In addition to issues finding substitute teachers, District E had a smaller proportion of certified teachers than other districts during the 2022-23 school year. Local leaders in District E shared that their schools were often relying on substitutes (who were also challenging to find) because of difficulty hiring certified teachers. Participants in District E shared that only 50% of their teaching staff were certified at the time of the interviews. One social worker noted that she spends a lot of time supporting teachers who are not certified. Within the district, some of these challenges were being addressed through a new focus on administrators providing teacher coaching. An academic dean shared:

> *When we had interviews for teachers this year, only one of our interviews was with a certified teacher. Every other interview was someone that was looking for a substitute role, and most of them said they would go the alternate certification route. That just takes some time. That has been very hard [...] I have to spend a lot of time coaching teachers that do not know what it looks like to have classroom management and routines and what it looks like to plan a lesson and how to execute, and what things [to] grade or what to do if a student struggles. It has been hard.*

Educators and Leaders Experienced Pervasive Burnout and Stress

Across all cases, participants shared several examples of how navigating the persistent stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery efforts negatively affected educators and leaders. In District F, several leaders talked about current staff being fatigued, tired, burnt out, etc. Concerns of burnout seemed to be more acute in 2022-23 than in 2021-22. The socioemotional learning coordinator shared:

> *Our teachers have families and life happens to them, too. So when we are leading initiatives to show the human element of [education] or asking teachers to help with implementing [socioemotional learning] in their curriculum, we have to understand they are dealing with their own children who are having their own challenges or dealing with sick parents and children. […] Understanding what teachers need and supporting that [is] important."*

A district-level administrator in District A shared that teachers were burned out because 2021-22 was much worse than 2020-21 and it doesn't seem that the district has fully addressed staff's wellness needs. Similarly, the superintendent said being an educator is *"harder than it's ever been."* They noted that people are dealing with personal loss or trauma and the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. These pervasive stressors constrained efforts to scale up student academic recovery efforts or to offer interventions outside of the school day, resulting in trade-offs.

Limited Time and Staff Capacity Led to Difficult Trade-Offs

Considering pervasive educator burnout and constrained time, districts were limited with the number of recovery initiatives they could feasibly support. Given these constraints, leaders had to make trade-offs, such as offering interventions in literacy but not in math or scheduling interventions during elective periods. In District C, participants shared that the alternative education program was eliminated so that the district could focus on other recovery efforts. With that said, across cases, leaders were proactive in trying to maximize student time wherever possible. Strategies included efforts to reduce student absences, limiting out-of-school suspension in favor of restorative practices (as a socioemotional learning strategy), making learning materials available online, and using breakfast or lunch periods as opportunities for skill practice.

Many local leaders described challenges with trying to balance multiple recovery initiatives. Time limitations were most challenging for districts implementing multiple academic programs to meet students' individual learning needs. Summing up this common challenge, a school principal in District A explained that there was not enough time *"for all the things we are trying to squeeze in during the school day."* In District F, limited time caused some teachers to initially push back against the district's socioemotional learning emphasis due to challenges incorporating this focus amidst their content-focused work. This required school and district leaders to explain to teachers why it was needed and to get their buy-in and support. School leaders figured out how to fit 15-20 minutes of socioemotional learning instruction into each day, which required intentional planning and other trade-offs. A principal in District F described this planning process as:

> *We sat down, and we played with our schedule and said, 'Okay. How much time?' We do the two hours for literacy. That is a given. That is a non-negotiable. Let's negotiate how much time goes in for math. How much time needs to go in for social studies? How much time needs to go in for science?' [...] We make sure [we're] getting everything covered.*

While the district's prioritization of and commitment to protecting the literacy time aligned with MDE's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan to "improve early literacy achievement" (MDE, 2020), it also left limited time for other initiatives and core instruction.

