

RESEARCH REPORT

What Are They Planning? An Analysis of Round 4 Partnership Districts' Improvement Goals and Plans

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Section One: Introduction

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School improvement is an iterative process through which districts and schools develop their capacity, implement and refine new policies and practices, and respond to new developments and needs over time (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015). School improvement policy can also be considered an iterative process, with policy implementors learning from previous rounds of a policy. Michigan developed the Partnership Model for School and District Turnaround to provide support and accountability for its lowest-performing schools (i.e., Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools, or CSI schools). In November 2022, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) identified the current round (“Round 4”) of Partnership schools and districts (see Singer & Cullum [2023] for additional details). By the spring of 2023, Partnership districts outlined new improvement goals and accountability measures, and by fall of 2023 they developed improvement plans to meet those goals. Throughout the 2023-24 school year, they began to implement those improvement plans.

In this report, we describe the goals and planning activities for the current round: Round 4 of Partnership schools and districts. At the heart of the Partnership Model is the Partnership Agreement (Strunk et al., 2020). The Partnership Agreement outlines the improvement goals for Partnership schools and accountability measures that will be applied if those targets are not reached, as well as the expectations for how MDE and ISDs will engage with the district and its schools over the course of the improvement period. It is signed by the districts with identified schools, their Intermediate School District (ISD),¹ and MDE (as well as the authorizer for Partnership charter schools). Following the Partnership Agreement, districts completed an improvement plan through the Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Platform (MICIP), which outlines the specific strategies and activities they will implement in connection with each goal. This report analyzes Round 4 Partnership districts’ goals, accountability measures, and improvement plans, which is an important foundation for understanding their improvement efforts in the 2023-24 school year and beyond.

BACKGROUND: EVIDENCE FROM PRIOR ROUNDS OF THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

The first round of Partnership identification took place during the 2016-17 school year. These schools were consistently low-performing and were given the option of participating in the Partnership model or closing. The second and third rounds of Partnership schools were identified during the 2017-18 school year and were similarly low performing. The third round of Partnership schools were the first identified as CSI schools under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Originally meant to be a three-year intervention, the first three rounds of Partnership schools remained identified through the 2021-22 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a delay in CSI identification at the federal level (Singer & Cullum, 2023; Strunk et al., 2022).

The theory of change for the Partnership Model evolved over the course of these initial rounds as MDE learned from its implementation and as the policy context shifted (Strunk et al., 2020). For example, the Office of Partnership Districts (OPD) standardized the systems and processes related to the Partnership Agreement over time. In addition, while these initial Partnership Agreements included high stakes accountability measures, the emphasis of the turnaround policy shifted away from accountability and toward supporting school improvement. In this way, accountability consequences have become less central to the intervention. Ultimately, MDE waived accountability measures and their consequences for the first three rounds of Partnership schools and districts due to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on school improvement efforts and trajectories (Strunk et al., 2022).

Our research to date finds that prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Partnership schools improved student achievement on state standardized exams compared to similarly low-performing comparison schools (Burns et al., 2023). After state testing resumed in spring 2022, following a pause, student achievement in Partnership schools did not decrease as much as in comparison schools, suggesting the Partnership intervention may have had a protective effect through the pandemic (Cullum & Harbatkin, 2023). In addition, teachers in Partnership schools were less likely to leave their schools and districts over time compared to teachers in comparable non-Partnership schools (Harbatkin et al., 2023).

CURRENT POLICY REQUIREMENTS

MDE identified the fourth round of Partnership schools in the fall of 2022 based on data from the 2021-22 school year. Schools could be identified for Partnership either due to a low score on the Michigan State School Index² or a graduation rate below 67%. Round 4 of Partnership currently includes 109 schools from 47 districts. Full details on the requirements for Partnership districts and schools and the process of developing a Partnership Agreement can be found in the “Comprehensive Guide for Partnership Districts” (Office of Partnership Districts, 2024). Here, we provide an overview of the relevant policy requirements.

The process for the Partnership Agreement and improvement plans started with a self-assessment via MICIP. ISD personnel and OPD Partnership Agreement liaisons guided Partnership district and school leaders through the self-assessment process, which included detailed data analyses,

identifying gaps in outcomes and practices, identifying root causes, and reviewing the allocation of resources. Based on these self-assessments, districts identified specific areas in which they wanted to set improvement goals. These goals broadly fell into four areas: academics (e.g., mathematics, literacy), whole child (e.g., attendance, behavior), human capital (e.g., teacher retention, teacher effectiveness), and graduation.

Based on the goals developed from the self-assessment, districts set specific targets for improvement. For each goal, schools set an “interim target benchmark” to reach by 18 months (the halfway point), and an “end target outcome” to reach by 36 months (the end of the turnaround period). Each Partnership school must have at least one target that uses state assessments (e.g., M-STEP, SAT) and one that uses local assessment data (e.g., NWEA, iReady). In addition, they must have one target focused on literacy, one target focused on mathematics, and one target focused on “whole child” outcomes. Schools identified on the basis of low graduation rates were required to set a graduation goal, as well. For student proficiency, districts must set a target for at least a 3 percentage point increase in proficiency by the 36-month mark. Interim (18-month) and outcome (36-month) targets are included in the Partnership Agreement.

In addition, the Partnership Agreement includes a set of accountability measures that may be applied if a school does not reach its improvement targets. With guidance from OPD, districts select their own accountability measures. There are only two specific requirements. First, districts must select at least two and no more than five accountability measures. If a Partnership school does not meet their targets by the end of the turnaround period, then the district selects one of those accountability measures to be imposed on the school. Second, per MCL Section 388.1622p, traditional public school districts must set “reconstitution” as one of their accountability measures (charter districts may select reconstitution but are not required to do so). Reconstitution has a specific definition in MCL Section 388.1622p: Districts will make significant changes to instructional and noninstructional programming, review whether the principal should remain or be replaced, and adopt similar goals for a new Partnership Agreement. It is important to note that this definition is different than a more common conception of reconstitution that involves replacing at least half of the teachers in a school (Strunk et al., 2016).

Finally, with goals, targets, and accountability measures in place, Partnership districts developed detailed school improvement plans via MICIP. The requirement to use MICIP is new for this round of the Partnership Model, as is the requirement to append a specific improvement plan to their Partnership Agreement. For each goal, districts were required to select a set of “evidence-based” strategies that they would use to meet that goal. Underneath each strategy, districts were required to outline the specific activities they would implement during their turnaround period. While districts cannot change their goals, targets, or accountability measures, they are able to change their strategies and activities as they learn from their implementation over time.

KEY FINDINGS

We analyzed the targets that Round 4 Partnership districts and schools set, the accountability measures they selected, and the specific activities they planned to implement as part of their improvement efforts. The following are our key findings:

1. Partnership districts adopted accountability measures that would require programmatic and operational changes in substantive areas of practice, rather than high-stakes measures that would significantly disrupt school staffing or governance. These measures align with a “continuous improvement” orientation embedded in the Partnership Model.
2. Partnership districts converged on the minimum allowable proficiency target; nearly all districts aimed for a 3 percentage point increase in proficiency by 36 months. These decisions were informed by a desire to set attainable targets in the face of accountability pressure, especially given that the minimum target would represent a large increase in proficiency rates in many cases.
3. Benchmark assessment-based growth targets varied more than proficiency targets. Most districts aimed for between 40% and 70% of their students to reach at least the 50th percentile for growth between the fall and spring testing periods by 36 months.
4. Partnership districts aimed for small improvements in attendance for their interim (18-month) targets, but large improvements for their outcome (36-month) targets, reflecting a “ramp up” in developing and implementing new attendance-related systems and practices.
5. Many Partnership districts planned to develop and adopt new academic, attendance, and human capital systems and strategies in the 2023-24 school year, aiming to fully implement them in subsequent school years.
6. Staffing and professional development were the most common types of activities in Partnership school improvement plans for both academic and non-academic goals. Other common activities include MTSS and curriculum changes for academics and family engagement for attendance.

Section Two:

Data and Methods

To summarize Partnership districts' improvement goals and plans, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Hewitt & Mansfield, 2021). We collected both quantitative and qualitative data, analyzed these data separately, and then integrated the findings. Using multiple types of data helps us triangulate our findings and develop a richer understanding of the topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In this section, we describe our data sources and methods of analysis (see Table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1. Data Sources				
Data	Outcomes of Interest	Source	Year	Sample size
Partnership Agreements	Partnership school goal areas, targets, and accountability measures	Office of Partnership Districts	2023 Partnership Agreements	47 Partnership Agreements
Statewide Administrative Data	M-STEP and SAT ELA and math scores, chronic absenteeism, attendance rate	MDE and CEPI	2021-22 school year	109 schools from 47 districts
	Benchmark test scores — NWEA MAP and iReady	MDE and CEPI	2021-22 school year	77 schools from 38 districts
Observations of Partnership District Planning Meetings	Process and criteria for selecting goals, targets, and accountability measures	Observations	2022-23 school year	17 districts
Partnership District Improvement Plans (MICIP plans)	Planned activities to meet Partnership Agreement goals	Office of Partnership Districts	2023 plans	41 districts
21h Funding Requests	Areas of planned expenditures	Office of Partnership Districts	2023 and 2024	47 districts

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

We coded the targets and accountability sections of the district Partnership Agreements. For this report, we focus on the 109 measurable student outcome targets that were required at the school level in the 47 Partnership Agreements. The districts were asked to set targets for the end of the 36-month Partnership Agreement, as well as interim 18-month targets. Every district included a target for state standardized test proficiency using M-STEP/PSAT (grades 3-8) or SAT (grade 11) proficiency. A few districts also set growth targets for state tests in addition to proficiency. Most districts (87%) included a benchmark test goal focused on either meeting grade-level expectations on the test or reaching a set target growth between the fall and spring tests. Districts also set at least one non-academic goal. For example, a district could set a goal for reducing exclusionary discipline, increasing daily attendance, decreasing chronic absenteeism, or increasing graduation rates. We focus on test proficiency rates, benchmark growth, and attendance measures for this report.

In addition to targets related to student outcomes (e.g., test scores, attendance), we analyzed Partnership districts’ “process-based” interim and end targets. Process targets are intermediate indicators of progress that are expected to ultimately support improvement in student outcomes. For example, districts could set process targets around increasing teacher effectiveness scores to support their academic goal or designing and implementing a new attendance policy to support their whole child goal. Districts with more than one Partnership school almost always set district-wide process targets (i.e., each school had the same target). Therefore, we analyzed at the district level (i.e., with observations at the district level rather than the school level).

