RESEARCH REPORT

The Infrastructure for Instructional Improvement in Round 4 Partnership Districts

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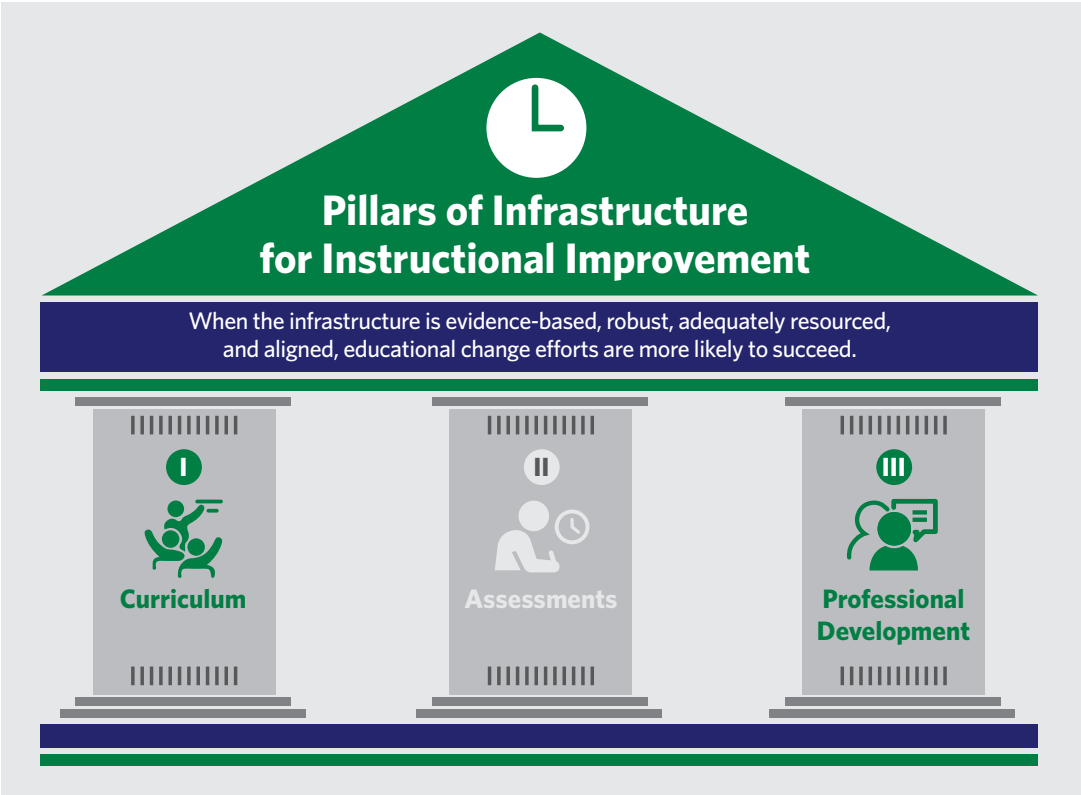
Section One: Introduction

An essential component of the Partnership Model for school and district turnaround in Michigan is its emphasis on improving instructional quality in Partnership schools. A combination of professional learning opportunities and supports from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and intermediate school districts (ISDs)[1], supplemental financial resources, locally-driven strategic planning and goal-setting, and additional accountability pressure aim to improve district systems and school practices related to curriculum and instruction (Strunk et al., 2020).

This form of improvement seeks to open classroom doors and targets the instructional core to change how teachers teach and, in turn, what and how students learn. A school's "educational infrastructure" can boost this form of improvement. During the accountability-policy era, researchers have shown how curriculum, assessments, and professional development together provide a foundation for systemic, coherent instructional reform (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015). Further, when the infrastructure is evidence-based, robust, adequately resourced, and aligned, educational change efforts are more likely to succeed (Garet et al., 2001; Penuel et al., 2007; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). This report focuses on two major pillars of the infrastructure for improvement: curriculum and professional development.

FIGURE 1.1. Pillars of Infrastructure for Instructional Improvement



First, we address curriculum, which defines what and how to teach. Curriculum delineates how to organize and teach specific grade levels and content areas; it is a tool shaping teachers' and leaders' work. More concretely, curriculum includes, but is not limited to: state standards, district instructional frameworks, scope and sequence documents, and instructional materials. It is necessary to note that, at this phase of the accountability policy era, standards-based instruction has become taken for granted. Yet Cohen et al. (2018) issue the reminder "standards and assessment may provide a frame that could inform decisions about curriculum, but they are far from being curriculum" (p. 208). As such, it remains crucial to uncover how Partnership districts and schools deployed a broad set of curricular resources. In sum, curriculum, outlining what content should be taught in which ways, has the potential to steer the direction and depth of instructional improvement efforts (Cohen et al., 2018).

Second, professional development helps educators learn about facets of instructional reform (e.g., Partnership, curriculum, frameworks for teaching and leading). Professional development is a lever for increasing the capacity of educators to teach and lead in specific ways; it can foster individual learning, collective sensemaking, and organizational improvement (Penuel et al., 2007). There exist many forms and modalities of professional development—from workshops and online modules to coaching and mentoring programs (Desimone, 2011). The content and design features of professional development matter for whether and how it affects classroom practice and student outcomes: intensive, aligned, and contextualized is more likely to advance changes in classroom practice (Coburn, 2004; Garet et al., 2001; Yoon et al., 2007).

In this report, we offer our major findings on the nature and enactment of educational infrastructure in Partnership districts and schools during the 2022-23 school year. These districts and schools were identified in November 2022—the fourth round of the Partnership Model—and wrote their Partnership Agreements throughout the remainder of the school year (Singer & Cullum, 2023). This report provides a snapshot of the educational infrastructure in Partnership districts and schools during their identification year, which can serve as a baseline to inform district and state leaders who are now supporting Partnership schools in their improvement efforts and assessing the progress of the program over time. After providing an overview of student achievement in Partnership schools over time and educator perceptions of instructional quality, we provide an in-depth analysis of the systems, routines, practices, and resources surrounding curriculum and professional development in Partnership schools. Our key findings include:

1. In survey responses, teachers and principals expressed concerns about the ongoing negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning and reported concerns about instructional effectiveness and the implementation of academic intervention practices.
2. Partnership districts have some gaps in their curricular infrastructure. These include relying on a mixture of curricula that may contribute to misalignment between curricular resources and student needs, and sometimes inadequate school and district leader support for implementing curriculum.
3. Partnership districts provide educators with professional development, especially through professional learning communities, which teachers described as helpful. Due to the variety of topics covered, professional development was perceived as disjointed at times.

We elaborate on these findings below. First, we present results on trends in student achievement in Partnership schools and the ways Partnership educators perceived student academic performance. These results highlight ongoing concerns of leaders and teachers about student achievement. Next, we describe the nature of the infrastructure for instructional improvement in Partnerships districts and schools, with close attention to how they implemented curricula and provided professional learning opportunities to change educators' practices and raise student outcomes. Here, we provide evidence on strengths and gaps in these components and their alignment. Together, we illuminate structures, routines, practices, and beliefs enabling or hindering instructional improvement efforts for Partnership Schools in their identification year.

Section Two: Data and Methods

To understand issues related to the educational infrastructure in Partnership districts and schools, we used a convergent parallel mixed methods research design (Hewitt & Mansfield, 2021). We collected both quantitative and qualitative data, analyzed these data separately, and then integrated the findings. Using multiple types and sources of data allowed us to triangulate our findings and develop a richer understanding of the topic (Creswell & Clark, 2010). In this section, we describe our data sources and methods of analysis (see Table 2.1 for an overview).

TABLE 2.1. Data Sources

Data	Outcomes of Interest	Source	Year	Subgroups
Case Study Data				
Partnership district case studies	Instructional systems and practices, curriculum resources, professional learning opportunities	Interviews with district leaders and principals Teacher focus groups	2022-23 school year	Traditional public and charter case districts Cases of reidentified and newly identified Partnership districts
Survey Data				
Teacher and principal surveys	Perceptions of student academic progress, curricular and instructional quality, professional learning, school leadership, school culture/climate	EPIC-developed survey	Spring 2023	All schools in Round 4 Partnership districts Partnership schools and non-Partnership schools in Partnership districts Reidentified, newly identified, released, and never identified schools in Partnership districts
Statewide Administrative Data				
Student administrative records	Student achievement on state standardized tests	MDE and CEPI	2016-17 through 2021-22	Students in Round 4 Partnership schools, non-Partnership CSI schools, and all other Michigan schools

CASE STUDY DATA

We ground our analysis in qualitative case studies of six Partnership districts, which we refer to with pseudonyms (Table 2.2). We intentionally sought both traditional public school (TPS) districts and charter districts, and both reidentified and newly identified districts. During the 2022-23 school year, we conducted a set of interviews and focus groups with our case districts to collect data related to instruction, professional development, academic intervention, and other factors shaping the educational infrastructure. We started by interviewing leaders at the district or charter management organization (CMO) levels for our cases. We then interviewed the principals of Partnership schools in the case sites. We were also able to conduct focus groups with Partnership school teachers in four of the case study districts. We asked participants directly about non-academic priorities and strategies, and we also heard about non-academic issues when asking about school practices and challenges more generally. (See Appendix A for a sample interview protocol.) We note here that we only included Partnership districts in our case studies (as well as in our survey, discussed below). Thus, we do not describe the practices and challenges in non-Partnership districts, and we are limited in our ability to compare the practices and challenges in non-Partnership districts with those in Partnership districts.

TABLE 2.2. Partnership District Case Study Sites

District Pseudonym	Sector	Round 4 Identification Status
Ducks	TPS	Reidentified
Hurricanes	Charter	Reidentified
Rangers	Charter	Reidentified
Blizzard	TPS	Newly Identified
Hornets	TPS	Newly Identified
Condors	Charter	Newly Identified

We analyzed our case study data in three stages. First, after each interview and focus group, we wrote a memo to summarize key points about the district or school's challenges and strategies as well as their efforts related to curriculum, instruction, professional development, and other organizational factors relevant for instructional improvement. Second, we compiled our findings from each interview or focus group into a matrix, which allowed us to compare aspects of the educational infrastructure across cases. Finally, we wrote summative thematic memos to capture key points related to curriculum use and professional development.

We complement our case study data with qualitative data from additional interviews and observations that we conducted throughout the school year. For example, we interviewed leaders and staff members from the Office of Partnership Districts (OPD), and we observed planning meetings that involved personnel from OPD, ISDs, and district and school leaders. We incorporate quotes from these data to help contextualize or augment findings from our case studies or surveys.

SURVEY DATA

We use survey data in this report to provide additional evidence related to educational infrastructure and help contextualize and generalize findings from the case studies. Round 4 Partnership schools were first identified in November 2022. We fielded our survey of all teachers and principals in Partnership districts from February through March 2023. We asked all teachers and principals a range of questions about their experiences, perspectives, and opinions about their school and district. We surveyed everyone in the district, regardless of whether they worked in a designated Partnership school or not. This approach allows us to gain insight into the different experiences and perceptions of educators in Partnership and non-Partnership schools within a given year and over time.

To conduct the survey, we worked with MDE and Partnership district leaders to identify the population of teachers and principals in Partnership districts and to obtain their contact information for survey administration. We administered the survey electronically to 9,065 teachers and 356 principals. The response rate was 44% for teachers and 48% for principals. (See Appendix B for subgroup response rates.)