Concerns About the Financial Sustainability of Recovery Initiatives

Across cases, federal COVID-19 relief funds were used to pay teachers for additional time and duties related to academic recovery and also to support new positions (e.g., teachers, counselors, specialists). Reflecting sentiments across cases, the superintendent in District A expressed concerns about what will happen to new staff roles when federal relief funds are no longer available, sharing:

> *I think everyone is concerned. [...] We hired additional teachers. We've hired counselors. We've hired additional social workers. We've hired nurses. A lot of the things that we've talked about are people. When the federal funds go away, can we sustain all of that? What I think the broader community outside of education wants to see is, well, what is the return on investment? [...] It's hard to demonstrate. It's not an input equals an output. It's, unfortunately, a little bit more complex than that. There is research that shows what works. It's incumbent upon us to demonstrate successes and how these additional resources have benefitted because if we don't, they will go away. We won't be able to comprehensively support students in the manner that's needed.*

While all local leaders were worried about the sustainability of recovery initiatives when federal COVID-19 relief funds are no longer available, there were also some district-specific concerns. For example, local leaders in District E noted how being a charter affects their ability to secure funding, especially since traditional funding streams like bonds are not available to them. District F also faced unique funding concerns given their focus on providing one-to-one technology access and upgrading school facilities. The district may face large expenses down the road to maintain technology and facilities without the certainty of funds to cover costs.

Looking ahead, district leaders in all four cases shared that they will have to use Title 1, state funds, local revenues, or find other grants to continue hiring for these roles, which will inherently involve making trade-offs or choosing to spend less in other areas.

Section Four: Key Takeaways and Policy Recommendations

Local leaders' reflections on their efforts to support student learning during recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic provide an in-depth understanding of successes and challenges across the state. Importantly, even though the districts featured in this report were selected as positive cases based on student performance, they still experienced barriers. In fact, many of the barriers discussed here are pervasive across the state and country (e.g., funding constraints, educator shortages, and burnout). Considering the relevance of these themes, we outline lessons learned and provide recommendations for policy and practice to inform ongoing recovery efforts and support the development of education systems that are better prepared to cope with future crises.

LESSONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Lesson One: Attending to Student Well-Being Was a Critical Foundation for Successful Recovery Efforts

All district cases prioritized students' socioemotional well-being and re-acclimation to school as critical early milestones in the recovery process. Leaders felt they could not expect students to learn if they were not mentally, socially, or emotionally prepared to do so. Consistent with an MTSS framework, districts relied on a combination of school-wide (Tier 1) strategies, as well as more targeted support (Tiers 2 and 3) for students with more acute wellness and behavioral needs. Local leaders described this combined approach as proactive rather than reactive in addressing students' wellness needs and resuming a sense of normalcy in school routines.

Anecdotes from our district cases suggest that an early and sustained focus on student wellness and re-acclimation to school can build a robust foundation for learning that enables students to catch up on missed opportunities and accelerate achievement growth down the road. In our previous report, we similarly observed that districts that showed resilience in the COVID-19 pandemic and were able to progress student learning amidst conditions of crisis were deeply invested in student wellness and maintaining students' social connectedness to school.

Recommendation for Policy and Practice

State policymakers should continue to **fund recovery efforts focused on improving student wellness** and reacclimating students to in-person schooling. State and district leaders might consider maintaining or expanding specialized staff positions needed to support these recovery efforts.

Lesson Two: Strengthening Core Instruction and Layering Additional Support Enabled Student Learning

Leaders in all districts described the COVID-19 pandemic as adversely affecting many—if not most—students in their school systems. As such, local leaders perceived efforts to strengthen core instruction as critical to recovering student learning. Improving core instruction would allow leaders to affect learning for all students, as it does not depend on student participation in voluntary programs. As part of these efforts, leaders relied heavily on evidence-based curricula, assessment data, and scaffolding strategies to expose students to grade-level content while addressing foundational gaps in learning along the way. These efforts reflect a commitment to accelerating learning (as opposed to remediation). Leaders identified essential content standards across grade levels to help educators identify necessary content, knowledge, and skills that students needed to master at each grade level. As noted in our previous report, district cases that progressed student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic also dedicated time and resources toward developing priority standards to narrow down the curriculum of instruction for students in remote and hybrid learning environments. This is another example of how COVID-19 pandemic response strategies in our district cases continue to shape recovery strategies.