TABLE 2.2. Examples of Process Targets by Measure Type

Goal Area	Planning/Preparation	Implementation	Measured Change
Academics	“By May 2024, the Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) is completed to gather baseline data.”	“To begin initial implementation of school-wide professional development, observations and feedback to teachers during an academic school year.”	“33% of the teachers will be effective in delivering relevant, engaging instruction to the students in the content area by 2023-24, demonstrated by their overall effectiveness rating using the Marzano Focused Teacher Evaluation Model.”
Human Capital	“[District] will develop a plan to provide certified teachers in all K-2 classrooms.”	“Develop and implement internal certification pathways that support teachers in acquiring a Michigan certification.”	“By August 2024, the new teacher retention rate will show an increase from the 2020-2021 rate of 55%.”
Whole Child	“During 23-24 SY, develop an attendance ladder of referral as evidenced by a step-by-step process for approaching student absence by members of the [school] staff.”	“Schools to develop and partially implement an Attendance Action Plan with Tier I, II and III strategies.”	“Increase the percentage of students who enjoy coming to school as measured by student surveys from 58% to 65% by 2023-24.”

Note: These examples are from the 18-month process targets. We categorized 36-month targets in the same way.

We started by categorizing the process targets by goal area (i.e., academic, human capital, and whole child), and then classified process targets as one of three types of measures: “planning/preparation,” “implementation,” or “measured change.” Table 2.2 provides examples of these three types of targets for each goal area. Planning/preparation process targets are based on creating or developing a new system, routine, or practice; implementation targets are based on implementing that new system, routine, or practice; and measured change targets include a quantitative indicator of progress. We counted the share of process targets by measure type at the 18-month and 36-month periods, to show the extent to which districts are focused on planning, implementation, or measurable improvements. We also provide examples of process targets (as in Table 2.2) to provide context for the quantitative data.

The accountability section of the Partnership Agreements was required to be set at the district level, unlike the goals that were set at the school level. We coded the accountability measures for each of the 47 districts in our Partnership Agreement sample. Accountability measures written in the Partnership Agreements serve as consequences if districts fail to meet their 18-month or 36-month targets. After recording the accountability measures, we further categorized the measures by type of intervention. We ultimately had seven categories: curriculum and instructional change, reconstitution,³ leadership change, human capital, system change, Partnership change, and enrollment change (see Section Three for definitions and examples of each of these categories and Appendix A for a breakdown of all accountability measures).

STATEWIDE ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

We used administrative data on schools to contextualize the targets districts set in their Partnership Agreements. We calculated school-level average measures from the 2021-22 school year which was the year schools were identified for Partnership status. For the academic measures, we calculated proficiency rates⁴ for state standardized tests and rate of students meeting growth targets for benchmark tests. We analyzed the state standardized test goals separately for math and ELA in grades 3-8 (M-STEP and PSAT) and 11 (SAT), respectively. The state sets proficiency in grades 3 to 8 for M-STEP and PSAT tests for each grade. The College Board sets College and Career Readiness proficiency on the SAT with standards of 480 in ELA and 530 in math.

Beginning in 2020-21, the Michigan legislature required districts to administer benchmark assessments to all K-8 students in both the fall and spring of each year. Districts that chose to use an assessment from one of four MDE-approved vendors were also required to make their results available for use in a series of statewide reports. Some districts agreed to allow researchers to include their benchmark assessment data for other studies. In our sample of schools identified for Round 4 of Partnership, 41 districts opted to make their benchmark test results available. We use the scores from two of the four tests in our study, NWEA MAP and iReady, because they were the most common tests listed in the Partnership Agreements (85% of schools with a benchmark assessment target). These criteria allowed us to analyze benchmark assessment targets from 71% of our sample (77 schools in 38 districts). For our baseline data, we focused on the share of students who reached at least the 50th percentile for growth from fall 2021 to spring 2022, based on national norms set by the assessment vendors.

Finally, we examined two attendance measures: student average daily attendance rate and chronic absenteeism. Students are considered present if they are in school for at least half of the school day. Students' average daily attendance rates are calculated by dividing the number of days they attended school in Michigan during each school year by the total number of days they were enrolled in school in Michigan that year. Chronic absenteeism is defined in Michigan as students who are absent for 10% or more of the school year (e.g., 18 days or more in a 180-day school year).

OBSERVATIONS OF PARTNERSHIP DISTRICT PLANNING MEETINGS

After Partnership districts and schools were identified in November 2022, district leaders and their Partnership Agreement liaisons began a series of meetings focused on preparing the goals, targets, and accountability measures for their Partnership Agreements. The meetings also focused on the MICIP, through which districts conducted self-assessments and root-cause analyses, and selected evidence-based strategies and activities to meet their Partnership Agreement targets. They documented those strategies and activities in the MICIP platform as part of their school improvement plan.

To complement our analysis of Partnership Agreement goals, targets, and accountability measures, we observed Partnership Agreement planning meetings for a subset of districts. A member of our research team took transcript-style notes during these meetings, documenting the deliberations surrounding the selection of targets and accountability measures and the development of school improvement plans. We observed meetings in 17 districts. We purposely selected a mix of reidentified and newly identified districts as well as a mix of traditional public and charter districts. We use hockey team names as pseudonyms to maintain district anonymity. We draw upon our observational data to provide evidence about how and why districts arrived at the goals, targets, accountability measures, and improvement activities in their Partnership Agreements and MICIP plans.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT PLANS

We also analyzed specific school improvement activities that Partnership districts included in their MICIP plans. We focused on three goal areas: academics, attendance, and human capital. Though districts produced MICIP plans at the school level, the planned activities were almost always consistent across schools within the same district (i.e., for districts with more than one Partnership school), therefore we analyzed MICIP plans at the district level. MICIP plans were available for 41 (87%) of Partnership districts, though not every district included activities for each goal area.

We quantitatively coded and analyzed districts' planned activities. To do so, we adapted a deductive coding scheme previously developed by the research team to study Partnership district funding requests and activities (Strunk et al., 2022), and inductively added additional codes as necessary. See Appendix B for an overview of the coding used for the funding requests and activities.

We descriptively analyzed the presence of different types of activities. We considered an activity type to be present if it ever occurred in a plan. We chose this measure rather than a count or

proportion of activity types because of variation in the way districts wrote their improvement plans: some wrote a single activity for each activity type (e.g., one statement for new data systems) while others split activity types into multiple activity statements (e.g., one statement for selecting a data system and another statement for implementing the data system). In addition, some lumped multiple different activities together into one activity statement, which required applying multiple codes to some activities (i.e., the coding was not mutually exclusive). Counting the presence or absence of different activities offered a more uniform approach to analyzing the data.

In the sections on academics, attendance, and human capital, we summarize the percentage of districts that have planned for various types of activities (e.g., professional development, staffing, curriculum, culture/climate). We do so to provide insight into how Partnership districts planned to achieve their goals and meet the targets in their Partnership Agreements. When presenting the MICIP activity data, we integrate examples of activity statements to qualitatively illustrate and more richly explain the activities that districts planned.

21H FUNDING REQUESTS

Finally, we analyzed data on Partnership districts' requests for 21h funding data. The state provides 21h funds to districts as part of the Partnership Model, and OPD helps districts prepare their requests. The data include district, funding year, a description of the activity for which the funds were approved, and the dollar amount of funds to be disbursed. In total, the dataset includes 481 entries across two years (2023 and 2024), representing funding requests for all Partnership districts. The 2023 funds were disbursed in July 2023 for the requested funds to be used during the 2023-24 school year and beyond (i.e., Partnership districts' school improvement period).

To analyze the 21h funding data, we began by classifying disbursements within several categories and subcategories in alignment with the coding scheme used for the MICIP plans (Appendix B). We used the same coding scheme described above for the school improvement plans. We then calculated three values: a) the number of districts that requested 21h funds for each use; b) the percentage of 21h funds for each use; c) the 21h dollar amount per-pupil for each use.⁵

We incorporate 21h funding data in our findings section to complement the data on Partnership districts' planned improvement activities. 21h funds are supplemental for Partnership districts, and thus do not cover the entire cost of the improvement activities outlined in their improvement plans. Still, summarizing the allocation of these funds can further clarify the districts' improvement plans and priorities.

Section Three:

Accountability Measures

Fundamentally, the Partnership Model is an accountability policy: Partnership districts set goals and targets for the identified schools, implement school improvement plans, and are required by the state to undertake additional measures if the schools do not meet those goals (Strunk et al., 2020). Yet, the Partnership Model is also guided by a commitment to supporting school improvement, for example, through additional funding and resources from the state and ISDs, and guidance from MDE and ISD personnel.

At the heart of this round of Partnership district identification was a focus on continuous improvement, or the idea that schools and districts can “get better at getting better” through cycles of implementing new strategies, improving their fidelity of existing strategies, assessing their effectiveness, reflecting on what can be improved, and adjusting for the next round of implementation (Bryk et al., 2015; Yurkofsky et al., 2020). As written in the OPD comprehensive guide, “OPD’s Theory of Action is grounded in a clear understanding of the challenges Partnership districts face, and the opportunities that result from continuous improvement.” This orientation toward continuous improvement aligned with the requirement that Partnership districts use MICIP to create their school improvement plans. As one OPD leader described during an interview, *“I love it that the word ‘continuous’ is in there, versus, you write a plan for three years and put it on the shelf. Continuous, you have to look at it [and adjust] each year. That’s a good thing.”*

Our analysis of the accountability measures set by Partnership districts reveals the significant influence of this continuous improvement orientation. In the initial rounds of the Partnership Model, some districts adopted “high stakes” accountability measures that could impose sanctions or otherwise disrupt the schools, such as firing many teachers, reducing school autonomy,

converting to a charter school or changing charter management companies, or even school takeover or closure (Cullum & Harbatkin, 2022).⁶ Partnership districts in this round, however, did not include any high stakes accountability measures. Rather than accountability measures that would significantly disrupt or punish its schools, Partnership districts set accountability measures that would require programmatic and operational changes to support continuous improvement.

Table 3.1 below provides information about the different kinds of accountability measures by goal area, the proportion of districts that include each goal, and examples of each type of goal for Round 4 Partnership Agreements. The most common type of accountability measure was curriculum and instruction change, followed by reconstitution (which was a required accountability measure for traditional public school districts). In addition to these measures, just under 50% of Partnership Agreements also included a leadership or human capital change. While these kinds of human capital measures could be considered “high stakes,” we do not define them as such as the inclusion of these measures give districts an *option* but not a requirement to make staffing changes.

TABLE 3.1. Accountability Measure Types Presence		
Goal Area	Presence	Example
Curriculum and instruction change	75%	“The district will make significant changes to the instructional and non-instructional programming of the school based on the needs identified through a needs assessment review of data in a manner agreed upon between the district and the ISD.”
Reconstitution	68%	“Reconstitute as defined in [MCL Section 388.1622p] for districts and MCL Section 380.507, MCL Section 380.528, and MCL Section 380.561 for public school academies.”
Leadership change	47%	“[District] will evaluate whether school and district leadership, including the principal, are appropriately placed.”
Human capital	40%	“The district shall review the instructional and non-instructional staff organizational flow chart and reassign staff based on the needs identified through a comprehensive review of data.”
System change	30%	“Increase the involvement of the Intermediate School District and Authorizer in determining corrective measures after careful determination of the root causes for failed implementation of identified goals.”
Partnership change	19%	“The district shall agree on a new date, with the agreement of MDE, by which the 36-month end target outcome must be met.”
Enrollment change	6%	“Restart the school by enrolling students only at the lowest high school grade offered.”