In our analysis, we summarized teacher and principal responses across a range of questions, including educator perceptions of student academic progress, major focus areas for school improvement, curricular and instructional quality and effectiveness, and academic interventions. For all analyses, we applied survey weights to adjust for differences in observable characteristics between respondents and non-respondents. (See Appendix C for additional details about survey items and weighting.)

In addition to analyzing responses for Partnership districts overall, we compared responses between Partnership schools and non-Partnership schools in Partnership districts. We also make some comparisons based on Partnership status: reidentified Partnership schools, newly identified Partnership schools, released schools, and never-identified schools (Table 2.3). We present subgroup results when differences between groups are statistically significant for teachers at minimum (the small number of principals limits our power to detect significant differences across principal groups), or in limited instances, where we want to highlight similarities alongside differences. Otherwise, we present Partnership district-wide responses. When we present item-level subgroup results in which at least one difference is not statistically significant, we use stars to denote statistically significant differences.

TABLE 2.3. Definition of Partnership Status Categories

Partnership Status	Definition
Reidentified	Schools that were previously identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 and that were reidentified in Round 4.
Newly Identified	Schools that were *not* previously identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 and that *were* identified in Round 4.
Released	Schools that were previously identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 and that were *not* reidentified in Round 4.
Never Identified	Schools that were *not* identified for Partnership status in *any* of the four rounds.

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Finally, we use administrative data on schools and students to provide baseline data on student achievement. We describe student achievement trajectories in Partnership schools relative to trajectories in other subgroups. For this analysis, we use the reidentified and newly identified Partnership subgroups as described above. We also compare Partnership schools to non-Partnership schools that were identified as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). These schools were in the bottom 5% of schools on the Michigan State Index, schools with at least one underperforming student subgroup for three years or had graduation rates below 65% and were not identified for Partnership. Finally, the last subgroup we used was all other schools in Michigan that were not in the other three groups. (Released schools can be in either the non-Partnership CSI or other subgroups.)

We plot student-level proficiency rates over time in math and reading by year for each of the four subgroups: reidentified schools, newly identified schools, non-Partnership CSI schools, and all other schools. We run this analysis separately for math and ELA in grades 3-8 (M-STEP and PSAT) and 11 (SAT), respectively. Proficiency in grades 3 to 8 is set by the state for M-STEP and PSAT tests for each year and grade. Proficiency on the SAT is set at the College Boards College and Career Readiness standards of 480 in ELA and 530 in math. Proficiency rates allow us to track the performance level of students in these schools with a policy relevant measure. (See Appendix D for an analysis of student achievement trends with standardized scores.)

Section Three: Student Achievement in Partnership Schools

This section of the report provides an overview of trends in student achievement for Partnership schools, as well as Partnership school educators' current perceptions of student performance and their focus on instructional improvement. Educators in current Partnership schools remain concerned about the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, survey data reveal that many Partnership school teachers and principals do not agree that their schools do an effective job with literacy and math instruction, and they report somewhat low levels of implementation for high-leverage academic interventions.

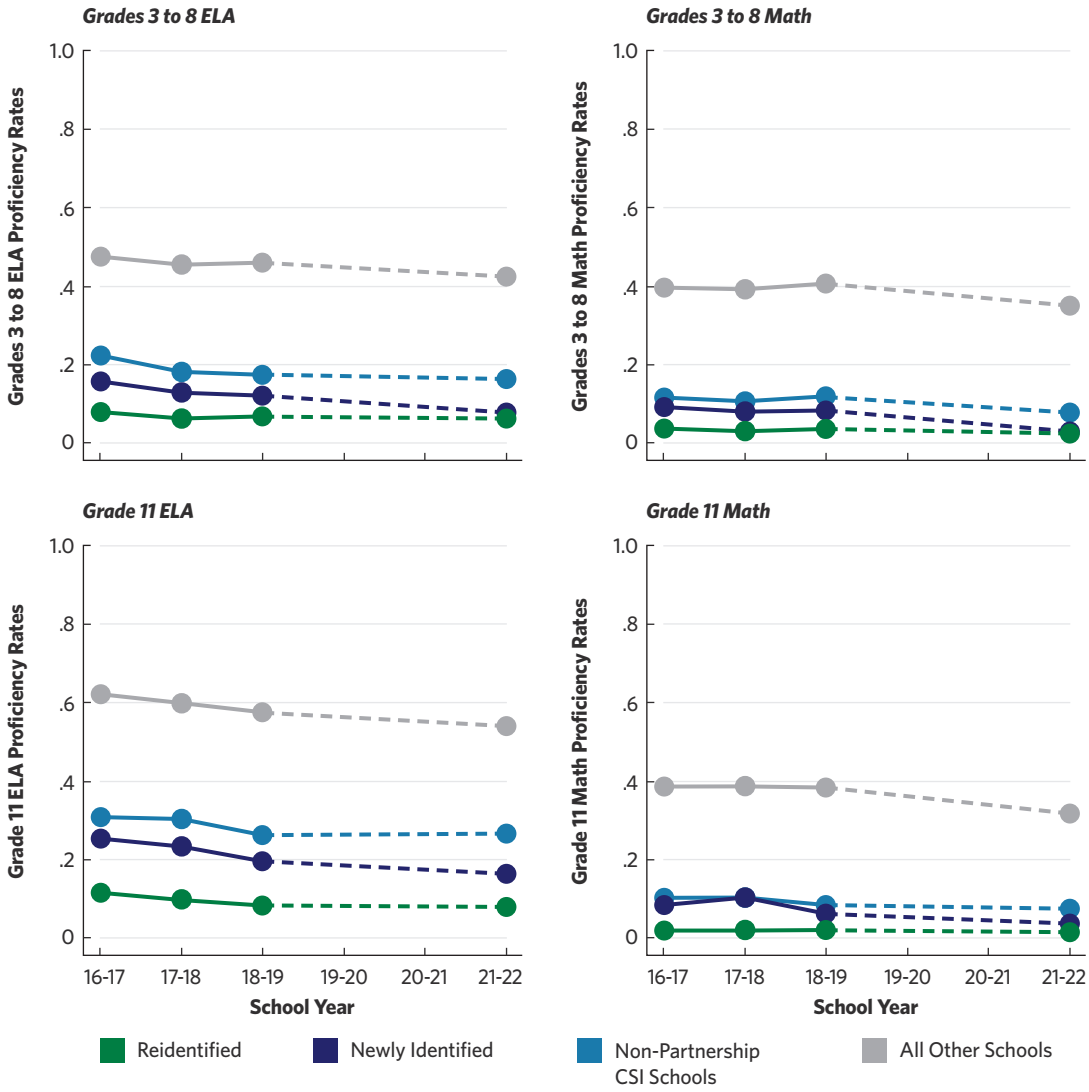
Our analysis of student achievement levels over time (Figure 3.1) shows trends in Partnership school performance before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The top row of Figure 3.1 shows the mean standardized test scores for grades 3 to 8 over time. The bottom row of line graphs in Figure 3.1 shows the results of grade 11 testing over time.

The current round of Partnership schools have had persistently lower achievement levels than other low-performing schools in the state, which is to be expected because Partnership schools are identified largely based on low student proficiency scores and growth (Singer & Cullum, 2023). In each subject and test, both reidentified schools and newly identified schools had lower proficiency rates than non-Partnership CSI schools (i.e., other low-performing schools).

However, reidentified Partnership schools fared better than other low-performing schools after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite these schools having the lowest student achievement in the state on average. Between 2018-19 and 2021-22, ELA and math proficiency rates for both grades 3 to 8 and grade 11 fell more sharply for newly identified schools and non-Partnership CSI schools than for reidentified schools on average. Newly identified schools have had higher proficiency rates than reidentified schools over time but have also experienced a steeper decline in achievement. In both ELA and math, proficiency rates in newly identified schools were already

declining before the COVID-19 pandemic, and they declined even further during it. The relatively stronger performance of reidentified schools reflects prior findings that the Partnership Model had a protective effect on low-performing schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, even for those schools that did not improve enough to be released from Partnership status (Cullum & Harbatkin, 2023). Still, for newly identified and reidentified Round 4 Partnership schools alike, as for many other schools statewide (Strunk et al., 2023), student achievement remains lower than their pre-pandemic levels.

FIGURE 3.1. Student Proficiency in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools Over Time, 2016-17 through 2021-22

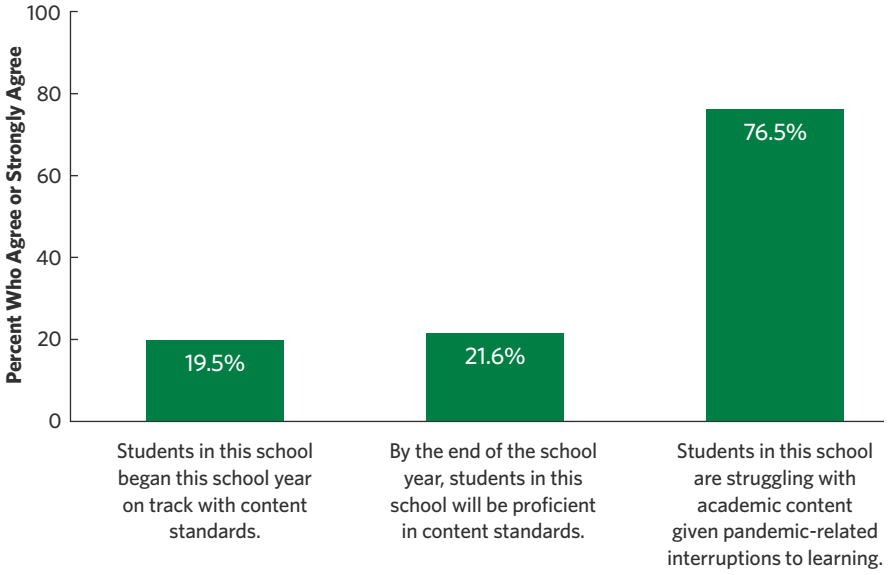


Note: Markers represent the proficiency rate by subgroup and year. Students are marked as a 1 if they are proficient and a 0 if they are not proficient. In the top two panels, Grades 3-7 use M-STEP and Grade 8 uses PSAT. For the bottom two panels, Grade 11 uses SAT. There was no state testing 2019-2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. State testing was modified for 2020-21 to allow for flexibility due to pandemic and participation rates were low in Partnership schools.

COVID-19 CONTINUES TO AFFECT STUDENT LEARNING

According to teachers from Partnership districts, their students continued to struggle academically and behaviorally due to the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3.2 shows survey results regarding teachers' perceptions about whether their students are on-track or struggling during the 2022-23 school year. Around 80% of Partnership district teachers indicated that students were still struggling with academic content due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas only around 20% of teachers reported that students are beginning the year on-track or will end the year on track (Figure 3.2).