In all districts, local leaders described strategies for recovering student learning as a layered approach where additional programs could target the individual needs beyond the support received during core instruction. Additional support included interventions such as high-dosage tutoring, double-dose instruction, summer school, push-in support, small-group instruction, and pull-out interventions. All districts followed an MTSS framework to guide the allocation of academic interventions to students or were in the process of developing their MTSS framework. We observed more layering of academic interventions in districts that were lower achieving or had offered remote instruction to students during the 2020-21 school year. These districts also tended to enroll more students of color and students who were economically disadvantaged. There have been larger gaps in student achievement stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic documented in districts offering remote instruction in the 2020-21 school year and that enrolled a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students (Kilbride et al., 2022).

Two of the districts, Districts D and F, that were sampled because they out-performed on reading test scores, developed extensive programming around improving early literacy instruction. These two districts were also lower performing in reading relative to other districts in our sample and serve a larger share of students who are economically disadvantaged. In these contexts, it may be helpful for district and school leaders to invest in evidence-based curricula, pedagogical practices, intervention strategies, instructional coaching, and other professional development focused on developing students' early literacy skills.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Collectively, these findings suggest that state policymakers and district leaders should consider **expanding support to strengthen core instruction, improve early literacy, and bolster layered interventions** based on student needs (e.g., high-dosage tutoring, push-in, tutoring, small groups). State policy makers may need to continue to weigh funding in favor of districts where student achievement was most adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lesson Three: Challenges With Staffing, Burnout, and Student Participation May Hinder Districts' Abilities to Implement Strategies Needed to Fully Recover Learning

While the layering of academic interventions can work to target additional instruction and support to students who are behind grade level in learning, districts have struggled to implement these interventions at the scale and duration needed to address all student needs. Interventions scheduled after school or outside of the school year have proven challenging in terms of securing student participation and consistent staffing, particularly amidst pervasive educator burnout. In light of these challenges, districts tended to prioritize interventions during the regular school day and calendar. This approach, however, has resulted in limited time and schedule conflicts that can reduce student exposure to necessary interventions and support. Given these challenges, districts may not be implementing academic recovery strategies at the intensity needed for students to catch up on unfinished learning and to fully resolve inequities in student learning opportunities. For example, while the research community has strongly endorsed high-dosage tutoring as a strategy for recovering student learning post-pandemic (e.g., Nickow et al., 2020), our district cases were not able to implement these programs at a large scale or to sustain tutoring long-term. Similarly, while summer school can be effective at improving student achievement, especially in math (e.g., Lynch et al., 2022), our district cases were changing programming to focus less on academic skills and more on project-based, STEM-focused, and experiential learning (e.g., field trips, athletics).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Given these complexities, state policymakers should carefully consider **how best to measure the effect of recovery efforts.** It is important that measures include outcomes beyond achievement on standardized tests and attend to the fact that as implementation and outcomes will likely take longer than COVID-19 federal relief funding timelines. It may also be important for leaders and researchers to evaluate which recovery strategies are most impactful for students so that they can be prioritized in the long-term.

Lesson Four: Efforts to Tailor Recovery Strategies for Students With Disabilities and English Learners Were Inconsistent

All district cases enrolled a moderate to substantial share of students with disabilities, yet not all reported consistent approaches to accelerate student progress on individualized education plans (IEPs). While students with disabilities can undoubtedly benefit from the academic interventions districts delivered to support literacy and math knowledge, they may have other educational and developmental needs that cannot be supported through academic interventions alone. Local leaders in all districts discussed interventions for students with disabilities as aligned with what they provided to students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. More support may be needed to implement a compensatory approach that attends to students with disabilities' limited access to services during the COVID-19 pandemic. District C was the only district that cut class sizes in half for special education instruction, notably through resources the district's ISD provided.

Two district cases enrolled a high proportion of English learner students, but only one (District A) shared detailed examples of tailoring their recovery efforts for this student population. In this district, prioritizing inclusive instruction and including English learner-focused experts on the

district leadership team helped to promote equity amidst recovery by ensuring that approaches were reflective of the needs of English learner students and families.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Moving forward, it may be important for state policymakers and district leaders to **prioritize strategies or approaches to support recovery for students with disabilities and English learner students**. As reflected below, implementation of such supports likely depends on the presence of strong staff, including specialists, and collaboration across roles.