There are a few differences in the types of accountability measures by identification status or school type. Re-identified districts were more likely than newly identified districts to have a human capital accountability measure, suggesting a holdover from the first three rounds of Partnership, which included more human capital accountability measures (Cullum & Harbatkin, 2022). In fact, every reidentified district that had a human capital accountability measure in their prior Partnership Agreement also had one present in Round 4. The largest difference between traditional public and charter districts was the presence of reconstitution as an accountability measure. This was not unexpected because charter schools were not required to adopt this accountability measure, though about half did so.

The fact that Partnership districts were not required and did not decide to set “high stakes” accountability measures reflects OPD’s intentional orientation toward continuous improvement. For example, one Partnership Agreement liaison explained to a district, *“You want to put in accountability measures that you believe will help.”* Similarly, another Partnership Agreement liaison stated to a district, *“Accountability doesn’t have to be punitive, it’s about what you need to do if you aren’t reaching the goals.”*

Although the accountability measures selected by districts are oriented toward continuous improvement, districts still described feeling accountability pressure due to their Partnership status. During Partnership Agreement meetings, Partnership Agreement liaisons emphasized that accountability measures are only implemented if a school fails to meet their goals and targets. As we discuss in greater detail below, district leaders expressed a strong desire to meet those goals. Thus, even if the accountability measures themselves are not high stakes, the Partnership designation and the process of setting goals serve as sources of accountability pressure; districts want to meet the targets that they set for themselves and want to be released from CSI status (i.e., “low-performing” status).

Section Four:

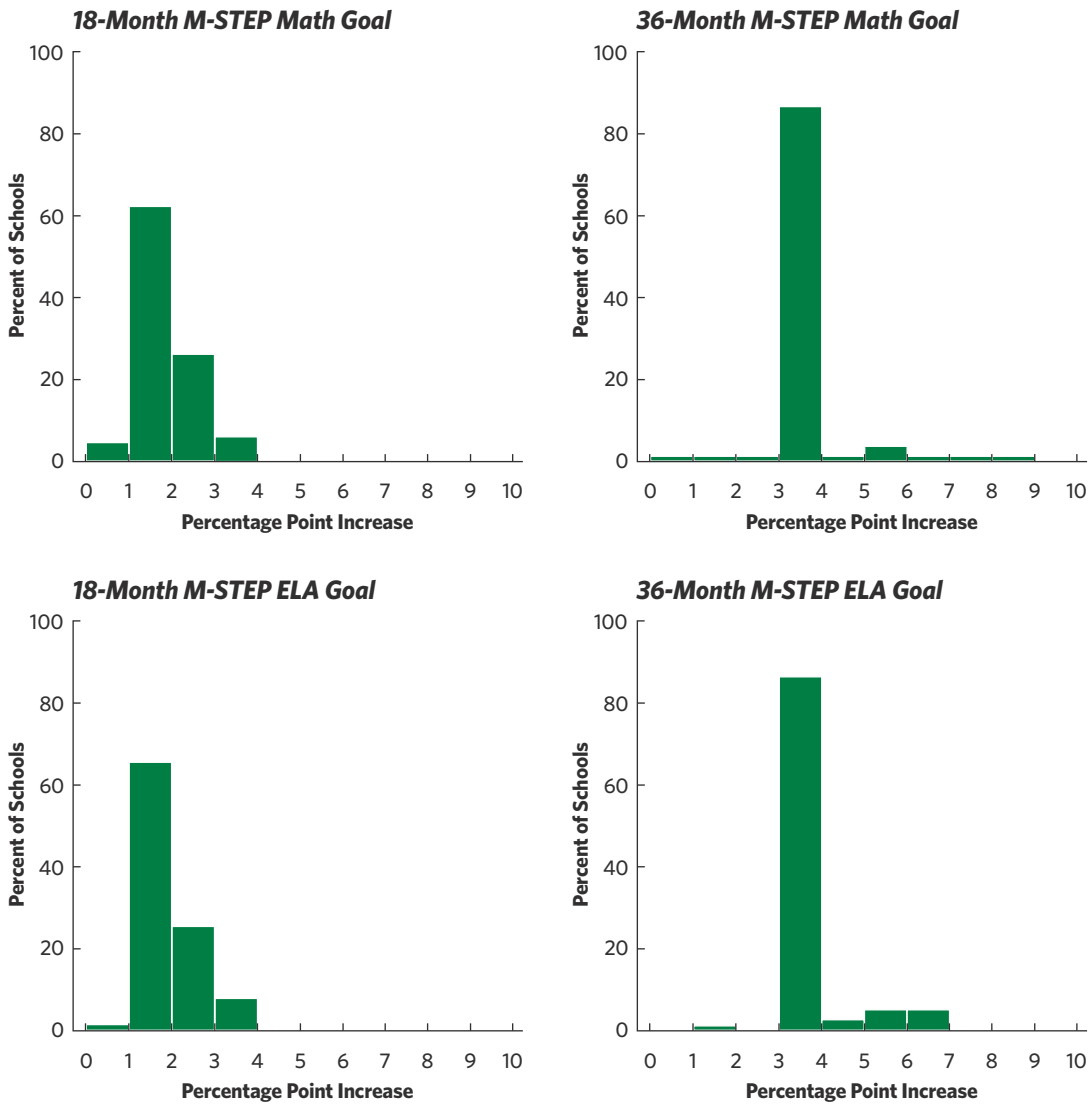
Academic Proficiency and Growth

The Partnership Model has an explicit focus of improving student academic achievement (Strunk et al., 2020). The majority (63%) of a school's Michigan School Index System score—the primary measure used to identify schools for Partnership status—is based on student proficiency and growth on the state standardized tests. During the self-assessment phase of the MICIP process, districts were prompted to examine prior data on student achievement and growth and received guidance from MDE on goal-setting. We find that districts prioritized academic proficiency and growth targets for their Partnership Agreements that met state guidance and were seen as achievable. As a Hurricanes school leader put it, *"I think the targets we set are realistic."* In addition, in their MICIP plans, districts and schools planned to improve their organizational infrastructure around academics.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS ADOPTED MINIMUM-ALLOWABLE PROFICIENCY TARGETS, WHICH CORRESPOND WITH SUBSTANTIAL INCREASES

Districts were required to include a proficiency target for the state standardized test in their Partnership Agreements. It is therefore not surprising that 100% of districts included a proficiency target based on either the M-STEP in elementary and middle schools or the SAT in high schools. Figure 4.1 shows a histogram of the school-level M-STEP targets included in the Round 4 Partnership Agreements for 18- and 36-month goals in ELA and math.

FIGURE 4.1. M-STEP Proficiency Targets for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: Bin size is 1 (e.g., 0-1pp, 1-2pp, 2-3pp).

State guidance required districts to set a minimum target of 3 percentage point increase by 36 months. Districts followed this requirement closely, with the vast majority of schools setting a 3 percentage point increase in M-STEP scores (Figure 4.1). Districts set a median target of 1.5 percentage point increases by 18 months, splitting the 36-month target in half. However, there was more variation in the targets set at 18 months (i.e., some selected a 1 percentage point increase, and others selected a 2 percentage point increase), suggesting that without specific guidance, districts set targets that they viewed as more realistic for their contexts. (The targets set for SAT scores followed a similar pattern to the M-STEP scores and can be found in Appendix C.) While Partnership districts overwhelmingly selected the minimum allowable targets for proficiency, the targets still represent a substantial increase from baseline levels: over a 100% median improvement in math scores and 50% median improvement in ELA scores for Partnership schools, a large change over 36 months.

During Partnership Agreement planning sessions, district and school leaders provided their rationales for adopting the minimum-allowable proficiency goals. In the meetings we observed, leaders explained that they chose targets they believed they could reasonably meet. For example, a Penguins district leader explained, *“Do we want to be higher? Absolutely. But...we are not going to commit to anything higher...We will be pushing harder but we think this is a reasonable goal.”* Leaders often noted their commitment to improvement beyond their stated targets when discussing their hope of scoring above the “bottom 5%” on the Michigan School Index System and thus being released from Partnership status during the next identification round. For example, a Jets district leader explained, *“Since this is district plan, we have the minimums, but we will communicate to each school what they need to hit to get out of bottom 5%.”* Similarly, a Hurricanes charter management organization leader said, *“The goal is getting out of the bottom 5%, but we’re taking all challenges into account...knowing we want to go much higher.”* As these statements suggest, district leaders hoped for even greater academic progress, but gravitated toward minimum-allowable proficiency targets that they viewed as realistic and attainable.

There were some instances when districts set higher targets (e.g., above the minimum-allowable proficiency target). Based on our observations, OPD personnel sometimes encouraged districts to set higher targets, with their Index scores in mind. For example, during the Canucks meeting, an OPD leader pointed to the low Index score of one of the district’s schools and suggested that *“when we set the outcomes for [that school], maybe we need to have it a little bit above three percentage points”* to increase their index score above the “bottom 5%”. In other cases, districts themselves decided they needed higher targets. For example, a charter management organization leader for Rangers explained that for their ELA proficiency target:

We looked at where it was prior to pandemic and considered what would be reasonable growth. We started at three percentage points but stretched it to [a few percentage points higher] because we don’t want to be reidentified and we think this is an area we can make more progress.

