RESEARCH REPORT

Round 4 of the Partnership Model: 2023-24 Implementation Report

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Round 4 of the Partnership Model: 2023-24 Implementation Report

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Section One: Introduction

The Partnership Model for School and District Turnaround is Michigan's policy for improving student outcomes in its lowest-performing schools. In compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) identifies schools that rank in the bottom 5% of the Michigan School Index System as Partnership schools. Districts with at least one Partnership school (i.e., Partnership districts) enter into agreements with MDE and their Intermediate School Districts (ISDs). These Partnership Agreements outline improvement goals, accountability measures, and the support that MDE and the ISD will provide to the district and its schools. (See Singer & Cullum, 2023, for additional details about ESSA, the Partnership Model, the Michigan School Index System, and the identification process for Partnership districts and schools).

The underlying theory of change for the Partnership Model is that a combination of support and accountability can help districts and schools build capacity for school improvement, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes (Burns et al., 2023). In the initial rounds of the Partnership Model (Rounds 1, 2, and 3), Partnership schools saw greater gains in math and ELA and had higher teacher retention rates than comparable non-Partnership schools, including through the COVID-19 pandemic (Cullum & Harbatkin, 2023; Harbatkin, Strunk, et al., 2023; Strunk et al., 2020).

For the current round of Partnership districts and schools (Round 4), the 2023-24 school year was the first year of their school improvement efforts. MDE identified these districts and schools in November 2022 (Singer & Cullum, 2023). In the 2022-23 school year, these districts faced challenges related to staffing, instruction, and student attendance, and were already working

on initiatives to address those challenges (Singer et al., 2023, 2024; Woulfin et al., 2023). Over the course of the 2022-23 school year, they developed Partnership Agreements and then school improvement plans within the Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Platform (MICIP). Their agreements and MICIP plans outlined their improvement goals and the specific initiatives they would implement to achieve them. Most districts planned to develop, adopt, and initially implement new systems and strategies related to academics, human capital, and attendance in 2023-24, with plans to refine and fully implement those strategies in the subsequent school year (Cullum et al., 2024).

In this report, we describe the school improvement efforts of Partnership districts and schools during the 2023-24 school year. We bring together quantitative and qualitative data to describe the implementation of improvement strategies, including the factors that enabled or constrained effective implementation. We also report changes over time for several intermediate indicators of school improvement. We focus in particular on three key areas of practice: human capital, curriculum and instruction, and student attendance. Finally, we discuss the role of support the Office of Partnership Districts (OPD) and ISDs provided to Partnership districts and schools.

Key findings include:

- Challenges with human capital eased somewhat yet remain a major concern for Partnership districts, and especially Partnership schools. Issues include hiring difficulties, reliance on substitute teachers, and teacher turnover. Partnership districts remain focused on pipeline initiatives (e.g., grow-your-own teacher programs) and salary increases aimed at improving teacher recruitment and retention.

- On the whole, indicators of instructional quality, school climate, and school leadership were consistent with the prior school year. Partnership districts were focused on developing resources and systems to improve instruction, with full implementation planned for the 2024-25 school year. However, persistent challenges with human capital likely hindered districts' progress.

- Chronic absenteeism remained a problem for Partnership districts, and Partnership school principals in particular reported an increased focus on student attendance. Partnership districts used similar strategies to improve attendance as in the previous year.

- In some cases, districts that described specific strategies to address challenges in their improvement plans (i.e., MICIP) were more likely to show progress in implementing those strategies. Examples included certain teacher recruitment and retention strategies, instructional supports, and academic interventions.

- Partnership schools and districts benefited from the support OPD and their ISDs provided. ISDs especially helped Partnership districts and schools through professional development and other instructional and academic supports. Partnership agreement liaisons helped districts navigate funding opportunities, access resources, and track progress with implementation.

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Section Two:
Data and Methods

EPIC

This study, as it did in previous years, uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine Partnership school and district improvement efforts in 2023-24 (Hewitt & Mansfield, 2021). We collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data separately, integrating the findings across data sources and methods. 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 (Table 2.1) and methods of analysis.