FIGURE 3.2. Student On-Track Ratings and Pandemic-Related Struggles as Reported by Partnership District Teachers, 2022-23



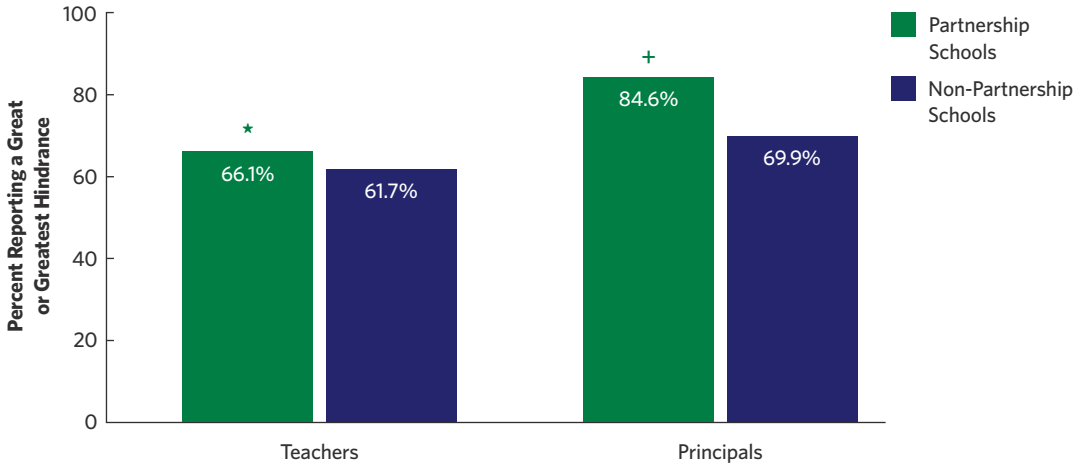
Note: Answer options were strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

Principals and teachers in Partnership districts characterized the lingering effect of the COVID-19 pandemic as a major hindrance to school improvement. A Ducks district leader explained that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be an obstacle to improvement because of how much academic recovery is necessary:

> *High academic achievement has been a focus [for our district], and I think all of that was impacted by COVID...The attention is still there, but COVID definitely had an impact on that, and so we are at a place right now where the attention is really around, how do we get back the gains that we were making, and what shifts do we need to make? Because it's not just continuing from where we were. Now we're at, how do we accelerate for this time of this unfinished learning? That is a big focus.*

The concerns voiced by this district leader were widely held by Partnership district teachers and principals. As shown in Figure 3.3, most Partnership district teachers and principals responded that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning was a great or the greatest hindrance to school improvement for them in 2022-23. The problem is likely even greater for Partnership schools within Partnership districts, as a larger share of Partnership school teachers and principals reported the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning as a great or the greatest hindrance than did those in non-Partnership schools.

FIGURE 3.3. The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Student Learning as a Hindrance to Improvement in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools, 2022-23



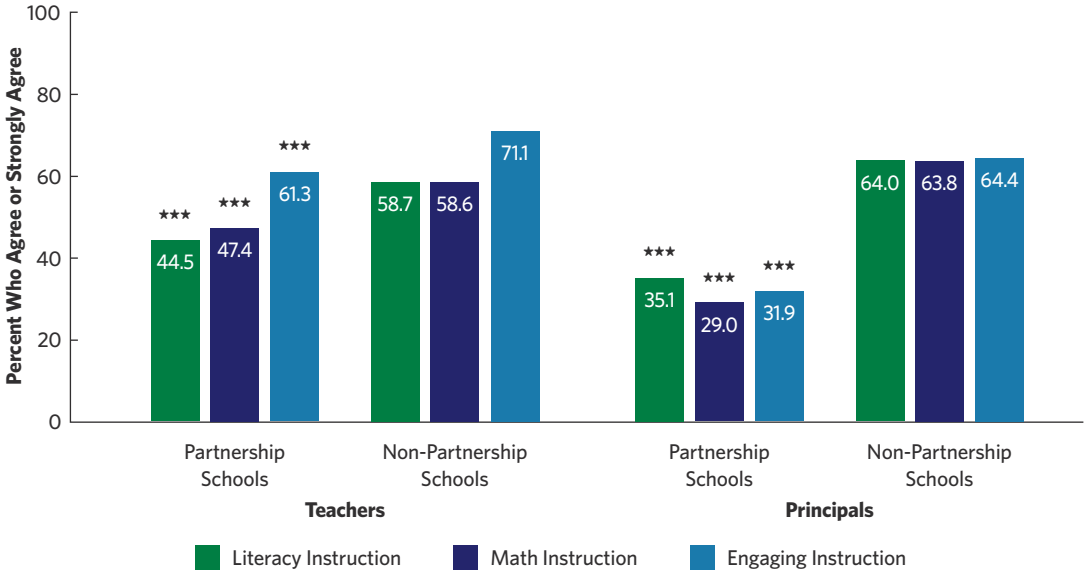
Note: Teachers and principals were asked to indicate the extent to which "the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on student learning" was a hindrance to school improvement. Answer options were: not a hindrance, a slight hindrance, a moderate hindrance, a great hindrance, and the greatest hindrance. $^{+}p<0.10$, $^{*}p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL EDUCATORS RAISED CONCERNS ABOUT INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY AND ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS

Though teachers and principals in Partnership districts recognized the academic needs of their students, they also expressed some uncertainty about whether their schools were meeting these needs. Principals in Partnership schools were particularly concerned about instructional quality. We asked teachers and principals about whether their schools do a great job with math and literacy instruction as well as whether they offer engaging instruction. As shown in Figure 3.4, only about one-third of Partnership school principals agreed that their schools do a great job with literacy and math instruction and that teachers in their school effectively engage students in learning. By comparison, around two-thirds of non-Partnership school principals agreed that their schools do a great job with those aspects of instruction. Similarly, significantly lower proportions of teachers in Partnership schools than those in non-Partnership schools agreed that their schools do a good job with literacy, math, and engaging instruction. Partnership teachers were more likely to agree that

their schools do a great job with subject-specific (i.e., math or literacy) instruction and effectively engaging students, though the low share of Partnership school principals who agreed highlights a discrepancy between teacher and principal perceptions.

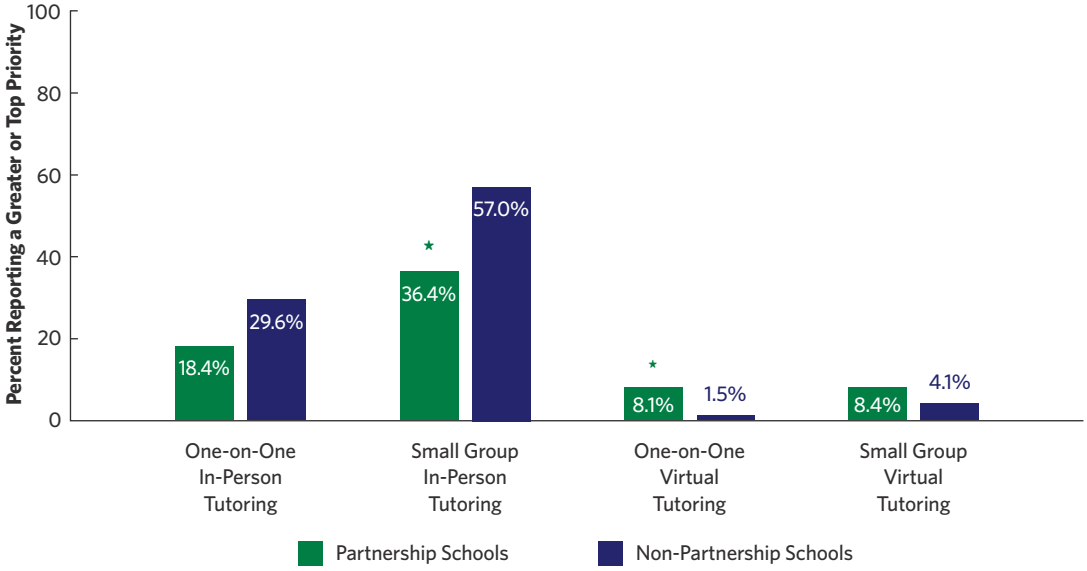
FIGURE 3.4. Principal and Teacher Ratings of Instructional Effectiveness for Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools, 2022-23



*Note: Teachers and principals were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "This school does a great job with literacy practice and instruction," "this school does a great job with mathematics instruction," and "teachers effectively engage students in learning." Answer options were strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. †p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

Relatedly, Partnership district principals and teachers reported some gaps in the implementation of academic intervention practices, which are promising ways to accelerate student learning but can be challenging to implement (Kraft & Falken, 2021; Nickow et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2022). First, we looked at principal-reported prioritization of tutoring (Figure 3.5). While a similar share of Partnership school principals and non-Partnership school principals prioritized one-on-one tutoring, Partnership school principals were somewhat more likely to indicate that this tutoring took place virtually. For non-Partnership schools, about 30% of principals reported prioritizing in-person one-on-one tutoring, with only 1.5% prioritizing virtual one-on-one tutoring. For Partnership schools, however, only about 18% of principals reported prioritizing in-person one-on-one tutoring, with about 8% prioritizing virtual one-on-one tutoring. Principals prioritized small-group tutoring at greater rates than one-on-one tutoring, though non-Partnership school principals were more likely to report prioritizing small-group tutoring than Partnership principals overall, and again there were differences related to the modality. For non-Partnership schools, the majority (about 57%) of principals reported prioritizing in-person small-group tutoring, with another approximately 4% prioritizing virtual small-group tutoring. For Partnership schools, only about 36% of principals reported prioritizing small-group in-person tutoring, with about 8% prioritizing virtual small-group tutoring. Overall, very few principals prioritized virtual tutoring, the effectiveness of which has been questioned (Barshay, 2022; Robinson et al., 2022).

FIGURE 3.5. Principal-Reported Prioritization of Tutoring in Partnership Districts, 2022-23



Note: Principals were asked the extent they were prioritizing the one-on-one and small-group in-person and virtual tutoring as strategies for accelerated learning or addressing student needs in the 2022-23 school year. Answer options were: not at all, to a minimal extent, to a moderate extent, to a greater extent, or this is a top priority in our school. $^{+}p<0.10$, $^{*}p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$