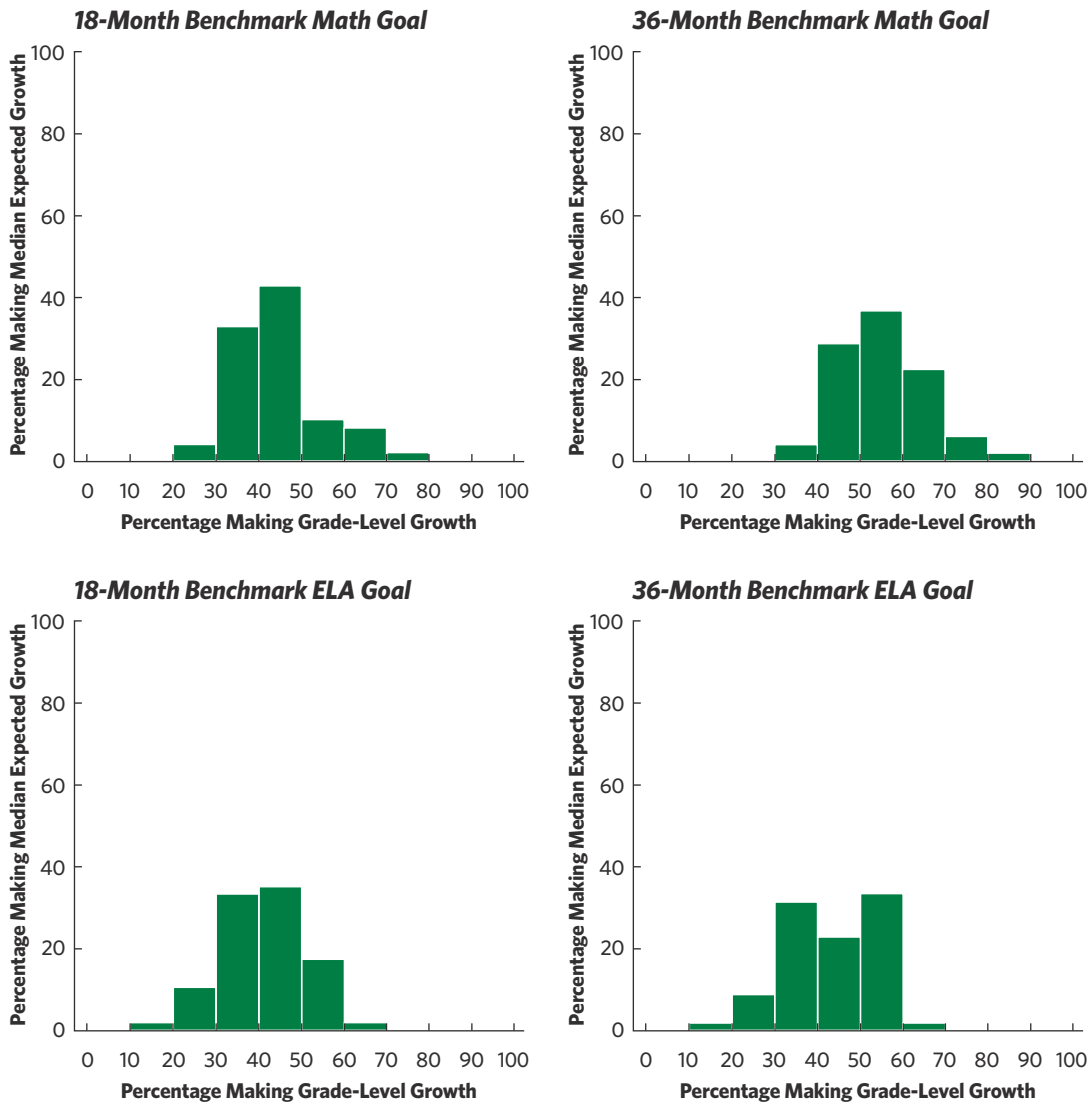
These examples highlight a tension in Partnership Agreement target setting. On one hand, districts want to embrace targets that will correspond to an Index score above the “bottom 5%” cutoff for Partnership status. Yet, because the exact amount of progress needed is unknown (since it also depends on the performance of non-Partnership schools), and because the Partnership Model requires schools to hit their targets to remain “on-track” and avoid additional accountability measures, districts want to select goals that they believe are realistic to attain. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that Partnership district and school leaders feel accountability pressure from the Partnership Model, which informed their selection of academic proficiency and growth targets.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS VARY IN THEIR BENCHMARK GROWTH TARGETS

Partnership districts were required to include an improvement goal for student achievement on benchmark exams. However, unlike the targets for improvement on state standardized tests, districts were not given a minimum allowable target to follow for benchmark assessments. Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of school-level targets for students making grade-level growth on a benchmark test. There is more variation in benchmark targets than M-STEP targets. On average, districts aimed for

a target of 45% of students reaching median expected growth by 18 months and 55% of students reaching expected growth by 36 months. These targets represent a large increase in the number of students reaching expected growth for some schools but could represent as low as a 1pp increase in reaching growth for other schools. This finding suggests that, when there is not specific guidance for how to set the target, districts will set targets that are responsive to their contexts.

FIGURE 4.2. Benchmark Growth Targets for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: Bin size is 10 (e.g., 0-10 percent, 10-20 percent, 20-30 percent).

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS PLAN TO IMPROVE THEIR EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

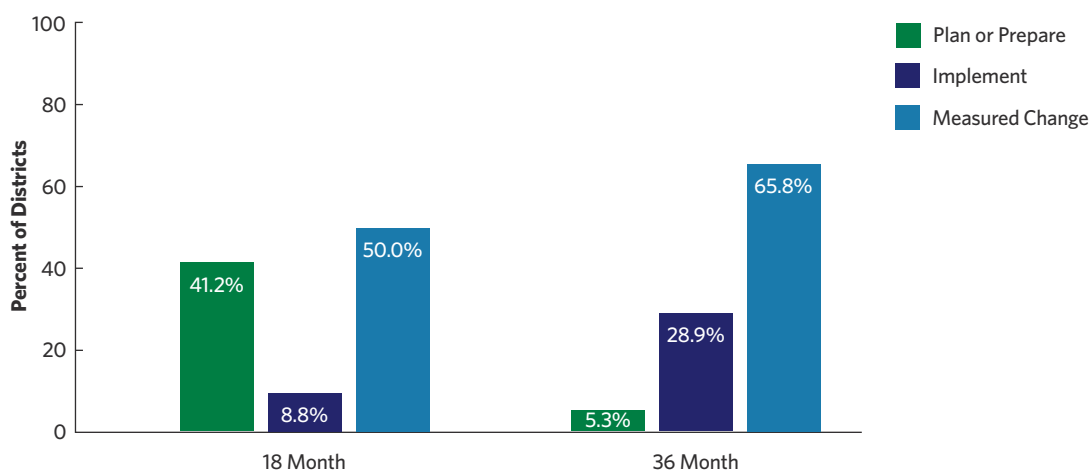
Based on their Partnership Agreements and MICIP plans, Partnership districts planned to improve elements of their educational infrastructure (Woulfin et al., 2024). Most districts planned to establish

new organizational systems related to student learning, and they outlined specific activities related to professional development, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), curriculum, and staffing.

Many Partnership Districts Planned to Create or Strengthen Systems to Support and Monitor Instruction

For many Partnership districts, the process targets and MICIP plans provided an opportunity to create or strengthen systems to improve instructional quality through support and monitoring. Figure 4.3 shows the types of 18-month and 36-month academic process targets set by Partnership districts.

FIGURE 4.3. Academic Process Target Types for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: 35 Partnership districts had process targets related to academic goals in their Partnership Agreements. Planning/preparation process targets are based on creating or developing a new system, routine, or practice. Implementation targets are based on implementing that new system, routine, or practice. Measured change targets include a quantitative indicator of progress. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Partnership districts set most academic process targets based on implementing or measuring progress within already-defined academic systems. In these instances, districts typically planned to make progressively greater measurable progress between the 18-month and 36-month period. For example, one district set an 18-month target that 60% of their staff would be effectively implementing elements of a project-based learning model and increased that to 80% of staff for their 36-month target. Similarly, another district set an 18-month target of 50% of teachers receiving a “proficient” rating on a teacher evaluation rubric, and 75% of teachers receiving a “proficient” rating by 36 months. Other process targets focused instead on measured change in organizational routines. For example, one district set the target of implementing classroom walkthroughs, with at least one additional walkthrough per teacher by 18 months and two additional walkthroughs per teacher by 36 months.

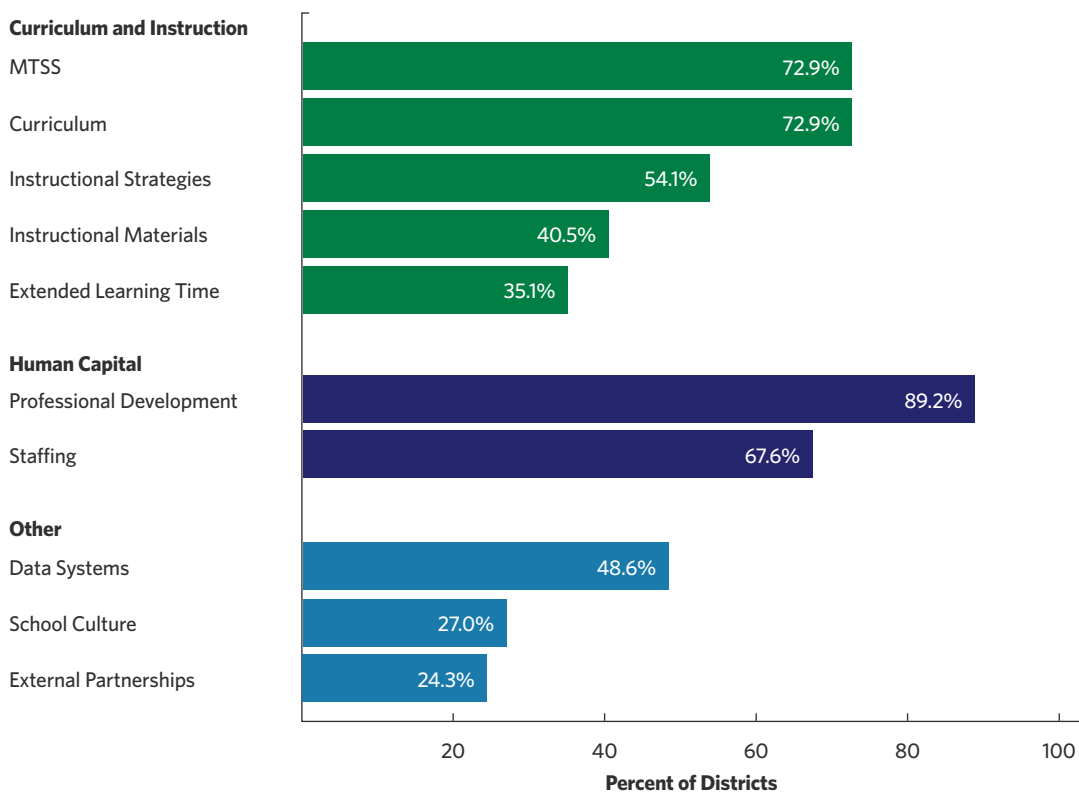
In other cases, districts described the need to plan for or prepare new instructional systems or practices. For these planning/preparation process targets, districts tended to focus on professional development for teachers by 18 months, and implementation of new pedagogical skills or strategies by 36 months. For example, one district wrote that its teachers would receive early literacy training by 18 months, and that the teachers would implement early literacy strategies by 36 months. Another district planned to provide its teachers with professional development on ELA curriculum mapping by 18 months, with teachers implementing ELA curriculum mapping by 36 months.