TABLE 2.1. Data Sources				
Data	**Outcomes of Interest**	**Source**	**Year**	**Sample size**
Teacher and principal surveys	Human capital, curriculum and instruction, student attendance, support from OPD and ISDs	EPIC-developed survey	Spring 2024	All schools in Round 4 Partnership districts
Partnership district improvement plans (MICIP plans)	Planned activities to meet Partnership Agreement goals	Office of Partnership Districts	2023	41 districts
Partnership district case studies	Human capital, curriculum and instruction, student attendance, support from OPD and ISDs	Interviews with district leaders	2023-24 school year	4 case study districts
Observations of Partnership district planning meetings	Nature of support from OPD and ISDs	Observations	2023-24 school year	12 districts
Teacher administrative records	Teacher turnover and credential data	MDE and CEPI	2017-18 through 2022-23	All teachers in Michigan

SURVEY DATA

We fielded our annual survey of all teachers and principals in Partnership districts from February through April 2024. We asked all teachers and principals questions about their experiences, perspectives, and opinions of their schools and districts. One goal of Partnership is for these districts to direct their resources and efforts towards their lowest-performing schools, which are

those identified for Partnership. We surveyed every teacher and principal in the district, regardless of whether they worked in a designated Partnership school. 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 these districts and to obtain their contact information. We administered the survey electronically to 7,521 teachers and 330 principals. The response rate was 43% for teachers and 49% for principals. (See Appendix A for subgroup and historical response rates.)

We analyzed the survey data to understand improvement efforts related to human capital, curriculum and instruction, and student attendance in Partnership districts and schools. For each of these topics, we summarized teacher and principal responses across a range of questions. We also analyzed change over time from 2022-23 to 2023-24, using data from our spring 2023 survey of the current Partnership districts and schools. From these responses, we used factor analysis to create survey constructs that capture school climate, school leadership, and perceived overall district support. For all analyses, we applied survey weights to adjust for differences in observable characteristics between respondents and non-respondents. (Appendix B provides additional details about survey items, constructs, and weighting.)

In addition to analyzing responses for Partnership districts overall, we compared responses between Partnership schools and non-Partnership schools in these districts. We also make some comparisons based on Partnership status: reidentified Partnership schools, newly identified Partnership schools, released schools, and never-identified schools (Table 2.2). 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 statistically significant, we use stars to denote statistically significant differences.

TABLE 2.2. Definition of Partnership Status Categories	
Partnership Status	**Definition**
Reidentified	Schools previously identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 and reidentified in Round 4.
Newly Identified	Schools that were *not* previously identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 but *were* identified in Round 4.
Released	Schools previously identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 that were *not* reidentified in Round 4.
Never Identified	Schools that were *not* identified for Partnership status in *any* of the four rounds.

Finally, for survey constructs on school climate and school leadership, we used four years of teacher and principal survey data from Partnership districts in Rounds 1, 2, and 3 (collected in fall 2018, fall 2019, spring 2021, and spring 2022). The historical survey data includes any Partnership school that was originally identified for Partnership status in Rounds 1, 2, or 3 and then reidentified in Round 4. We do not have data in these prior years for newly identified Partnership schools or schools that were

never identified for Partnership status. (For additional details on survey methodology and response rates for prior survey waves, see Strunk et al., 2022). We use historical survey data in some instances for reidentified and released schools to further contextualize our findings.

MICIP DATA

We also incorporated data from Partnership districts' school improvement plans from MICIP into our survey data analysis. MICIP plans were available for 41 (87%) of Partnership districts, though not every district included activities for each goal area.

We quantitatively coded districts' planned activities to identify the presence of different types of goals (e.g., human capital, academic, attendance) and activities associated with each goal (e.g., professional development, teacher recruitment, curriculum selection). (See Cullum et al., 2024, for addition details about our MICIP plan coding process.) We considered an activity type to be present if it occurred in a plan at least once. 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.

We used these data on the presence of goal and activity types in the MICIP plans to analyze the relationship between Partnership districts' improvement planning and implementation. Specifically, we analyzed whether changes over time for specific human capital, academic, and attendance practices differed based on whether a Partnership district listed that type of activity in their MICIP plan. For example, we asked principals in 2022-23 and again in 2023-24 whether they use incentives for student attendance. We analyzed whether principals were more likely to report using incentives or show an increase in using incentives, if their districts listed incentives as a planned activity in MICIP. While we conduct many such analyses, this report includes only results where a difference between districts with and without a listed activity was both practically meaningful and statistically significant.[1]

CASE STUDY DATA

We also draw on qualitative data from case studies of Round 4 Partnership districts. We conducted case studies of three traditional public school districts and one charter management organization with at least one Partnership school. We intentionally sought districts with different governance structures and both reidentified and newly identified districts. We refer to these districts with pseudonyms: Hornets, Blizzard, Ducks, and Chargers.