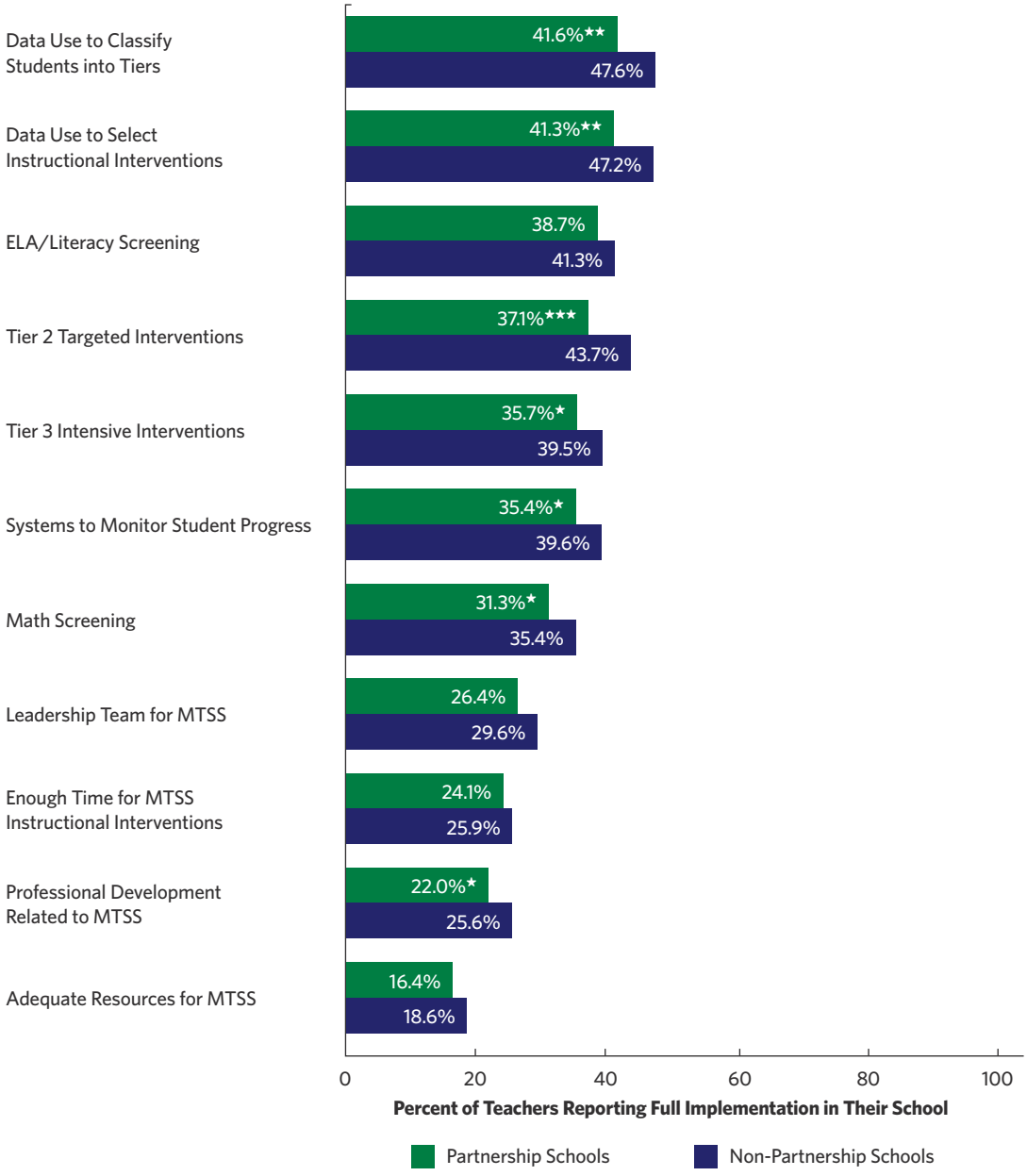
Second, a relatively low percentage of Partnership district teachers reported full implementation for their instructional multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Key elements of an instructional MTSS include screening students and classifying them into intervention tiers, providing Tier 2 (targeted) and Tier 3 (intensive) interventions, and various supportive resources for MTSS (e.g., monitoring systems, leadership, time, resources). As shown in Figure 3.6, less than half of Partnership district teachers reported that initial classification and ELA screening practices were fully in place, with an even lower percentage reporting that targeted and intensive interventions were implemented, and the lowest percentages reporting that various support functions were in place. For most of these elements, fewer Partnership school teachers reported full implementation than non-Partnership teachers.

Educators' perceptions of instructional quality and limited academic intervention implementation relates to human capital challenges within Partnership districts and schools.

One explanation for educators' perceptions of instructional quality and limited academic intervention implementation relates to human capital challenges within Partnership districts and schools. As discussed in a prior report (Singer et al., 2023), Partnership districts (and especially Partnership schools) have had to rely on newer and under-credentialed teachers to a great degree. In addition, staffing challenges strained school

personnel in multiple roles, ranging from school administrators and instructional coaches to paraprofessionals, such that academic intervention practices may often not be implemented as frequently or as well as intended.

FIGURE 3.6. Teacher-Reported Instructional MTSS Implementation for Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools, 2022-23



*Note: Teachers were asked the extent to which their schools had implemented various elements for their instructional MTSS. Answer options were: not at all implemented, partially implemented, or fully implemented. Teachers could also select "I don't know" and those responses are excluded from the figures in this graph. †p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

Another important explanation for these instructional issues, however, is a lack of strong, coherent educational infrastructure to support instructional improvement. During a planning meeting, for example, one Partnership school principal explained that "*elevating Tier 1 instruction, [in other words] rigorous grade-level curriculum*" is their main focus for now. A district-level administrator in the meeting built on this point:

> *We found a lack of Tier 1 systems being implemented with fidelity…not just that someone is outright not doing it. It could be that but also there is a lack of understanding, lack of knowledge or skills. If we don't have base instruction around rigorous grade-level curriculum we're not going to be able to build off of that. Greater monitoring, accountability, coaching, professional development, common tools… There's a need to elevate instruction, strong instruction with appropriate rigorous grade-level curriculum and that's not taking place in every classroom.*

As reflected in the quote above, Partnership schools have struggled to establish systems, routines, and practices that both define and promote high-quality instruction. The magnitude of academic needs reinforces a focus on Tier 1 (or universal) instructional practice rather than academic interventions. As the principal of another Partnership school put it, "*With 90% [of students] 'not proficient' [on state standardized tests], we're talking about really most [students] needing strong instruction at Tier 1.*"

In sum, while many, if not most, students in Partnership schools would benefit from targeted and intensive (Tier 2 and 3) academic supports, schools are instead devoting more of their attention toward universal curriculum and instructional practices rather than interventions. This is because so many Partnership school students are struggling academically, and Partnership teachers and principals alike believe they must shore up the foundational quality of their Tier 1 instruction. Accordingly, the next two sections of this report explain and illustrate two components of the infrastructure for improvement in the context of Partnership reform: curriculum and professional development. While presenting findings on each, we demonstrate leaders' activities to formulate, implement, and mediate curriculum implementation and professional development in Partnership districts and schools. We also describe teachers' perspectives on and responses to various aspects of instructional improvement inside Partnership schools and classrooms.

Section Four: Curriculum in Partnership Districts

Curriculum plays a central role in efforts to improve student outcomes and shape instruction. As a pillar of instructional improvement, curriculum guides the content and pedagogy of teaching while fostering a common vision—and framework for—instruction in a school (Ball & Cohen, 1996). Instructional materials, therefore, enable educators to collectively work to improve teaching and learning (Remillard & Bryans, 2004). Additionally, instructional materials can function as resources for teacher development. For these reasons, curriculum matters for Partnership reform efforts. We surface and explain curriculum implementation in Partnership Schools, with particular attention to the adoption of an array of curricular materials and the degree to which curricula supported teachers, leaders, and educational improvement. (Note that as we discuss curricula, we use pseudonyms to preserve district and school anonymity. We use lettered pseudonyms [e.g., A, B, C] for ELA and numbered pseudonyms [e.g., 1, 2, 3] for math.)

Partnership districts had access to a multitude of instructional and curricular resources; however, Partnership schools encountered certain challenges with curriculum implementation. In particular, the curricular resources available for Partnership districts ranged in quality and consistency. Educators voiced some concerns related to issues of fragmented curricula and misaligned resources that, in turn, contributed to barriers for effective curriculum implementation.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS USED A MIXTURE OF DIFFERENT CURRICULA

Partnership districts in our case study sample selected and adopted a combination of different curricula, partially driven by the need to use different curricula for different grade levels and content areas. A Hornets district leader, for example, explained that "*some other curriculum developments have been happening at the middle school and the high school.*" They expanded on this by saying:

> *At the middle school, they've moved to using [Curriculum 1] for math as their curriculum resource, and for the language arts courses, they are using [Curriculum A]. I think this is their second year of implementing that. There's been some professional development, some learning, at the middle school level around those different curriculum pieces.*

Similarly, the Rangers principals described their school's curriculum this way:

> *We started with a new curriculum, [Curriculum A], which is very robust. Unfortunately, my first year was the year of the pandemic. We left in March. Over the years, a lot of the literacy initiatives have been centered around ensuring that teachers have capacity and implementing [Curriculum A]. Then in addition to that, last year we also started with [Curriculum B] as a way to help close some of the gaps and kind of deal with some of the foundational skills with students with their reading. Those have been kind of the two major priorities.*
>
> *Right now, with our kindergarten through fifth grade, we use [Curriculum C]. We use our pacing guides and, of course, we use our curriculum maps to determine what is taught in the classroom. We use [Curriculum C]—and that's for ELA. In 6th through 8th, we use [Curriculum D] for our middle school curriculum when it comes to literacy…The curriculum that we use for math for K through 5 is [Curriculum 1]. One of the big things that we like about [Curriculum 1] is because there's a calendar piece that's built into it from grades K through 5—so it's not that they're just getting the math lesson. As far as our 6th through 8th, they are using [Curriculum 2].*

This demonstrates the assortment of curricula in place in a single school and offers evidence on how schools adopted and relied on a variety of programs. Even more importantly, this points to issues of curriculum turnover, in which schools frequently replace curriculum. This often leads to unstable implementation. Offering further evidence on this issue, teachers expressed concerns about frequent and often rapid shifts as to the required curriculum. For example, a Blizzard teacher shared:

> *This is the fourth word study type thing, so we've brought four different curriculums. [Curriculum A], then we went into [Curriculum B] and now we're in [Curriculum C]. So, three different phonic-type things. This is our second reading, so I think actually the reading's good. Math—we've at least stayed consistent with our math—we've been [Curriculum 1]—use that. Social studies—non-existent…So, I don't know. The curriculum, the professional development—it's all just all over the place. It's a mess.*

Taken together, these quotes indicate that multiple curricula are used within a single district or even a single school. On the one hand, the abundance of curricula makes sense to guide different subject areas, and they can help ensure instructional materials align to strategic goals and educators' varied needs. Likewise, changing the curriculum can be productive if districts choose a higher-quality option. On the other hand, the variety of curricular materials presents challenges

for systemic improvement. For example, in response to multiple curricula, district administrators must design and institute an array of professional development and other supports matching each of those curricula, which can increase the overall workload required for instructional improvement efforts and can tax already resource-constrained schools and districts.

Beyond the capacity and support challenges inherent in using multiple curricula, using different curricula may result in misalignment between learning contexts. We heard one example of this issue from the Blizzards district, where an interventionist explained, "*Our Title reading intervention curriculum is [Curriculum A] while our general education reading curriculum is [Curriculum B], so these two curriculums aren't aligned.*" The district's reliance on separate curricula in the district ultimately created additional challenges for educators to coordinate with core instructors and effectively provide academic intervention.

Curriculum Resources Were Sometimes Misaligned With Academic Needs

Curriculum is more likely to advance instructional improvement when it matches local conditions and coheres with other improvement efforts (Cohen et al., 2018; Hopkins et al., 2013). Educators across levels can work to craft coherence (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). In several Partnership schools, leaders took steps to adapt curricula to help match the school context and the students they serve. However, many teachers perceived misalignment between the curriculum, students, and broader needs as instructors.