Similarly, of the 37 Partnership districts that included specific activities in their MICIP plans, 76% included a “planning and implementation” activity to support instruction. Many activities coincided with data systems to monitor academic progress and with specific instructional frameworks and practices. For example, one district planned to “develop [an] inventory of evidence-based tiered interventions instruction and supports and [an] MTSS decision framework” to guide their academic interventions. Another district stated that it would “assess current [instructional] practices for efficacy”; and a third planned to “form a building assessment/learning team” in Partnership schools. In sum, Partnership districts outlined the steps they will take to create or improve instructional systems in their process targets and MICIP plans.

Partnership Districts Focused on Professional Development, MTSS, Curriculum, and Staffing in Their Improvement Plans

In addition to new instruction-related systems, Partnership districts planned for specific activities in several areas related to academics. Figure 4.4 shows the presence of different types of activities associated with Partnership districts’ academic goals. Most Partnership districts’ plans for academic goals included activities related to professional development, MTSS, curriculum, and staffing. Many districts also planned for specific instructional activities, and some included activities in other areas such as materials, extended learning, culture, and partnerships.

FIGURE 4.4. Academic MICIP Activities for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: 38 Partnership districts included activities for an academic goal in their MICIP plans. The graph shows the percentage of districts for whom each type of activity is present, meaning it ever occurred in their MICIP plan. Due to variation in the way districts wrote their improvement plans, counting the presence of activities offered the most uniform approach to analyzing the data.

Most Partnership Districts Planned for Academic-Related Professional Development

Overall, 89% of Partnership districts with an academic goal in their MICIP plan included professional development activities. In some cases, districts used general language to describe these activities, such as “instructional support,” “ongoing professional learning for staff,” or “professional development.” Other districts specified the focus of professional development but did not specify the format. For example, one district planned to provide teachers with “iReady professional development around [the] instructional model, whole group instruction, small group intervention block[s], [and] student-centered activities.”

In addition to general professional development activities, many districts planned for instructional coaching and professional learning communities (PLCs). Specifically, 59% of Partnership districts with an academic goal in their MICIP plan included instructional coaching. For example, one district wrote that “instructional coaches will implement data-driven coaching cycles,” and another district wrote that “academic coaches will support teachers in building effective tier one and two lessons.” In addition, 51% of Partnership districts with an academic goal in their MICIP plan included PLCs. For example, one district planned for “monthly leadership PLCs [that] include status update and progress monitoring,” and another planned to “reestablish the purpose of PLC meetings to analyze student common assessment data and use that to drive instruction.” These specific approaches to professional development were present in most Partnership districts’ plans, alongside the more common general professional development activities.

The 21h funding data reinforces this emphasis on professional development. In total, 60% of Partnership districts requested 21h funding for professional development. Those districts allocated \$59 per-pupil on average to professional development, which translates to about 17% of their 21h funding request, though the amount varied, with some districts allocating over 40% of their 21h requested funding to professional development.

Most Partnership Districts Planned to Develop and Implement Academic MTSS

In addition, 73% of Partnership districts with an academic goal in their MICIP plan included MTSS activities. Oftentimes, districts outlined that they would develop the various elements of an academic MTSS. For example, one district stated that it would “create, implement, and monitor a system of continuous data based decision making...a team-based leadership system...[and] a tiered delivery system based on the MTSS practice profile.” Other times, districts planned for practices at each tier. One district wrote that it would implement “tier 1 grade-level whole-group instruction” and “tier 2...small-group instruction,” and specified the specific curricula for tier 1 instruction as well as the programs for tier 2 interventions.

Most Partnership Districts Planned to Acquire or Implement Curriculum

Of the Partnership districts with an academic goal in their MICIP plan, 73% included curriculum-related activities. The most common activities related to curricula or programs for academic intervention (46%), ELA (41%), and math (32%). For these activities, districts primarily tended to list the specific curriculum or program they would be acquiring or implementing. In addition, 19% of districts specified that they would review their existing curricular materials. For example, one district planned for “a curriculum audit in ELA and math...to ensure alignment with state standards.”

In terms of 21h funds, 36% of Partnership districts requested 21h funding for curriculum. Those districts allocated \$15 per-pupil on average to curriculum, which translates to about 7% of their 21h funding request, though the amount varied, with some districts allocating up to 30% of their 21h requested funding to curriculum.

Most Partnership Districts Planned to Hire Staff to Support Their Academic Goals

Staffing activities were also common for Partnership districts' academic goals. In total, 68% of Partnership districts planned at least one staffing activity associated with their academic goal. While the specific activities vary, the most common involved hiring academic interventionists (38%) or building-level instructional coaches (35%). The 21h funding data reinforces these hiring priorities. Overall, 57% of Partnership districts requested 21h funding to hire academic intervention staff. For those districts that did request funding for academic intervention staff, they allocated \$128 per-pupil on average, which translates to about 37% of their 21h funding request. The amount varied, however, with some of those districts allocating more than 75% of their 21h requests to academic intervention staff. Fewer Partnership districts overall requested 21h funding for instructional coaches (25%), in part because many planned to receive coaching support from their ISDs. Those districts allocated \$132 per-pupil on average for instructional coaches, or about 33% of their 21h funding requests.

Finally, about 25% of districts had activities related to improving their systems for teacher recruitment and retention, and about 20% of districts planned for recruitment or retention incentives. Likewise, in 21h requests, about one-third of Partnership districts requested to use funding for retention and recruitment incentives. The presence of these staffing activities and funding requests—whether hiring specific personnel or implementing new incentives and practices to improve retention and recruitment—reflect Partnership districts' need for consistent and high-quality staffing to meet their academic goals (Singer et al., 2023).

Some Partnership Districts Planned Other Academic Activities, Such as Specific Instructional Practices and Data Systems

In addition to the four major activity types discussed above, Partnership districts planned for a range of other activities associated with their academic goals. Fifty-four percent of districts with an academic goal in MICIP identified instruction practices they planned to implement or improve. Examples of these activities include “close reading,” “formative assessing...to check for understanding,” and “I Can’ statements...displayed daily for all content areas.”

In addition, 49% of districts planned for activities related to academic data systems. These activities range from collecting new survey data (e.g., “align and complete school climate survey for parents and staff”) or completing self-evaluation tools (e.g., “complete tiered fidelity inventory and create action plan”) to inform improvement efforts. Data activities also included establishing or strengthening systems for student achievement data and forming new data-related routines; for example, one district planned for “quarterly data reviews and ongoing progress monitoring of data within Skyward [including] benchmark performance data tasks, M-STEP, common assessments, [and] student work samples.” Nearly every Partnership district (98%) requested to use some of their 21h funding on data systems, though on average they allocated a relatively small share (7%).

Other activity types that were present in Partnership districts' plans included purchasing materials such as new technology (41%); implementing tutoring or extended learning opportunities (35%), culture and climate initiatives (27%), and engaging with external partners such as MDE, ISDs, or community organizations (24%). These areas also represented relatively small shares of overall 21h funding requests, especially compared to professional development and staffing.

In sum, Partnership districts mostly adopted the minimum-allowable targets for increased proficiency on state standardized exams but varied in the targets they adopted for benchmark assessment growth. To meet these targets, they planned to improve their organizational infrastructure for academics, as well as for specific activities in areas such as professional

Section Five:

Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism

development, MTSS, curriculum, and staffing.

While academic achievement plays a large role in the Partnership Model, it is not the only outcome the policy aims to improve for students. ESSA required states to include at least one “non-academic” measure in their state indexes. Michigan chose to include the chronic absenteeism rate, defined as the share of students missing 10% or more school days in a given school year. Attendance is an important measure to track, as improving attendance positively affects students’ academic performance (e.g., Gottfried, 2010). Declines in attendance through the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in the diminished student achievement documented during and after the pandemic (Council of Economic Advisors, 2023). With the highest absenteeism rates in the state on average, Partnership districts have prioritized improving student attendance (Singer et al., 2024). In this section, we review how districts set their attendance and chronic absenteeism targets, and how they planned to meet these targets.

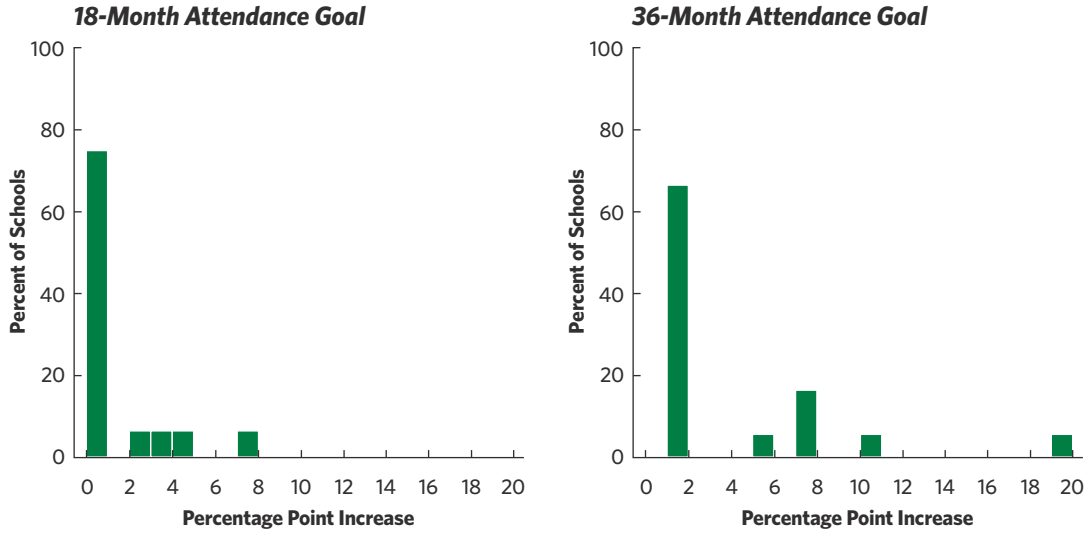
PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS PLANNED TO “RAMP UP” EFFORTS TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

Partnership districts’ attendance targets—particularly those with chronic absenteeism as a metric—require a modest improvement by 18 months, followed by a sharp improvement by the 36-month mark. This steep (rather than gradual) improvement trajectory reflects the fact that Partnership districts felt they needed to create new attendance systems and practices before they would see significant improvements in student attendance.

Attendance targets in Round 4 Partnership Agreements took two forms: increases in the attendance rate or decreases in chronic absenteeism. Figure 5.1 shows the distribution of school-level attendance targets in Round 4 Partnership Agreements for 18 and 36 months. The median attendance target was to increase the attendance rate by 1 percentage point by 18 months and 2 percentage points by 36 months. There was little variation between Partnership districts. These targets represent an average increase in daily attendance of 4.8% by 18 months and 6.2% by 36

months, which are sizeable given the small (if any) average effect of common attendance-related interventions (Eklund et al., 2022).