Lesson Five: Strong Leadership, Committed and Collaborative Staff, And Engagement with Families Enabled Recovery Across Cases

Across cases, leaders emphasized that the success of recovery efforts depended on educators and support staff, and these conditions were also identified in our previous report as supporting effective COVID-19 pandemic response. Districts increased hiring for specialized staff positions to support students' socioemotional well-being. District and school leadership that were responsive to student needs, along with dedicated school staff who were willing to collaborate in support of recovery efforts, also contributed to the success of local recovery efforts.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

These findings stress the importance **of strong leader and educator pipelines** that attract and retain high-quality leaders and staff at schools. Leaders should also **encourage collaboration across roles** to ensure coordinated response efforts. As noted in our findings, for districts to sustain recovery efforts, it may be important for leaders to proactively address complex issues such as educator burnout and staffing shortages.

Family engagement was also important for districts to tailor recovery efforts and decision-making according to family needs and preferences, and to sustain participation in these programs. Thus, leaders and policymakers should **continue to develop and support strategies for engaging and partnering with families**.

Lesson Six: Widespread Concerns About the Sustainability of Recovery Initiatives Reflect a Need for Consistent Funding

Across all district cases, relief funds from federal and state sources covered curriculum purchases, staffing positions, overtime costs, infrastructure upgrades, and digital programs used in recovery efforts. Local leaders, in general, were grateful for these funds and explained that they provided a much-needed influx of resources to improve education for students. At the same time, leaders were concerned about what would happen to new staff roles and programming when funds were no longer available, which made it difficult for leaders to plan long-term and more proactively around student recovery needs.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

State policymakers should **develop a sustainable funding plan to support ongoing recovery initiatives**. As noted earlier, recovery efforts are complex and take time to implement. With federal COVID-19 relief funding sunsetting, state support for ongoing recovery efforts will be critical. As the funding landscape changes, district leaders will need to plan and prioritize approaches that best support student learning and well-being.

ENDNOTES

1 In Michigan, public school academies are publicly funded schools that operate independent of a traditional school district, often referred to as charter schools. We refer to these schools as "charter schools" as that is the more commonly used term.

2 Hereafter, all references will mention only ISD as this is the more common term used among policymakers.

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APPENDIX A: ANALYTIC MODELS AND SAMPLING OF DISTRICT CASES

To document response and recovery strategies to the COVID-19 pandemic that may have contributed to student learning during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, we first identified "positive outlier districts" with better-than-predicted performance from different instructional modalities (in-person, remote, and hybrid). To do so, we estimated the following model for each school year:

$$Ygd = \alpha + \beta 1\text{FALLSCORE}gd + \beta 2\text{M-STEP}gd + \beta 3DCHARgd + \beta 4\text{VE}NDORgd + \mu g + \alpha d + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Where Ygd is the spring standardized test score for reading or math in grade-level *g* in district *d* in 2020-21 or 2021-22. *FALLSCORE* is the fall standardized test score and *M-STEP* is the 2019 summative assessment score for the same subject area for each grade-level *g* in district *d*. $DCHAR$ is a vector of location and student characteristics for each grade level and district (i.e., the percentage of non-White students in a district [Black, Asian, Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races], the percentage of students considered economically disadvantaged, the percentage of students receiving English learner or special education services, and urbanicity). $VENDOR$ is a vector of indicators showing which of the four pre-approved benchmark assessments were offered at each grade level by each district (see Kilbride et al., 2021a and Kilbride et al., 2021b, for detail about approved vendors used by Michigan districts to measure student achievement growth during the COVID-19 pandemic). We also include grade-level (μ) and district (α) fixed effects.