During the 2023-24 school year, we conducted a set of interviews with our case districts to collect data related to human capital, curriculum and instruction, student attendance, and support from OPD and ISDs. We recruited district leaders overseeing those key areas of practice for interviews (N=13). We conducted two rounds of interviews with district leaders: the first in fall 2023 and

the second in winter/spring 2024. In the first round of interviews, we asked detailed questions about human capital, curriculum and instruction, and student attendance. For each of these areas, informed by our prior analysis of MICIP plans, we asked the district leaders what progress they hoped to see in their improvement efforts over the course of the school year. We also asked about the support they were receiving from OPD and ISDs. In the second round of interviews, we followed up with district leaders about the improvements they hoped to see, seeking to understand the extent of their progress with implementation and the factors that enabled or constrained their efforts. We also asked additional questions about their engagement with OPD and their ISD. (See Appendix C for sample interview protocols.)

We analyzed our case study data in three stages. First, after each interview, we wrote a memo to summarize key points. Second, we coded the data using the qualitative coding software Dedoose. We used two rounds of coding, first categorizing excerpts based on the broad topic area (i.e., human capital, curriculum and instruction, attendance, OPD/ISD). Then, with each category, we further coded excerpts to identify the specific aspect of each area being discussed (e.g., for curriculum and instruction: MTSS, instructional materials, professional development, instructional leadership). Third, we compiled our findings for each case into a matrix, which allowed us to summarize our results by case and compare across cases. We also organized the matrix by interview round (i.e., fall 2023, winter/spring 2024) to analyze our findings over time. Finally, we wrote case-specific memos to summarize our findings and facilitate further cross-case analysis.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF CASE STUDY DISTRICTS

Case Study **Chargers**

Human Capital: The district faced a severe teacher shortage, requiring instructional leaders and coaches to fill in as teachers and share teachers between schools. Despite efforts to improve recruitment and retention, such as offering bonuses and competitive salaries, the district still struggled to find qualified applicants for teaching positions and retain current teachers long term.

Curriculum and Instruction: The Chargers partnered with an online platform to create its curriculum library, which provides high-quality curriculum resources and lesson plans. The district prioritized academic rigor by providing professional development opportunities for teachers, particularly in areas like literacy and other instructional best practices.

Attendance: The district made notable progress in improving attendance, facilitated by sharing best practices during Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and implementing data monitoring systems. However, maintaining attendance initiatives district-wide presented challenges, including administrative workloads and tailored attendance plans for each school.

Case Study **Ducks**

Human Capital: Staffing challenges such as teacher vacancies significantly limited the advancement of district initiatives.

Curriculum and Instruction: The Ducks district focused on implementing a strong curriculum by hiring a curriculum instruction coordinator and an instructional coach to support staff. Although the district was able to fill those positions, they acknowledged making little progress in their curriculum initiative due to continuous staffing turnover.

Attendance: The district established an attendance practice profile that outlines interventions to address student absenteeism. The district focused its attendance efforts on data tracking, home visits, and working with truancy officers.

Case Study **Blizzard**

Human Capital: The district was unable to fill a behavior interventionist role due to a lack of qualified candidates, so it shifted course and implemented a student mentoring program instead. The district struggled to fill teacher vacancies and relied on substitute teachers to fill many roles.

Curriculum and Instruction: Implementation of Tier 1 instruction varied across schools due to variation in teachers' and leaders' mastery of instructional skills. Teacher turnover and the constant reassignment of new hires to fulfill urgent instructional roles hindered progress on the district's curriculum initiative.

Attendance: The district developed an attendance system that initiates attendance interventions after a student misses three school days. These interventions involve home visits from attendance liaisons, an attendance tracking app, student incentives for good or improved attendance, and staff training on attendance strategies.

Case Study **Hornets**

Human Capital: The district made progress in staffing teaching positions, employing recruitment efforts such as leveraging relationships with other districts and social media outreach.

Curriculum and Instruction: The district piloted a new curriculum while soliciting teacher feedback and will roll it out this upcoming school year. The district also focused on professional development implementation by conducting teacher needs assessments and fostering supportive PLC environments; however, they faced challenges such as miscommunication and resistance among their staff.

Attendance: The Hornets district developed a comprehensive attendance system that includes a team of attendance liaisons to address attendance problems and propose solutions. The district emphasized the importance of collaboration with students' families and community services to support families facing attendance challenges.