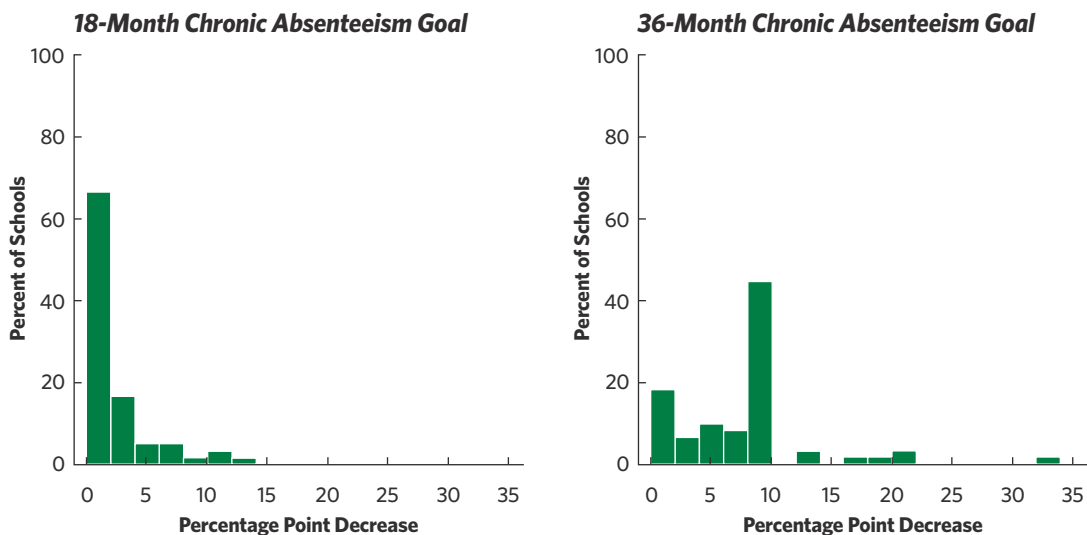
FIGURE 5.1. Attendance Targets for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: Bin size is 1 (e.g., 0-1pp, 1-2pp, 2-3pp).

The goals for decreasing chronic absenteeism show a more dramatic change from 18 months to 36 months (Figure 5.2). The median chronic absenteeism target for the 18-month timeframe is a 1 percentage point decrease. However, the median 36-month goal is a 10 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism, with more variation between districts than for the attendance rate targets. These targets for improvement by 36 months represent substantial increases (4.3% by 18 months and 11% by 36 months), especially relative to the magnitude of improvement typically found for attendance interventions (Eklund et al., 2022).

FIGURE 5.2. Chronic Absenteeism Targets for Round 4 Partnership Districts

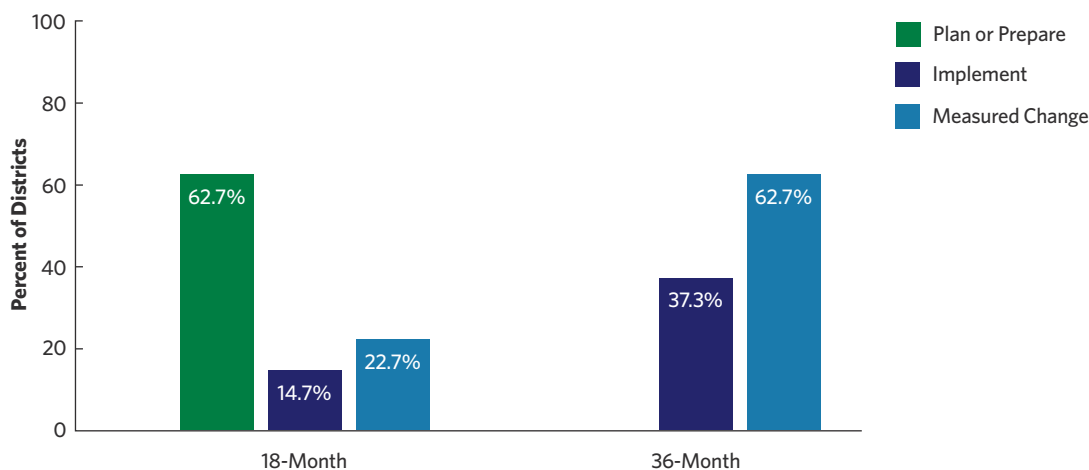


Note: Bin size is 2 (e.g., 0-2pp, 2-4pp, 4-6pp).

There are two reasons why there may be a difference between attendance and chronic absenteeism targets. The first is that chronic absenteeism (rather than attendance rate) is a part of a school's Michigan State Index System score, which would suggest more focus on improvement in this area. Second, chronic absenteeism is a discrete measure that counts the number of days a particular student is absent from school. This means that even a small increase in attendance rate could translate to a bigger decrease in chronic absenteeism, if additional days of attendance push many students across the threshold of chronic absenteeism.

Overall, these findings suggest that districts are planning to ramp up their efforts over the three years they are in Partnership and expect to see larger changes based on their efforts at the end of implementation. Indeed, in a prior report, we showed that many Partnership district and school leaders felt they did not have strong systems and practices in place for addressing and improving attendance (Singer et al., 2024). Based on our observations of Partnership Agreement meetings, these perceptions guided districts' selection of attendance and chronic absence targets. As one example, Penguins district leaders explained in a meeting with OPD how they selected their attendance target, "We weren't sure what was realistic or not...Since the first year is planning [new attendance strategies], we don't have a lot of time to implement before the 18-month benchmark."

FIGURE 5.3. Whole Child Process Target Types for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: 33 Partnership districts had process targets related to whole child goals in their Partnership Agreements. Planning/preparation process targets are based on creating or developing a new system, routine, or practice. Implementation targets are based on implementing that new system, routine, or practice. Measured change targets include a quantitative indicator of progress. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

This need for Partnership districts to develop new attendance systems and practices is reflected in their process targets and MICIP plans as well. As shown in Figure 5.3, the majority of 18-month attendance (and other "whole child") process targets are based on planning and preparation activities. By the 36-month point, however, most of those process targets are based on implementation or measurable outcomes. For example, one district set a process target to "review and evaluate the effectiveness of the district wide attendance system" by 18 months and then to "implement a district wide attendance system" by 36 months. Another district set a process

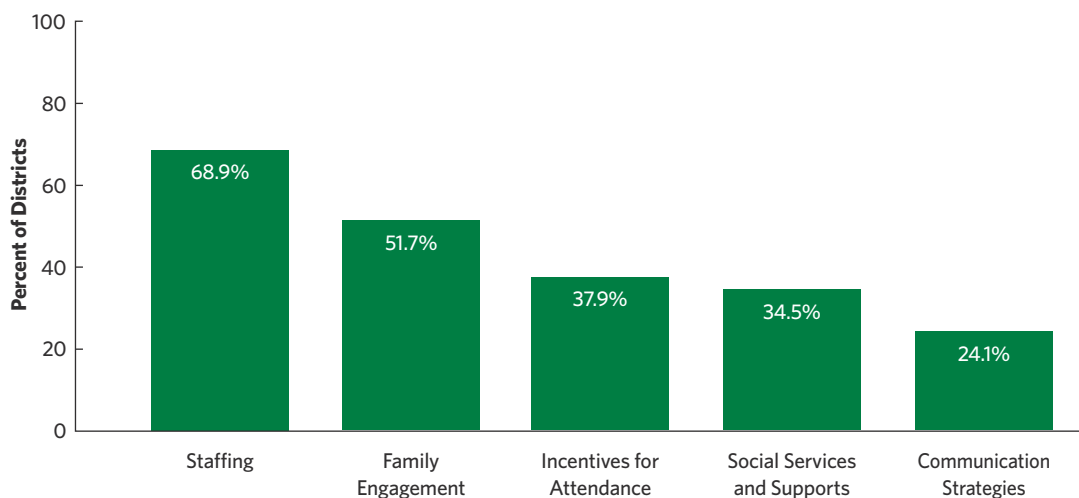
target to “develop a culturally responsive PBIS plan” by 18 months, and “implement a culturally responsive PBIS plan” by 36 months.

Similarly, of the 28 Partnership districts that included an attendance goal in their MICIP plans, over 80% included a “planning and implementation” activity. For example, one district planned to “develop, strengthen, and utilize a system of attendance supports,” and another planned to “develop, communicate, and implement cohesive attendance policies and procedures.” In addition, 64% of districts with an attendance goal in their MICIP plans included data system activities. For example, one district stated that it would “establish an attendance success team to monitor data and attendance goals,” and another planned to “conduct quarterly attendance data reviews... and modify tier 2 and 3 intervention plans based on need.” In sum, Partnership districts placed an emphasis on creating new attendance systems and practices, which helps explain why their attendance targets increase sharply between the 18-month and 36-month periods.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS PLANNED TO HIRE STAFF AND IMPLEMENT SPECIFIC PRACTICES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

For those Partnership districts with attendance activities in their MICIP plans, the most common activities involved hiring new staff. Other specific practices include family engagement, incentives for attendance, providing resources and support to families, and communicating with families and students (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4. Attendance MICIP Activities for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: 28 Partnership districts included activities for an attendance/whole child goal in their MICIP plans. The graph shows the percentage of districts for whom each type of activity is present, meaning it ever occurred in their MICIP plan. Due to variation in the way districts wrote their improvement plans, counting the presence of activities offered the most uniform approach to analyzing the data.

Most Partnership Districts With Attendance Goals Planned to Hire Staff

Most Partnership districts with an attendance goal in MICIP planned to hire staff to address chronic absenteeism. Fifty-seven percent of districts planned to hire or continue to fund attendance-focused personnel. For example, one district stated, "The district will hire an attendance intervention specialist or reallocate existing human resources to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of this position." Another district stated that it "will employ a family engagement liaison to work with families to reduce barriers to student and family attendance." Other districts simply stated, "attendance agents," "attendance liaison," or "parent liaison" as an attendance activity. The 21h funding data also show the prioritization of attendance personnel. In total, 42% of Partnership districts requested 21h funding for attendance personnel. Those districts allocated \$93 per-pupil on average to attendance personnel, which amounts to about 25% of their 21h funding requests. This translates to at least 1 additional full-time equivalent (FTE) staff member on average.

In addition, 21% of districts with an attendance goal stated that they would hire a social worker or school counselor, and 29% stated that they would hire behavioral staff such as a "behavior interventionist." In some cases, districts planned for these personnel to explicitly support attendance issues. For example, one district stated, "*[the] counselor will work with students on academic, behavior, and attendance needs...the district does not have a counselor...having a school counselor improves [test] scores, makes post-secondary decision-making more informed, decreases disciplinary referrals, and improves attendance.*" Similarly, another district stated that it would use a "social worker" to "decrease...absenteeism and behavioral disruptions." In other instances, however, these positions appear to focus more on student behavior and social-emotional development and were captured as part of attendance goals because the district included attendance as part of a broader "whole child" goal. In their 21h requests, 23% of districts requested funds to hire behavior-related staff, and 6% requested funds to hire a school counselor or social worker.