In several Partnership schools, teachers pointed to the mismatch between the adopted curriculum and students' current academic level. A Condors teacher explained the issue this way:

> *I'm running into is, the kids that are so far behind in the reading that—and I can adjust it to an extent with the articles that I use. I teach science, so when they do the activities, reading isn't necessarily an issue. However, they need to be able to respond to questions and observations, but if they say—I was also taught, you're supposed to teach them where they are and bring them up, which is fine, but you can't—things like chemical equation for photosynthesis, it's hard to teach that when they don't have so much of the background on photosynthesis, but if they're supposed to know that—that's what's hard for me is how far back to go. I can't go back to second grade and try and bring 'em up to sixth grade, at least not in one school year. That's the hard part I run into. I got a kid that just—I got at least two or three that don't know the letters and the sounds. It's like, how? I can't go back to kindergarten or first grade. It's so much.*

In a similar vein, a Blizzard teacher shared they appreciated portions of the curriculum, "*but I would say it doesn't really match our needs…I have a second-grade curriculum that I can't really teach to my second graders because they're just not there, which makes it pretty difficult.*" Taken together, teachers reported substantial challenges for accelerating learning so that students would be ready for the curriculum. Further, this demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic affects student academic performance and influences curriculum implementation in Partnership schools.

SOME DISTRICTS ARE FOCUSED ON PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING RELATED TO CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

In the case study interviews, Partnership district leaders described the steps they took to support curriculum adoption and implementation. Specifically, district administrators played central roles in selecting instructional materials for schools and subsequently supporting roll-out efforts to promote curriculum implementation. For example, a Ducks district leader noted:

> *We are doing a curriculum adoption right now. I am leading that. That has a team of 14 teachers. Elementary principals are invited, and then we have about three district admin leaders that are on that team as well. I'm going through the—a process that is—EdReports has a really good kind of how you adopt a curriculum flow of developing your lens and then narrowing your choices, things like that. I have that. We actually just started last month, and I've mapped it out.*

While the Ducks leadership focused on faithfully adopting existing materials, other districts developed their own instructional frameworks and melded multiple curricula to match strategic priorities. For example, a Blizzard district leader explained how they sought to implement their curricular materials within a culturally responsive teaching framework:

> *We use [Curriculum A for our ELA curriculum]. We have embedded [a prominent educational scholar's culturally responsive teaching framework]...We had everybody doing a book study of [the scholar's book], and so we really talk about the [culturally responsive teaching framework] throughout so that students can see themselves. They can see their intellectuality. They can find joy. We're not afraid to talk about culturally responsive teaching here.*

Whether creating a new framework or adopting an existing one, the efforts by Ducks and Blizzard district leaders highlight the emphasis that Partnership districts have placed on creating materials to guide curriculum adoption and implementation.

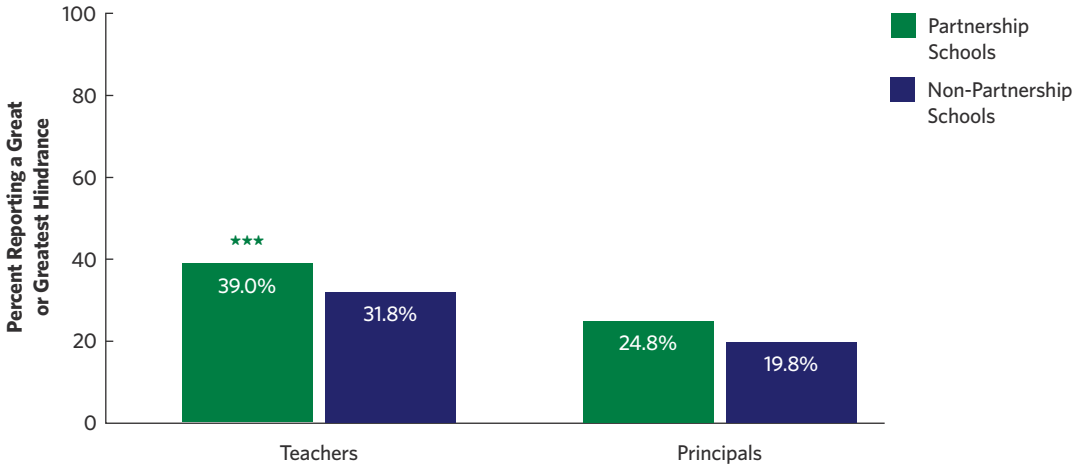
CHALLENGES WITH CURRICULUM MAY HINDER SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

District leaders in our case sites noted that although teachers were attempting to use adopted instructional materials, they were not seeing the strength of curriculum implementation that they hoped. For example, a Condor principal shared that their teachers "*put forth an effort and implemented [the curriculum] okay, but not with the fidelity that I'm looking for.*" Similarly, a Ducks district leader explained that their district is "*trying to make sure we have the right professional development so that [curriculum] is really implemented the way that it should be.*" These quotes signal issues with the depth of curriculum use in Partnership classrooms since the principal would prefer a tighter coupling of instruction with the curriculum.

In our focus groups, teachers raised issues with district-level support for curriculum implementation. Blizzard teachers reported gaps between formal instructional programs and ongoing supports for leaders and teachers. As one teacher in the district explained, "*Curriculum-wise...they [district leaders] think that they've done a good job of choosing curriculum because it looks good on paper, but the follow-through I don't think is there.*" For Hornets teachers, the problems stemmed from district-level turnover that led to inconsistency. As one teacher put it, "*There's a lack of support from the central office. We've had I don't know how many curriculum directors in the last three years. Then they outsource the curriculum director, and she brings in a program that nobody is buying into.*" Another teacher in the district echoed these concerns, noting that "*it has always been an issue here, for years, that we don't have things documented, like curriculum...the teachers here, they are great with collaborating, but I still think we need some uniformity with documentation.*" In sum, inconsistency at the district level has both led to frequent curricular changes and has disrupted processes that support effective curricular use. The problems noted by Blizzard and Hornets teachers reinforce the importance of strong infrastructure for curriculum adoption and implementation.

While interviewees brought up concerns with the implementation of curricula, the majority of teachers in Partnership districts did not report insufficient curricula as a major challenge that hindered their school improvement efforts. Instead, as shown in Figure 4.1, 39% of teachers in Partnership schools and about 32% of teachers in non-Partnership schools identified insufficient curricular resources as a great or the greatest hindrance to school improvement. Further, even fewer principals identified this as a great hindrance. Notably, a greater share of Partnership school principals did than non-Partnership school principals, reinforcing that insufficient curricular resources may be somewhat more of a hindrance for Partnership schools than non-Partnership schools.

FIGURE 4.1. Insufficient Curricular Resources as a Hindrance to School Improvement in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools, 2022-23



Note: Teachers and principals were asked to indicate the extent to which "insufficient curricular resources" was a hindrance to school improvement. Answer options were: not a hindrance, a slight hindrance, a moderate hindrance, a great hindrance, and the greatest hindrance. $^{+}p<0.10$, $^{*}p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$

That said, in our case studies, educators spoke about a lack of materials to guide their instructional efforts. Blizzard teachers in particular described insufficient resources for instructional improvement. As one teacher shared during a focus group:

> *They're in the process of making a pacing chart for the students and showing how they paced learning the standards and what projects went with each of the standards. I briefly looked at the one quarter of, I guess, curriculum or pacing guide that they gave me, and there were no resources attached to it. It was basically useless because I didn't have any of the resources to go with it.*

In other words, teachers received pacing guides specifying when to teach certain content and standards but found those unhelpful without additional resources for standards-based instruction. Another Blizzard teacher mentioned:

> *My biggest problem with—curriculum-wise—that I've encountered is the books I have. The resources and books I have in the classroom don't always translate to the ones I have online. If I want to read [one specific book] because I have 30 copies of it, [Curriculum A] does not have any materials on [that book]. They do have materials on [another book], so I have all the materials I might need for [the other book]. It's kind of hit or miss whether there is curriculum already created...I create about 80% percent of my curriculum even though there is a complete [Curriculum A] curriculum available to me online.*

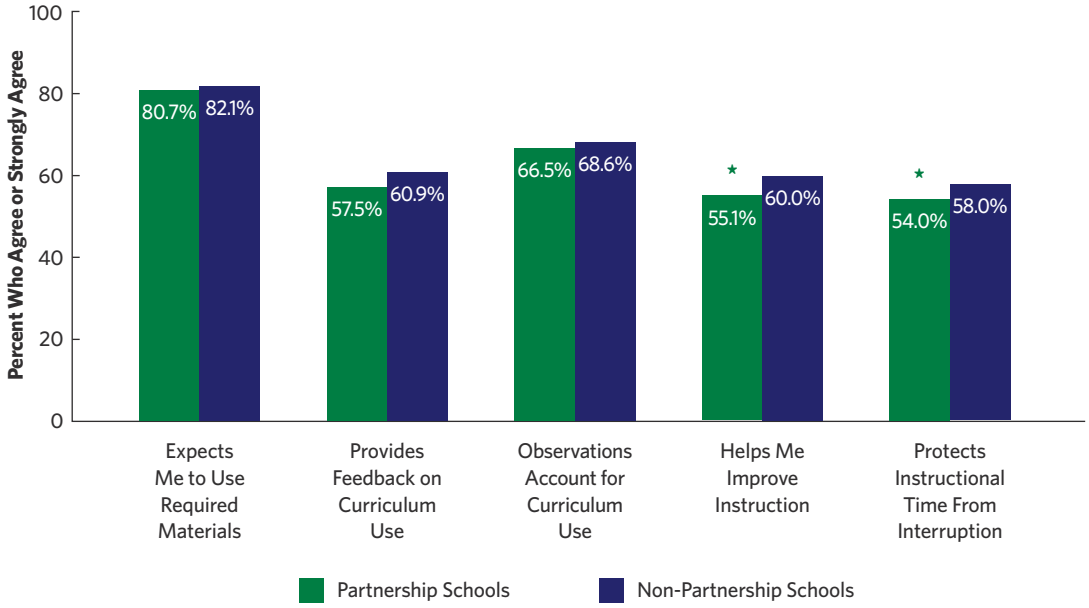
As this example illustrates, the lack of and mismatch of usable curricular resources can contribute to teachers electing to develop their own materials. For those teachers who did identify curricular resources as a hindrance to improvement in our survey, these may be the types of issues they are facing.

HUMAN CAPITAL CONSTRAINTS CREATE OBSTACLES TO CURRICULAR SUPPORT FROM SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

District leaders noted that high rates of teacher turnover made it difficult to provide adequate support around curriculum (see also Singer et al., 2023). Consistent with findings for previous Partnership rounds (e.g., Strunk et al., 2020), we found that teacher turnover created greater demands on district and school leaders and made providing curricular support more complicated.

These capacity issues, especially for Partnership schools, are reflected in teacher survey responses about their principals' instructional leadership. Figure 4.2 shows teacher responses to questions about instructional leadership in their schools. Teachers most frequently agreed that their principals expected them to use required curricular materials, accounted for the use of those materials in classroom observations, and cared about their teachers. A smaller share of teachers agreed that their principals provide feedback on curriculum use, help improve instruction, and protect instructional time from interruption. Comparing the responses of teachers in Partnership schools and non-Partnership schools, Partnership school teachers were statistically significantly less likely to agree that their principal helps improve their instruction and protects instructional time from interruption, reinforcing the capacity challenges highlighted in our case studies.