We estimated the model and analyzed results separately for three unique district samples that we 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=365). Districts that were classified as hybrid only or hybrid option for a majority of the school year were included in our hybrid sample (n=89). Finally, districts classified as fully remote only for a majority of the school year were included in our remote sample (n=83). Note that these samples are smaller than those from our previous report since we now require districts to have two years of test score data with the same assessment vendor, leading us to drop districts from our sample that changed assessment vendors or did not report test score data in 2021-22. Additionally, we could not assign 60 districts to any modality category, either because they did not offer any one modality option for the majority of months in the school year or because they were missing modality data.

We next compared each district's actual average spring standardized test score with each district's model-predicted average score. We further limited sampling to districts using the Curriculum Associates i-Ready and NWEA MAP Growth assessments, the two most common benchmark assessments 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 more positive test score than what we predicted in our models. As we outline below, within each category of instructional modality, positive outlier districts had to be at or above the 85th percentile of the distribution in the difference between actual and predicted spring test scores by reading or math. Consistent with research documenting the many challenges districts faced when providing remote and hybrid instruction (see, for examples, Halloran et al., 2021; Kaufman & Dilberti, 2021; Kilbride et al., 2021a; Kilbride et al., 2021b; Kilbride et al., 2022), 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. We note that these trends could also be driven by how we classify districts by instructional modality, as we identified a smaller number of hybrid-only or remote-only districts to begin with (see sample sizes by modality reported above).

APPENDIX A *(continued)*

For in-person instruction, we identified between 152 (reading) to 186 (math) districts that exceeded our predicted spring test scores in 2020-21, and between 173 (reading) to 195 (math) districts in 2021-22. In-person districts demonstrated positive differences in actual relative to predicted spring test scores ranging from greater than 0 standard deviation units to a maximum of 0.48 (2020-21) and 0.41 (2021-22) standard deviation units in reading. In math, differences ranged from greater than 0 to a maximum of 0.68 (2020-21) and 0.50 (2021-22) standard deviation units.

In comparison, we identified 22 (reading) and 27 (math) hybrid districts with actual test scores that exceeded predicted spring test scores in 2020-21, and between 49 (reading) and 50 (math) hybrid districts in 2021-22. Differences between actual and predicted spring test scores ranged from greater than 0 standard deviation units to a maximum of 0.31 (2020-21) and 0.42 (2021-22) standard deviation units in reading. In math, differences ranged from greater than 0 to a maximum of 0.18 (2020-21) and 0.39 (2021-22) standard deviation units. For remote districts, we identified between 6 (math) to 19 (reading) districts with actual spring test scores that exceeded predicted test scores in 2020-21, and between 32 (math) and 58 (reading) districts in 2021-22. Differences between actual and predicted spring test scores ranged from greater than 0 standard deviation units to a maximum of 0.28 (2020-21) to 0.47 (2021-22) standard deviation units in reading. In math, differences ranged from greater than 0 to a maximum of 0.15 (2020-21) to 0.40 (2021-22) standard deviation units.

Within each category of instructional modality, we sampled districts that were at or above the 85th percentile of the distribution in the difference between actual and predicted spring test scores by reading or math. We also confirmed that these districts demonstrated similar results in reading or math based on test scores for all students, as well as those for student populations 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 (e.g., rural fringe, small town, small city, large city, etc.), and district type (charter versus TPS).

Following the above procedures, we first confirmed whether any districts identified in year one of data collection could be re-identified and re-sampled again for year two. We re-sampled three districts from year one of data collection (districts A, C, and E) as performing better-than-predicted in either reading or math in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. These districts were among the highest performing for their instructional modalities in 2020-21 and/or 2021-22 school years. Moreover, by following these districts for another year, we could gather longitudinal data to explain how pandemic *response* strategies in 2020-21 may have informed pandemic *recovery* strategies in 2021-22. The other two districts in our sample from year 1 of data collection (districts B and D) changed assessment providers between 2020-21 and 2021-22 and hence could not be included in our sampling framework for year two of the study. In addition, we identified one new district (District F) that did not perform better-than-predicted in either reading or math in 2020-21 but did demonstrate growth in reading test scores in the 2021-22 school year. While not in the 85th percentile of the distribution of the difference between actual and predicted reading test scores in 2021-22, District F was close behind at the 80th percentile of the distribution.

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