Some Partnership Districts Planned for Specific Attendance Strategies

Finally, some Partnership districts with attendance goals in MICIP listed specific attendance practices as activities. About half of the districts included activities related to family engagement. Many districts stated a generic activity, such as "parent and family engagement," "engage students and parents," or "create annual calendar of parent engagement events." Others, however, specifically stated that they planned for family engagement to inform, educate, or communicate with parents. Specific examples include "parent involvement workshops," "create parent education sessions," "parent university," and "family engagement... promoting the importance of education, attending school, and family engagement in their children's education."

Incentives, resources and support, and communications were the other specific attendance practices included in the plans. Thirty-nine percent of districts included an incentives activity. For example, one district stated that they would "create and purchase attendance incentives," and another stated that they would "offer prizes and incentives for classrooms with 100% weekly attendance." Thirty-six percent included an activity for providing resources and supports to students or families. Some of those districts specifically identified a type of resource or target population,

for example, “student transportation” or “homeless student supports.” Others stated generally that they planned to provide resources or supports. Last, 25% included a specific communication activity. Some districts indicated the purpose of communication. For example, one district stated that they would make “attendance calls of celebration, calls of concern, [and] communications of expectations [to parents],” and another district stated that it would “provide personalized early outreach.” Other districts simply stated that they would conduct communication, such as “mass text, email, and voice communications [to] parents.” Compared to organizational planning and implementation activities, these specific practices were less common, reinforcing the fact that Partnership districts planned to develop their attendance systems more fully during the first 18 months of their plan implementation.

In sum, Partnership districts planned for new organizational systems for improving attendance, in some cases including specific practices around family engagement, motivation, communication, and support. Given the new organizational infrastructure they hoped to develop, they set relatively low interim (18-month) targets for improving their attendance and chronic absenteeism rates, with a sharp improvement for their outcome (36-month) targets.

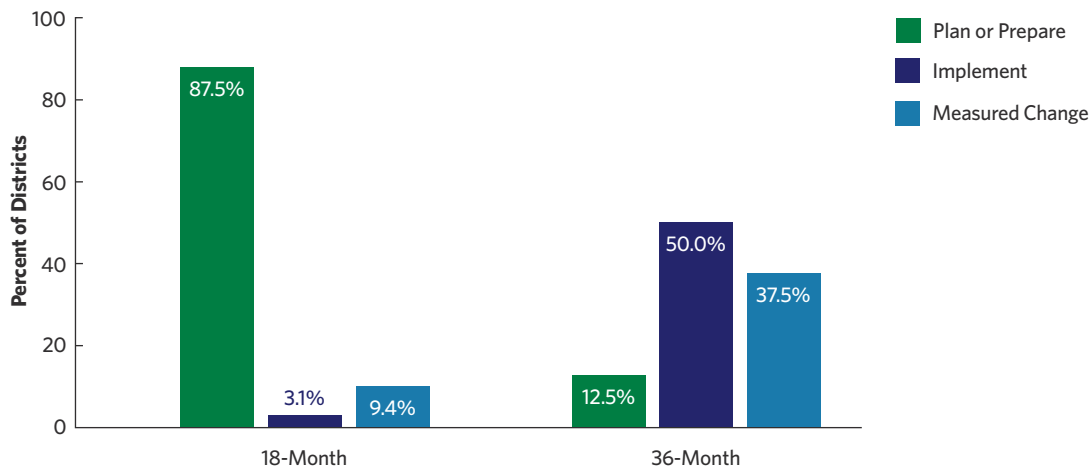
Section Six:

Human Capital

Human capital (e.g., recruitment, retention, teacher quality) is a significant challenge for Partnership schools and districts (Singer et al., 2023), as well as a critical intermediate indicator of improvement (Strunk et al., 2020). As discussed earlier, staffing is a central component of Partnership districts' plans for academic and attendance goals. Most Partnership schools do not have a specific human capital goal for which they will be held formally accountable. In total, 16 Partnership districts set process targets for human capital, and 12 districts included specific activities related to human capital in their MICIP plans. (Most districts, however, included staffing-related activities as part of their academic or attendance goals, as discussed in sections four and five.) Given the importance of human capital for Partnership school improvement, we use this section to summarize the human capital process targets and activities for that subset of districts.

The human capital process targets and MICIP activities reveal an emphasis on creating new systems or strategies to improve teacher retention, recruitment, and overall quality. As shown in Figure 6.1, for those 16 Partnership districts who set a human capital process target, nearly all set planning/preparation targets by 18 months, with districts shifting to implementation or a measured change by 36 months. For example, one district set an 18-month target to "develop a plan to provide certified teachers in all K-2 classrooms" and a 36-month target to implement that plan. Similarly, one district set an 18-month target to "develop and adopt a talent management system," and a 36-month target to "implement and monitor a talent management system." As these examples reinforce, districts that prioritized human capital predominantly focused on developing new plans or systems. These mirror our findings that Partnership districts emphasize planning for academic and attendance goals (see sections four and five).

FIGURE 6.1. Human Capital Process Target Types for Round 4 Partnership Districts



Note: 16 Partnership districts had process targets related to human capital goals in their Partnership Agreements. Planning/preparation process targets are based on creating or developing a new system, routine, or practice. Implementation targets are based on implementing that new system, routine, or practice. Measured change targets include a quantitative indicator of progress.

For those 12 Partnership districts with human capital activities in their MICIP plans, their plans similarly show an emphasis on planning new systems and strategies. One of the two most common activity types was staffing. Unlike for the academic and attendance goals, where staffing activities were mostly related to hiring specific personnel, the human capital activities for staffing were mostly focused on creating new organizational systems. Sixty-seven percent of those districts had an activity related to infrastructure or practices specific to recruitment or retention. For example, one district planned to “build an effective hiring and selection process,” and another stated that “district and building leadership [will] intentionally recruit and retain qualified staff with expertise/experience with continuous improvement processes.” In addition, 33% of these districts planned to create or improve their Grow Your Own efforts, 33% planned for recruitment incentives, and 33% planned for retention incentives. For example, one district planned to “investigate incentives for recruiting and retaining teachers and/or assisting with credentialing.” As these examples show, these districts planned to improve their recruitment and retention capacity by creating new systems and processes.

Finally, this subset of Partnership districts also planned for professional development to meet their human capital goals. Professional development was the most common type of activity: of the 12 districts with human capital activities, 83% included an activity related to professional development. This emphasis aligns with prior evidence that Partnership district and school leaders view supporting teachers as an important strategy for retention alongside improving instruction (Singer et al., 2023). In sum, along with creating new systems for recruitment and retention, those Partnership districts with human capital goals and planned activities prioritized supporting teachers through professional development.

Section Seven: Implications for Policy

At this moment in the 2023-24 school year, current Partnership districts and schools are well into their first year of implementation. This report provides an overview of the goals and plans that are guiding their improvement efforts, as well as accountability measures in place. In this section, we discuss some implications of our findings for Partnership Agreements and improvement plans in future rounds of the Partnership Model, as well as for supporting the current round of districts and schools.

DISTRICTS WILL ADOPT TARGETS BASED ON DEFINED REQUIREMENTS AND GUIDANCE

Our analysis of the targets and accountability measures Partnership districts selected shows the strong influence of policy requirements. Districts overwhelmingly set their proficiency targets based on the defined minimum increase. By contrast, there was greater variation in targets for growth on benchmark exams, where there was no defined minimum target. Likewise, while reconstitution was required only for traditional public school districts as an accountability measure, many charter schools also selected reconstitution or its component parts (e.g., changes to the instructional program, leadership review) for their accountability measures.

On one hand, our findings suggest that districts may aim for minimal compliance, which echoes prior research on school improvement planning (Anfara et al., 2006; Mintrop et al., 2001; Yatsko et al., 2015). Policymakers thus may want to adjust their requirements or guidance if they want to push districts to adopt higher targets or higher-stakes accountability measures. On the other hand, however, we have evidence the required proficiency targets represent a meaningful increase from baseline levels, and that flexibility in other areas (e.g., growth, attendance) allowed districts to set targets they felt were realistic based on their current student outcomes and organizational capacity. Future research on the relationship between Partnership goals, accountability measures, and outcomes can help inform the use of requirements and guidance for Partnership districts and schools.

THE “CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT” DIMENSION OF THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL MAY HELP WITH POLICY SUSTAINABILITY

Our analysis also highlights the strong emphasis on “continuous improvement” in the Partnership Model. The introduction of the MICIP process for self-assessment, target-setting, and improvement planning certainly played a role, as the platform is intentionally designed to promote a continuous improvement approach. However, the centrality of continuous improvement is also a product of the improvement-oriented approach to accountability measures in this round, building upon the “supportive” approach prioritized in prior rounds of the policy (Torres, 2024).

Prioritizing support and continuous improvement over high-stakes accountability may help make the policy a more sustainable intervention over time. School turnaround research highlights the importance of policies that are both effective (i.e., increase student achievement) and sustainable (i.e., maintains public and stakeholder support), to maintain productive relationships between state and local leaders and enable incremental improvements over time (Schueler, 2019). The emphasis on continuous improvement appears to have helped MDE navigate the tension between support and accountability at the heart of the Partnership Model, ensuring that OPD and ISDs are able to positively (rather than punitively) engage with district and school leaders while districts still feel pressure to improve. Using the language of continuous improvement may be productive for MDE when describing the Partnership Model to other stakeholders (e.g., lawmakers, educators, community leaders).

DISTRICTS WILL NEED TIME TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT NEW SYSTEMS AND STRATEGIES

The process targets and improvement activities reveal a “ramp up” period for Partnership districts and schools, during which they will develop new systems and practices to support improvement. This is true in all goal areas, but especially for attendance and absenteeism, for which districts had the least existing organizational infrastructure. These findings are positive, as they align with the Partnership Model’s theory of change, which envisions systemic improvement at the district and school levels leading to increased student outcomes (Strunk et al., 2020). At the same time, they are a reminder that the improvement efforts will take time.

The emphasis on developing new systems and strategies should therefore help set expectations for Partnership schools’ improvement trajectories and has implications for reidentification. Sharp improvements in student outcomes may not materialize immediately (i.e., by the end of the 2023-24 school year). The timeline for schools to meet their improvement targets (within 36 months) is a relatively short timeline, given that many schools will need a full school year to develop and adopt the new systems and strategies they are planning. Likewise, the disbursement of 21h funding, which districts may use to hire staff, occurred during the 2023-24 school year. The fact that districts planned to hire new staff and needed time to receive funds and search for candidates reinforces the districts’ need for additional time to build their capacity to improve academics and attendance.

The importance of time for Partnership school improvement underscores the benefit of the “continuous improvement” dimension of the policy. Even if districts are reidentified for Partnership status in the next round, they may be able to build on the progress with planning and initial implementation that occurred in this round. OPD can articulate this vision for incremental improvement to help current Partnership districts understand the implications of reidentification and to set expectations for newly identified schools and districts in subsequent rounds.