FIGURE 4.2. Teacher-Reported Instructional Leadership for Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools, 2022-23



Note: Teachers were asked to rate their principals based on the instructional leadership practices included in the graph. Answer options were strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. $^{+}p<0.10$, $^{*}p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$

Teacher Turnover May Contribute to Constrained Curricular Support

Our case study findings offer a richer understanding of how teacher turnover creates difficulties related to curricular support. One challenge is related to the greater needs of new hires. For example, a Blizzard district leader stated:

> *There has to be regular, repeated access to training. That's part of it, especially because we have so much turnover. Right, or at least it seems to me. New people coming in, they have to be able to access the curriculum and know where the pacing guides are and know where their grade-level teams are right now.*

The need to provide multiple learning opportunities for new teachers and engage in onboarding related to the curriculum highlights the challenges that Partnership districts face in providing curriculum-related support. With so much attention going towards developing and supporting newer and under-credentialed teachers, Partnership districts have less capacity to provide more advanced training and support for teachers, including on curriculum (Singer et al., 2023).

Although all Partnership district leaders in our case sites mentioned selecting and procuring curricular resources for teachers, some teachers still reported a lack of sufficient instructional materials. These gaps could negatively affect teachers' perceptions of district or school leadership. For example, a Hornets district-level administrator acknowledged:

> *One of the things I would like to do is to focus on, one, getting the curriculum that we need to teach our students and, two, actually working on instructional practices with*

> *the teachers, instructional strategies…I'm not sure exactly where the gaps are. I think it's a combination of not having core curriculum resources to use and then some strategies that need to be in place.*

Teachers in the district reiterated these problems related to inadequate curriculum. In a focus group, one teacher stated, "*Sometimes it feels like we're given solutions to problems that don't exist. One of the problems I was floating was, 'We don't have a curriculum.'*" The lack of curricular materials appeared to be an issue in other Partnership districts too. An educator from Hurricanes, who was a paraprofessional serving in a long-term substitute role, articulated, "*I don't have a curriculum, I don't have any standards…We don't have pacing guides, we don't have curriculum, we don't have any of those things.*"

Limited School Leadership Capacity Could Also Hinder Curricular Support

In terms of school leader support for curriculum implementation, educators in our case study districts emphasized the capacity limitations that Partnership school leaders face. In a prior report, we described how principals were often unable to engage in their full set of instructional leadership activities due to staffing issues (Singer et al., 2023). Teachers in our case study sites reiterated that their leaders were juggling multiple roles and responsibilities. For example, a Hornets teacher shared:

> *Our principal is doing dual duties right now—principal of the in-person elementary school and [overseeing the district's] virtual K-8 program…That's very time-consuming to him. We just feel like sometimes we don't always get that opportunity to discuss with him things that we need to discuss.*

Similarly, a Hurricanes teacher noted:

> *There's been a lot of challenges this year in terms of—we have a math teacher issue, let's say, and our administration—especially one of our administrators has been working really hard to make sure there's math curriculum almost every day. And they've been working in tandem with one of our paraprofessionals, who's absolutely fantastic, and covering classes when teachers are out, and creating curriculum and tutoring and doing all kinds of things.*

The Hurricanes principal echoed this teacher's point, reflecting on the challenges the school has faced as a result of inconsistent leadership and turnover:

> *Just like any educational curriculum, it's like the new hot thing every year they're trying to bring in. "Okay. Let's do this. Let's do that." The one consistent part, I think, [our CMO] has done a nice job of trying to carry out these initiatives when there's turnover on the [school] admin side, but that doesn't really work that well when it's the people who are on the ground here every day. It's like, they're corporate, and they can say, "Use this curriculum," but if you don't have the instructional coach and the principal there to really push that every day, it's not really going to be successful.*

A Blizzard principal also explained that they had been stretched thin in their role. As a result, the principal has had a hard time providing administrative and instructional support at their school:

> *What the work is here is you really have to be able to coach. You really have to be able to support teachers because I would say I have four teachers, classroom teachers that have four years or more of experience in my building right now. The difficulty is there's a need to coach, but because the layers of support in the building are so low, I don't get the opportunities to be the instructional leader that I need to be, which I think creates the cycle and then I have teachers leave from year-over-year.*

Teachers at the Blizzard school recognized this too. As one teacher shared during their focus group, "*Our principal—he is fantastic, but he again, does the best he can with what he has available to him. We are severely understaffed. He is pulled in a million different directions.*" As illustrated by each of these examples, teachers recognized the many different roles that their principals had to juggle throughout the school day as barriers to being fully involved in promoting curriculum implementation.

In sum, a complex set of factors shape the conditions for curriculum implementation in Partnership schools. The capacities of district and school leaders to develop, select, and procure materials appeared to shape implementation. In the following section, we shift our focus to professional development, presenting evidence on how it shaped Partnership school educators' responses to and enactment of instructional programs.

Section Five: Professional Development in Partnership Districts

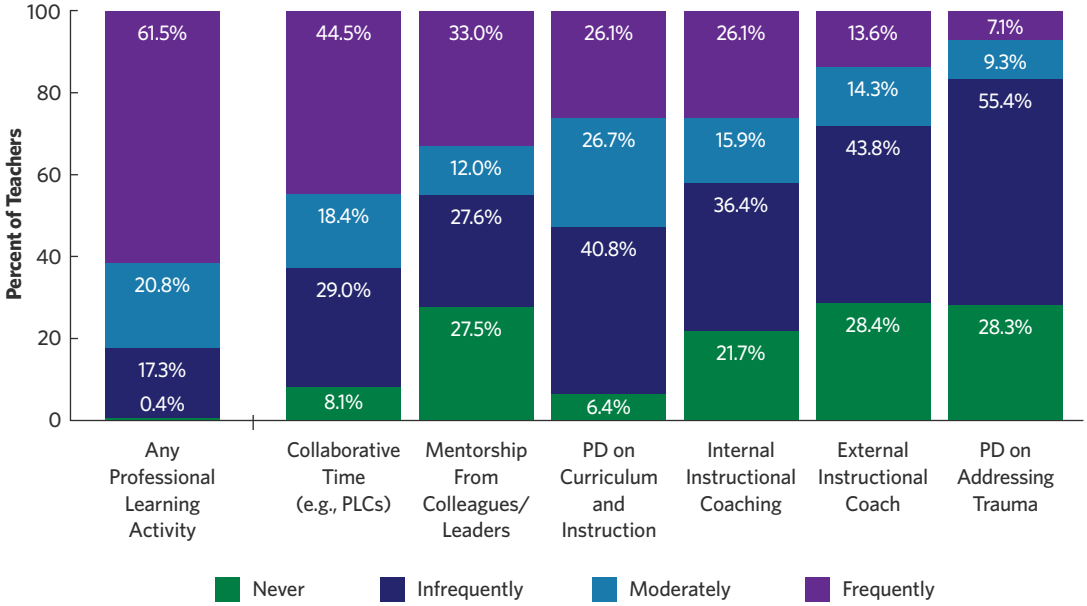
Professional development is an important pillar of instructional improvement. Aiming to foster individual learning and organizational improvement, Partnership districts adopted several different approaches to professional development. In this section, we highlight the varied nature of professional development in Partnership schools. This includes attention to the content (what is addressed in professional development) as well as pedagogy (or format of professional learning opportunities) (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Connecting professional development to curriculum discussed previously, we delve into the ways the design and content of professional development shaped educators' opportunities to learn about curricula.

Although we cannot evaluate the effect of professional development based on our case studies and survey results, we offer some perceptual evidence on strengths and areas of improvement for professional development based on the experiences of Partnership district educators. Further, this evidence documents facets of the format and content of professional learning opportunities with the potential to influence the depth and nature of instructional improvement in Partnership schools.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS OFFERED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN VARIOUS FORMATS

As shown in Figure 5.1, about 62% of Partnership district teachers reported participating in any form of professional development. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were the most frequent activity reported, with 45% of teachers indicating that they participate in a PLC frequently (at least monthly), and another 18% indicated that they participated in a PLC moderately frequently (4 to 6 times per year). Around half of respondents reported receiving professional development on curriculum and instruction infrequently (1 to 3 times per year) or never. Partnership district teachers reported informal mentorship and internal instructional coaching at similar levels, and at higher rates than external instructional coaching, Still, in general, the majority of teachers reported infrequently or never receiving instructional coaching. Finally, more than 80% of teachers responded that they infrequently or never receive professional development on addressing traumatic experiences in students' lives. Overall, these results are similar to the frequency of professional development reported by teachers nationally (Zuo et al., 2023).

FIGURE 5.1. Teacher-Reported Participation in Professional Learning Activities in Partnership Districts, 2022-23



Note: Teachers were asked how often they participated in the listed professional learning activities. Answer options were: never, 1-3 times per year, 4-6 times per year, 1-3 times per month, and weekly or more often. We classified 1-3 times per month and weekly or more often as "frequently," 4-6 times per year as "moderately," and 1-3 times per year as "infrequently." The percentages in each column may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Professional Learning Communities Were a Popular Professional Development Format

Teachers and principals in our case districts reported participating in professional development in multiple formats. The PLC emerged as a common model for professional development in Partnership schools. Principals and teachers described how PLCs functioned as a site for teacher professional learning and collaboration that advances instructional improvement. A Hornets principal stated:

> *Within our PLC, we have identified, as a building and as a district, reading as our focus. Each department within our PLCs this year has developed lessons to help support improving student reading comprehension. The PLC time allowed for teacher departments to plan our strategies and assessment measures to help us determine whether or not we're being successful in those areas.*

This leader describes how PLCs function as a venue for educators to tackle issues in reading instruction or outcomes. Further, they express how PLCs provided time and space for teachers to plan lessons responding to issues in the data, as well as to monitor shifts in reading instruction and outcomes. The teachers we spoke to reported that PLCs did foster their development. For example, during a focus group, one Condor teacher explained that they learned an important instructional planning skill during a PLC, "*The grade-level meetings, the PLCs, that's where I learned*

that term…teaching backwards is necessary because, most of the time, especially when you're dealing with children who are not on grade level, they're going to be missing some skills." Another Condor teacher added on, noting that professional development time was useful for connecting and communicating with other teachers:

> *I think that what works well for us is that we have a practical learning center each week, so that's called a PLC where we are able to touch base with each other and with our instructional coach to bounce off ideas and go from there.*

Thus, PLC structures and their associated routines are a useful space for shaping teachers' knowledge and skills regarding differentiating instruction. Crucially, PLCs provided a supportive space for teachers to engage in individual and collective learning while planning lessons together.

Coaching Provided Another Layer of Professional Development

Some of our Partnership district cases adopted coaching to provide ongoing, contextualized professional development. Notably, much of this coaching sought to build school leaders' capacity. A Blizzard district leader shared:

> *We believe that we ought to be coaching our students, coaching our teachers, coaching our coaches. We have brought in coaches from [Curriculum A] as well, not just coaches from our own selves, coaching from [Curriculum A], coaches from [our ISD] because, again, everybody needs a coach.*

This leader highlights their underlying value that all educators benefit from coaching. Similarly, a Ducks district leader shared:

> *I have two right now, but it should be a team of four district transformation coaches. These coaches, essentially, are data coaches for the principals, and they work with the principals on strategy, monitoring instruction in the classroom, talking about how you get feedback to teachers, planning for professional learning.*

Here, the administrator delineated data analysis as a major focus of leadership coaching in Ducks. Further, principals' data coaches provided elbow-to-elbow support for Partnership school leaders. Additionally, some Partnership schools used instructional coaches to reinforce messages on curriculum and promote teachers' curriculum use. Blizzard's principal mentioned:

> *We also have instructional coaches in our building that are trained kind of in a trainer-to-trainer method, so they're kind of considered more of the expert with [Curriculum A]. They will offer kind of our monthly professional developments or our monthly staff meetings or…planning time. Instructional coaches will offer opportunities for staff to be trained in certain areas or model certain facets of [Curriculum A].*

Thus, coaches wove the curriculum into professional development, ensuring teachers received ongoing learning opportunities on instructional materials and methods.