Finally, staffing, professional development, and planning new organizational systems were the most common activities Partnership districts planned. This was true for both academic and attendance goals: Nearly every district planned to hire new staff, train staff, and develop new systems as part of their improvement plans. OPD and ISDs should therefore continue to support the current round of Partnership districts and schools in these critical areas for improvement. In addition, OPD and ISDs can anticipate these as the most likely areas of focus for Partnership districts in the future and plan their support accordingly.

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.
2. More information about the Michigan School Index System and how Index scores are calculated can be found [here](#).
3. Reconstitution as applied in the Partnership Agreements is defined in MCL Section 388.1622p and can be found [here](#). This does not follow the definition of reconstitution often used in the literature on school turnaround (Strunk et al., 2016).
4. We use proficiency rate rather than scale score or standardized score because proficiency rate is the required goal in the Partnership policy.
5. To calculate funding request amounts per pupil, we use publicly available enrollment data from mischooldata.org.
6. The Office of Partnership Districts opted to waive the accountability measures from the first, second, and third rounds of the Partnership Model because the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of school operations and student academic progress. More background about the waiver for accountability measures is available [here](#).

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APPENDIX A: ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

TABLE A.1. Accountability Measure Presence and Categories			
Accountability Measure	Sum	Proportion	Measure Type
Reconstitution	32	0.681	Reconstitution
Changes to instructional/non-instructional programming	27	0.574	Curriculum and instruction change
Principal/school leadership review	18	0.383	Leadership change
Evaluate curriculum	14	0.298	Curriculum and instruction change
Review/make staff changes	13	0.277	Human capital
Develop/review strategic plan	9	0.191	System change
Change the 36-month goal date	6	0.128	Partnership change
Increased school flexibility over staffing	5	0.106	Human capital
Provide MTSS support	5	0.106	System change
Authorizer contract renewal or revocation	3	0.064	System change
Provide job-embedded support	3	0.064	Human capital
Adopt literacy program	2	0.043	Curriculum and instruction change
Adopt math program	2	0.043	Curriculum and instruction change
Assign leadership coach	2	0.043	Leadership change
Conduct instructional model review	2	0.043	Curriculum and instruction change
Increase amount of PD	2	0.043	Human capital
Meeting of partners	2	0.043	Partnership change
Only enroll pre-k to 2nd grade students	2	0.043	Enrollment change
Superintendent leadership review	2	0.043	Leadership change
Adopt ELA program	1	0.021	Curriculum and instruction change
Adopt modified block scheduling	1	0.021	Curriculum and instruction change
Blueprint for systematic reconfiguration	1	0.021	System change
Develop leadership PD	1	0.021	Leadership change
Evaluate hybrid learning	1	0.021	Curriculum and instruction change
Graduation assessment	1	0.021	Curriculum and instruction change
Increase ISD/authorizer involvement	1	0.021	Partnership change
Integrate turnaround research	1	0.021	System change
Only enroll the lowest HS grade students	1	0.021	Enrollment change
Program evaluation	1	0.021	Curriculum and instruction change
Reallocate budget items/grant funds	1	0.021	System change
Review instructional leadership	1	0.021	Leadership change

Note: Sum represents the total number of districts that have the accountability measure listed in their Partnership Agreement. Proportion represents the share of all Partnership Agreements that include the listed accountability measure out of 47 district Partnership Agreements.

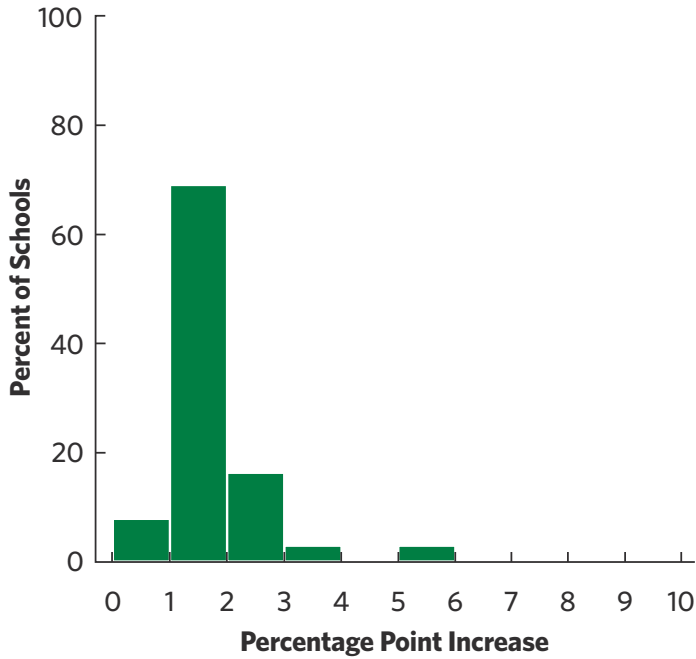
APPENDIX B: CODING SCHEME FOR MICIP ACTIVITIES AND 21H FUNDING

TABLE B.1. Coding Scheme for MICIP Activities and 21h Funding

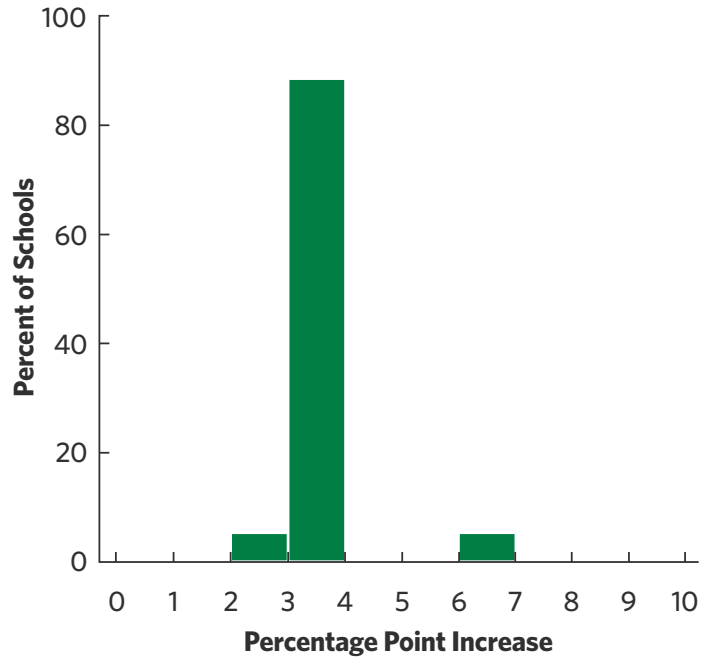
Activity Type	Examples
Educator development	Professional development sessions, instructional coaching
Staffing	Hiring for specific positions, improving organizational systems for hiring and retention, incentives for retention and recruitment
Extended learning	Tutoring, summer school
Curriculum	Math or ELA core curricula, academic intervention programs
Data	New data systems, data collection activities
Materials	Technology, books
Extracurriculars	Field trips, non-academic afterschool activities
Planning and implementation	Creating, implementing, or monitoring new organizational systems
Partnerships	Community organizations
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)	Tier 1, tier 2, and/or tier 3 practices or interventions
Incentives for attendance	Awards, rewards
Communication about attendance	Phone calls, letters, home visits
Culture and climate	Family engagement, behavior management
Instructional practices	Specific pedagogical techniques
Social supports	Transportation, homelessness resources
Miscellaneous	Facilities, scheduling, class size

APPENDIX C: SAT-BASED PROFICIENCY TARGETS

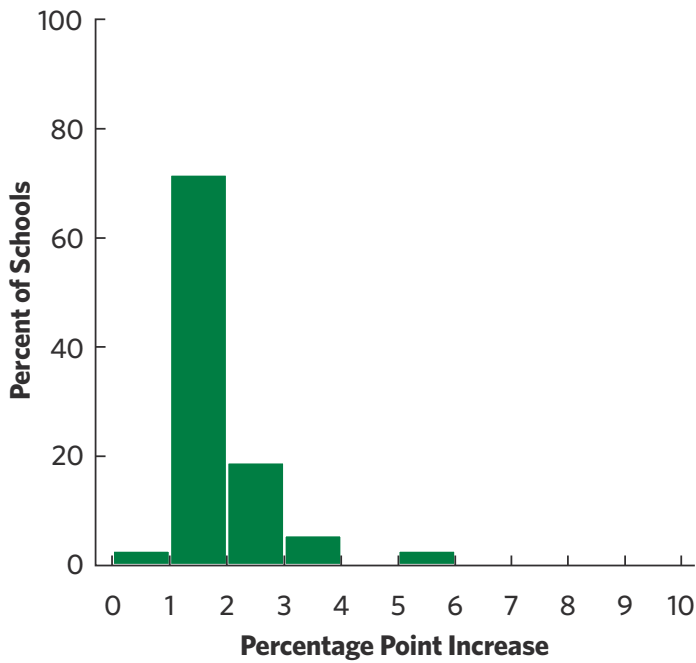
18-Month SAT Math Goal



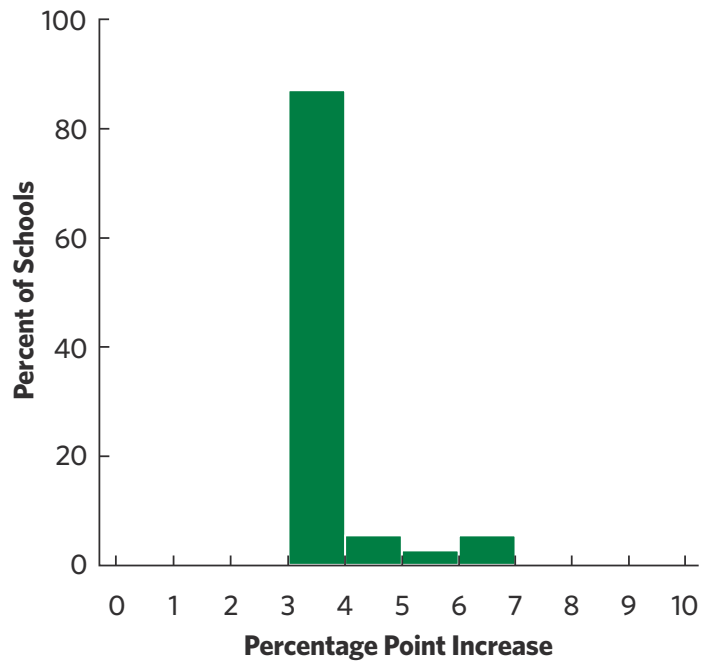
36-Month SAT Math Goal



18-Month SAT ELA Goal



36-Month SAT ELA Goal



Note: Bin size is 1 (e.g., 0-1pp, 1-2pp, 2-3pp).



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