Finally, several school leaders reported carrying out activities that supported ongoing teacher professional learning, including attempting to support teachers through classroom observations. As one Hornets principal described:

> *I have tried to work with my newly hired assistant principal, making sure that we are ensuring that teachers feel supported. We're actively engaged in classroom visits. We're actively helping to support teachers and students who have behavioral issues. The one area that we will continue to focus on that we haven't done as much so is on instructional practice.*

Here, it appears that classroom walkthroughs, as a professional development strategy, targeted behavior rather than pedagogy or academic outcomes, but this principal aimed to direct additional attention to instruction in the future. In sum, across sampled partnership schools, leaders developed several systems, strengthened conditions, and launched routines, including PLCs, with the potential to develop teachers' capacity for instruction.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS COVERED A RANGE OF TOPICS

Professional development offered by Partnership districts covered a variety of different topics, such as curricular programs, data use, and classroom management. Both principals and teachers noted the varied focus of professional development in Partnership schools. A Condors principal said:

> *We may choose classroom management one week and talk about classroom management. We talked about student engagement last week, improving student engagement, watch a video, discuss strategies where we can improve student engagement so it's weekly. The goal is to address any issues that we think are pressing at that time, discuss it with the teachers by grade level or subject area, and then implementing in the classroom, and then monitored by the data coach and the instructional coaching and myself.*

In this example, professional development sessions presented a blizzard of strategies for improving instruction to teachers. While this approach to professional development offers a large variety of ideas for teachers to consider, it can be somewhat disjointed and as a result limit the depth of teacher skill development in any one area.

In addition, educators noted that professional development often addressed data use and assessments. This included using professional development time to share student assessment data. For example, a Hurricane school leader explained:

> *We use [an education data analysis software] as well, which I believe is a requirement for Partnership schools, at least it is within [our CMO]. We use that which essentially tests the power standards every quarter, and then we're having a [CMO-led] PD on instructional learning cycles and basically how to analyze data and*

> *reteach. We're having those once a quarter. We're going to analyze the data next week for the second quarter on those power standards, and then go back and reteach.*

While examining student data during educator professional development was common, these routines did not always extend to providing strategies and supports for improving specific outcomes based on that data. For example, a Hornet teacher mentioned:

> *We hear a lot in our professional development and staff meetings and stuff about assessment data, and, as [another teacher] pointed out, there's not really any strategy. Every month, we see the assessment data, and sometimes the assessment data isn't spectacular, and then we're not really given any advice or strategies on how to maybe improve that assessment data.*

This finding is consistent with national evidence: much of the professional learning time is devoted to analyzing student data and creating or modifying instructional materials, and professional development providing tailored feedback on how to improve curriculum and instruction is less common (Zuo et al., 2023). Important instructional and curricular topics were discussed in professional development. Yet, educators voiced concerns related to the absence of guidance regarding how to implement topics and approaches in their work, which highlights the limitations that result from a lack of more contextualized professional learning (e.g., coaching).

HUMAN CAPITAL CHALLENGES LIMITED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Across our case districts, human capital challenges stood out as a factor that can limit collaboration and common planning time (Singer et al., 2023). For example, schools in the Ducks district schedule coordinated teacher preparation periods to allow subject-area and grade-level teams to meet as PLCs. Yet, when there is a teacher absence and no substitute teacher available, other teachers need to cover the class, which disrupts PLC meetings. As one Ducks principal explained:

> *We do PLC meetings once a week. If you get pulled away from that PLC meeting, that's your time to talk with your department about ideas and about lessons and how we should move forward and what we should do. When you get pulled away from that, then you don't have anybody—you don't have your time with your colleagues to talk about that. That can hurt our lesson planning, and it can hurt our kids in the long run.*

As in this example, even though some Partnership districts have professional learning systems in place, human capital challenges can make it difficult to maintain them. (See Singer et al., 2023 for a deeper dive into human capital challenges in Partnership schools generally and their effect on instruction and professional development specifically.)

Section Six: Key Takeaways and Policy Recommendations

KEY TAKEAWAYS

After several years of schooling affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Strunk et al., 2023), Partnership educators remain concerned about the quality of instruction and gaps in implementing academic interventions. To improve instruction and ultimately student achievement, Partnership schools need strong systems and resources for selecting, adopting, implementing, and monitoring the curriculum and for providing teachers with targeted, ongoing professional development that fosters individual learning, organizational change, and systemic improvement.

Through case studies and survey analysis, we documented facets of the instructional improvement infrastructure. More concretely, we provided a snapshot of curriculum and professional development in Partnership schools during their identification year, thereby characterizing the foundation for their design and enactment of Partnership Agreements. We highlighted strengths related to the infrastructure for instructional improvement, including system leaders' commitment to and efforts for promoting curriculum implementation and providing professional development. District and school leaders, thus, structured and facilitated learning opportunities for educators targeting instructional improvement. Yet we also identified infrastructural elements needing improvement, including inadequate curricular materials and non-tailored professional development. In particular, teachers reported fragmented supports for curriculum implementation. Although district leaders and principals put in place initiatives to guide instructional change, we found some disconnects between curricular materials and professional development. Based on these results, we offer several implications for school- and district-level practices as well as agency supports as Partnership reform proceeds. To the extent that Partnership districts have the resources and capacity to do so, these refinements could aid in bolstering instructional improvement in Partnership schools over time.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Partnership Districts Should Strengthen and Align the Curriculum Infrastructure

In terms of the curricular infrastructure, two areas of focus for districts should be: 1) the alignment of evidence-based instructional materials with school and student needs; and 2) effective technical systems for curriculum implementation. First, our results on inadequate instructional materials signal that district leaders should assess the availability of materials as well as the match between materials and schools or educators. We encourage district leaders to collect multiple forms of evidence from school leaders and teachers about instructional priorities and current conditions prior to selecting or modifying curricula. Here, we point to the importance of district leaders listening to and learning from school-based educators while adopting or implementing curricula.

Additionally, to facilitate curricular coherence, district leaders should track which schools are using which curricula across various grade levels and content areas. Together, these forms of information about curriculum and instruction could guide future decision making related to scaling up curriculum as well as supporting campuses. District leaders might also develop multi-year implementation plans while introducing new curricular materials. This would build in necessary time and supports for learning and planning, promoting deeper levels of curriculum use and, ultimately, instructional change. Further, curriculum implementation plans would include monitoring activities that check for necessary adjustments and, in turn, enable continuous improvement.

Second, while launching instructional improvement efforts, it is necessary for district leaders to closely attend to the technical and administrative details of curriculum implementation. District leaders should, therefore, aim for teachers to experience a smooth, comprehensible curriculum adoption process. Areas of improvement include the nuts and bolts of selecting and providing access to instructional materials (e.g., how curricular materials are ordered and delivered to schools) as well as establishing clear lines of communication about curriculum between teachers, schools, and the district (e.g., how and from whom teachers can request support with material selection and adoption). In particular, we encourage district leaders to develop the capacity of principals and instructional coaches about curricular programs and the rationale and strategies for adopting curricula. These are important steps in ensuring all teachers are clear about what materials are available to them and the support they can solicit when adopting and implementing those materials in their local contexts.

Partnership Districts Should Provide More Contextualized and Differentiated Professional Development

Turning to improvements in professional development, MDE and ISDs already worked to provide and promoted professional development opportunities, such as LETRS literacy training and MTSS technical assistance, to the current round of Partnership districts. To build upon this, MDE and ISDs could offer its expert personnel or resources to directly provide coaching and other forms of contextualized development that can otherwise be demanding on school and district leaders' limited time. As Partnership districts plan professional development to raise capacity and support

their specific school improvement goals, they can strengthen the quality of that professional development in three ways. First, district leaders should ensure that professional development provides adequate depth and clarity on focal topics. This can include important aspects of instruction (e.g., early reading, math, classroom discourse, culturally responsive approaches) as well as other areas that districts may be targeting as part of their Partnership Agreements (e.g., trauma-informed practices and socioemotional learning, accelerated learning strategies). Since most Partnership schools have many different areas for improvement, professional development can tend towards offering shallow coverage on a hodgepodge of topics instead of deeply addressing a few crucial topics. While acknowledging this is a difficult tradeoff for district leaders to navigate, we encourage leaders to check whether professional development is frequent enough or in-depth enough (or ideally both) to provide adequate guidance to teachers and leaders.

Second, districts should expand and improve ongoing, contextualized professional learning techniques. Specifically, we encourage strengthening the quality of existing PLCs and coaching systems. First, improvements to PLCs, including ensuring PLCs go beyond analyzing current data, would provide education time and space for teachers to learn about particular types of instruction and, in turn, motivate changes in classroom practice. District and school leaders could create routines and tools (e.g., protocols and forms) enabling PLCs to serve as a venue for educators to assess, revise, and share their approaches and strategies for instruction. Importantly, the PLC would be the site for teachers to openly share what is working and what remains challenging, and leaders and coaches could use this information to construct other supports (Woulfin et al., 2023). Second, district and school coaching models can be refined to help ensure coaches provide ongoing, tailored educative experiences for teachers and leaders. Through this strengthening of elements of coaching, coaches and educators in Partnership schools can, together, foster deeper learning and promote changes in classroom practice to a greater extent than whole-staff workshop professional development (Kraft et al., 2018).

Finally, since educator turnover creates shaky ground for consistent professional development (Singer et al., 2023), district leaders should prioritize providing differentiated professional development to meet the needs of novice and veteran teachers in Partnership schools. Professional development should be designed so that teachers in the same school are on the same page about instruction. At the same time, professional development would address any gaps in foundational skills for new teachers and provide more advanced learning opportunities for experienced teachers. Again, it will be important to tailor professional development and offer follow-up support to match the skills and dispositions of teachers at different career stages and with different types of preparation/training.

MDE and ISDs Will Need to Play a Central Role in Supporting Curriculum and Professional Development

For both curriculum and professional development, MDE and especially ISDs have an opportunity to support Partnership districts and schools. Though Michigan districts retain local control over curricular materials and professional development, MDE and ISDs can provide guidance and support. Our findings suggest that Partnership districts and schools have challenging organizational conditions and capacity constraints, which can make curriculum implementation and monitoring

difficult and can limit the frequency and quality of professional development. In each of these areas, MDE and ISDs can use their expertise and resources to help Partnership districts strengthen their infrastructure for instructional improvement.

For curriculum implementation, MDE and ISDs could further incorporate coaching activities, including routines that braid curriculum into Partnership planning and support activities. This could entail facilitating discussions, or learning opportunities, among MDE and Partnership system leaders that target how curriculum functions as a lever for Partnership reform. These discussions could be educative, enabling district leaders to gain strategies for strengthening curriculum implementation as a lever for their overall improvement efforts. Additionally, through such activities, MDE and ISDs could gather information and ideas as to how to further refine Partnership structures and practices to better support curriculum implementation and, ultimately, instructional improvement. These steps could foster coherence across instructional initiatives and the guidelines, expectations, and activities of Partnership (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

Turning to improvements in professional development, MDE and ISDs can first and foremost offer its expert personnel to directly provide coaching and other forms of contextualized development that can be demanding on school and district leaders' limited time. MDE and ISD administrators can, for instance, offer to provide workshops and help as facilitators during regularly scheduled PLCs. For this, MDE and ISD leaders and staff would coordinate closely with system/school leaders to ensure that the professional development is well-aligned to the goals of the school and does not conflict with existing foci. Still, Partnership districts would benefit from the additional capacity to deliver coaching and other forms of professional development directly to their teachers, especially to ensure teachers are receiving adequate guidance and feedback on high-quality instruction. Given that ISD-based coaches often identify teachers to support based on teacher-initiated requests (Cummings et al., 2023), ISDs may also be able to direct their coaches to prioritize teachers in Partnership schools. Finally, MDE and ISD personnel can work with Partnership district leaders on professional development planning. This might include helping to ensure the scope and sequence of professional development is well-aligned to the school's areas of need and improvement goals and provide recommendations and resources for high-quality professional development sessions.

Michigan Should Maintain its Focus on Addressing Staffing Challenges

Finally, our findings reinforce the centrality of human capital for improvement in Partnership districts. Not only does teacher retention and recruitment directly impact students, but the strain on districts due to vacancies and teacher turnover indirectly impacts the teaching and learning by creating challenges for curriculum implementation and professional development. As we recommended in a previous report (Singer et al., 2023), there are a number of steps statewide and in Partnership districts that educational leaders should continue to take, from efforts to strengthen the overall supply of teachers to additional staffing support and funding for Partnership districts. (See our report, Human Capital Challenges in Round 4 Partnership Districts, for a full discussion of these staffing recommendations.)

ENDNOTES

1. In Michigan, intermediate school districts can also be called regional educational service agencies (RESA). Hereafter, all references will only mention ISD as this is the more common term used among policymakers.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

We conducted semi-structured interviews—following a set of questions but allowing for additional probing questions and follow-ups with participants based on their answers. All our interviews and focus groups in 2022-23 lasted about one hour. We recorded each interview or focus group, which were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

District and School Leader Interviews

1. Please describe your district/school strategic priorities for the year.
2. It would be helpful to hear about the initiatives you are implementing this year to improve outcomes. How did you select or develop those initiatives? What do you believe are the strengths of those approaches? Any weaknesses? Are there differences in what you're implementing in Partnership Schools versus non-Partnership schools?
3. We understand you have been/are becoming a Partnership district. What are your perceptions of the Partnership Model? Could you also tell us about your engagement with the Office of Partnership Districts?
4. Can you tell us about your district's approach to reading/ELA curriculum? And to math curriculum?
5. Could you tell us about your district's approach to professional development? What is the nature of the professional learning system?
6. What is your district's approach to non-instructional issues that you are trying to address?
7. Overall, how would you describe working conditions in this district for teachers, staff, and principals?
8. What is your district approach to teacher recruitment and retention? What initiatives are you implementing to address this?
9. How does your district/school use data and evidence in planning and daily activities? What are your expectations for schools' use of data and evidence?
10. From your vantage point, what are 2-3 of the district's biggest, current challenges?
11. What have been the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on your district/school?
12. Historically, when your district/school has sought to implement a new improvement initiative, how well-prepared have you been to do so? What have the biggest obstacles usually been?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about the Partnership Model and your efforts to implement Partnership this year? Partnership this year?

Teacher Focus Groups

1. We are interested in the infrastructure—or things your school has in place — for improving instruction, including curriculum, instructional frameworks, professional development, leadership, and other resources. We'd like to hear from each of you, what you notice about strengths and gaps in your school's approaches to help improve teaching and learning.
2. It would be great to hear more about leadership in your school/district. How would you describe the support from district and school leaders on instruction? And could you share a few ways your district and school leaders are working to retain teachers?
3. We're looking at the Partnership Model across schools in Michigan and would like to hear about how you're making sense of Partnership reform. What do you know about this state initiative? What are your perceptions of Partnership?
4. We are aware this is a challenging time for teachers. In your context and networks, to what degree are teachers considering switching schools or leaving the teaching profession? What is shaping their decisions to leave the district/profession? What changes or supports could prevent teachers from exiting the district/profession? Why are other teachers choosing to continue serving as a teacher at their school?

APPENDIX B: SURVEY RESPONSE RATE

TABLE B1. Partnership Survey Sample and Response Rates for Round 4 (i.e., Cohort 3), 2022-23

	By Partnership Status		By School Type		TOTAL
	Partnership	Non-Partnership	TPS	Charters	
Teachers	46.4% (1,246)	43.3% (2,763)	43.1% (3,487)	53.3% (522)	44.2% (4,009)
Principals	61.5% (67)	42.5% (105)	44.7% (136)	69.2% (36)	48.3% (172)
Total Wave 5	*47.0% (1,313)*	*43.3% (2,868)*	*43.2% (3,623)*	*54.1% (558)*	*44.4% (4,181)*

APPENDIX C: SURVEY MEASURES AND ANALYSIS

Item-Level Analysis

In all waves of survey administration, the EPIC's survey of Partnership district principals and teachers focused on the following areas of the Partnership Model and related school and district contexts:

- understanding and awareness of the Partnership Model
- understanding and perceptions of school and district improvement goals
- perceptions of support from various organizations
- perceptions of school and district effectiveness and implementation
- perceptions of challenges, with a particular focus on staffing
- school culture and climate

A copy of the 2022-23 surveys can be found at
https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Yr5_Partnership_OnlineAppendix_Surveys2022-23.pdf

In interpreting findings from these survey items, it is important to note that responses to the questions about student challenges are perceptions only and are therefore framed by teacher experiences. Analyses of data from these survey responses should be interpreted as teacher perceptions that necessarily include some degree of uncertainty. Over the past few years, we had one teacher survey and one principal survey, where many, but not all, of the items were aligned across the teacher and principal surveys. For example, we asked only teachers about their school leader effectiveness and school instructional practices, and we asked only principals about district and school strategies for teacher recruitment and retention.

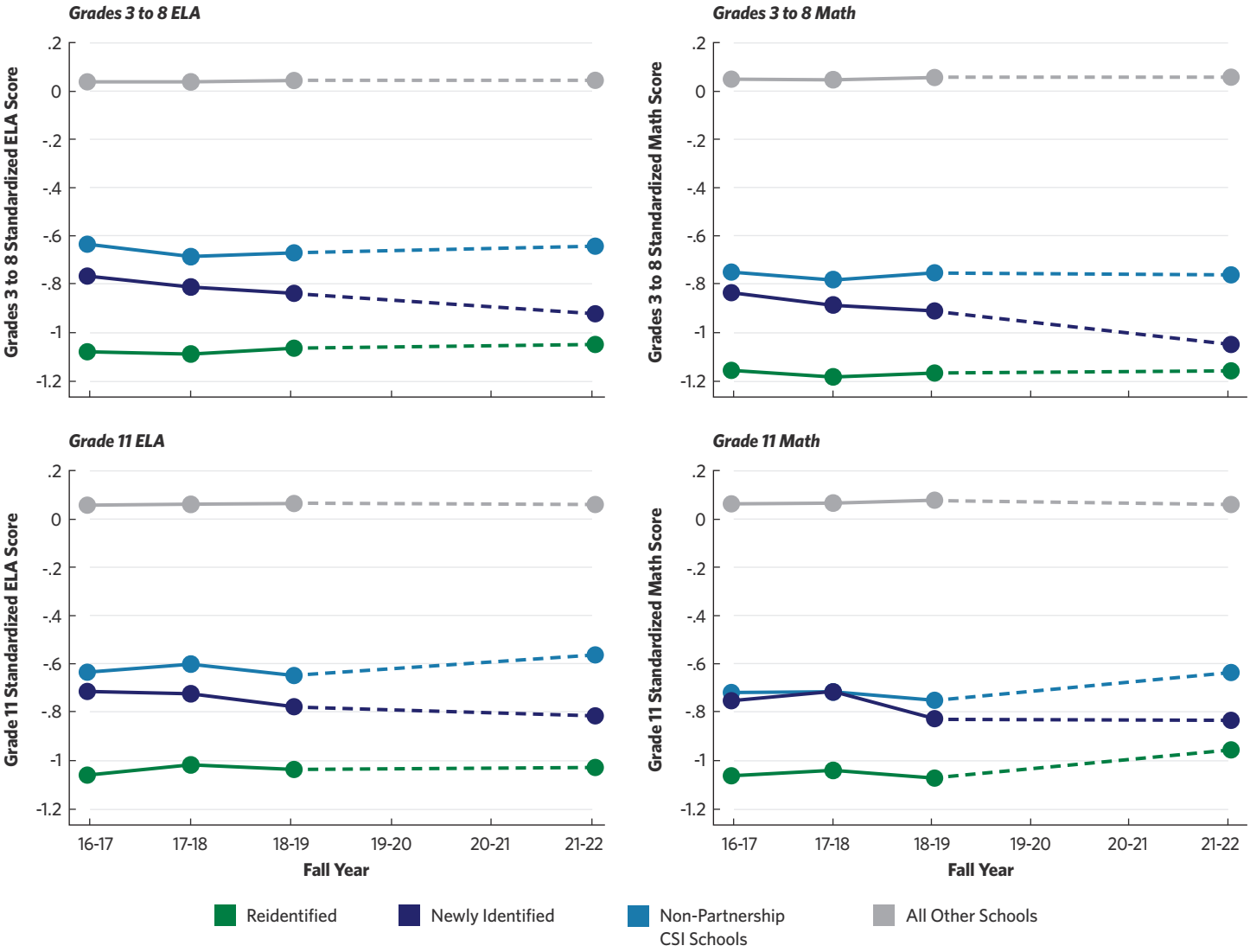
Weighting

In all analyses (both item and construct level), we weight teacher and principal survey responses separately by year using sampling and nonresponse weights. We calculate the sampling weight using the school-level coverage of our sampling frame and calculate the nonresponse weight as the inverse probability of response within schools (for teachers) or districts (for principals). We do so based on demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender) for both teachers and principals, certification type (i.e., elementary, secondary) for teachers, and Partnership identification round for principals.

APPENDIX D: STANDARDIZED ACHIEVEMENT DATA

In addition to proficiency shown in the main text of the report, we also plotted student-level average scores in math and reading by year. We standardize scores across the full sample of schools by exam and school year to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Each subgroup's average in a given year will be relative to the other subgroups in that year. Importantly, learning disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic led to decreased student achievement statewide (Strunk et al., 2023), and test scores standardized by subject and year will not reflect those declines. Thus, an increase from one year to the next reflects improved performance relative to the statewide average that year and not necessarily improved absolute performance.

FIGURE D1. Student Achievement in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools Over Time, 2016-17 Through 2021-22



Note: Markers represent the mean standardized score by subgroup and year. Scores are standardized by year and grade to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. In the top two panels, Grades 3-7 use M-STEP and Grade 8 uses PSAT. For the bottom two panels, Grade 11 uses SAT. There was no state testing 2019-2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. State testing was modified for 2020-21 to allow for flexibility due to pandemic and participation rates were low in Partnership schools.

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