OBSERVATION DATA

In addition to our case studies, we collected data on the interactions between OPD, ISDs, and their Partnership districts through observations. Partnership Agreement liaisons met with Partnership district leaders at least monthly (and often more frequently) to discuss their improvement goals and progress in implementing improvement plans. Representatives from the district's ISD typically attended these meetings as well. In 2023-24, we attended meetings between Partnership agreement liaisons and Partnership districts in 12 districts (about a quarter of all Partnership districts). We intentionally selected a mix of reidentified and newly identified districts, including both traditional public districts and charter districts. During these observations, we took transcription-style notes to capture data on how Partnership agreement liaisons and ISD personnel engaged with Partnership district leaders. For this report, we analyzed observation notes for key themes related to the type of interactions and support provided to districts.

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Finally, we used administrative data on schools and teachers to contextualize our findings on human capital trends over time. First, we examine teacher mobility and turnover. We compared teachers in Round 4 Partnership schools with peers in two other groups of schools (Table 2.3). The first group, Non-Partnership CSI, are schools that are similarly low-performing to Round 4 Partnership schools and were identified by MDE for Comprehensive Support and Intervention (CSI) but were not identified for Partnership status. The second group, All Other Schools, contains all Michigan schools that are neither Round 4 Partnership schools nor non-Partnership CSI schools. (See Appendix D for a comparison of school characteristics for each group.)

TABLE 2.3. Teacher Administrative Data Sample		
Treatment Group	**N School-Years (unique)**	**N Teacher-Years (unique)**
Partnership Schools (Round 4)	652 (111)	14,159 (5,297)
Non-Partnership CSI Schools	808 (142)	16,878 (5,727)
All Other Schools	21,402 (3,920)	481,787 (110,888)
Total	*22,862 (4,173)*	*512,824 (121,912)*

Note: The number of school-years and teacher-years represent the total number of school or teacher observations across all years (e.g., a teacher that is in our dataset in 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 has three teacher-year observations). The number in parentheses is the number of unique schools or teachers in the dataset (e.g., a teacher that is in our dataset in 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 is counted as one unique observation).

In this report, we describe teacher mobility patterns and credentials in Partnership schools relative to the comparison groups above. As the data is current only through the 2022-23 school year, they do not describe turnover rates in the most recent school year. Rather, they offer helpful context about staffing trends prior to the 2023-24 school year.

First, we plot teacher turnover rates by year and for each subgroup (i.e., Partnership schools, non-Partnership CSI schools, and all other schools). We run this analysis separately for three mobility outcomes: left school, transferred out of district, and left Michigan education. We coded a teacher as left school in year t if the teacher transferred to another school in Michigan in year t+1; or if they are teaching in year t and do not appear in the dataset in year t+1 (i.e., if they appear to have left teaching in Michigan public education).

Second, we use data on teacher credentials to examine rates of under-credentialed teachers over time. Based on state administrative data on Michigan teacher assignments, the under-credentialed measure indicates the share of teachers who are either uncertified or who are certified but teaching in a subject area for which they are not certified (Kilbride et al., 2023). We include in our calculations teachers in core subject areas (elementary, mathematics, ELA, science, and social studies); and we calculate an overall under-credentialed rate for Partnership schools, non-Partnership CSI schools, and all other Michigan schools. We summarize under-credentialed rates for these groups over time. The precise rates of under-credentialed teachers warrant cautious interpretation given some gaps in the teacher credential data (Kilbride et al., 2023), but they offer evidence on the level and persistence of issues with hiring credentialed teachers over time.

SECTION TWO NOTES

1. We analyzed the survey data alongside the MICIP data for a variety of practices. For most, there was not a significant difference between districts who did and did not include an activity in their MICIP plan. In some cases, that was because certain types of practices were nearly ubiquitous among Partnership districts (e.g., professional development for teachers).

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Section Three:
Human Capital

Recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers is a foundational condition for school improvement (Cucchiara et al., 2015; Pham, 2023; Strunk et al., 2016). Thus, increasing teacher retention is a key intermediate outcome in the Partnership Model's theory of change (Burns et al., 2023). Yet, human capital has been a consistent challenge for Partnership districts and schools. As shown in Figure 3.1, current Partnership schools have long dealt with higher rates of teacher turnover than other schools in Michigan, including other low-performing schools (i.e., non-Partnership CSI schools). While teacher turnover rates have increased statewide in recent years, they have increased most sharply for the current round of Partnership schools. Coming into the 2022-23 school year, one in four teachers, on average, had left these schools (i.e., a 25% teacher turnover rate). By contrast, other low performing schools had an average 18% teacher turnover rate, and all other schools in Michigan had an average 12% teacher turnover rate.

FIGURE 3.1. Teacher Turnover Rates Over Time for Partnership Schools, Non-Partnership CSI Schools, and Other Michigan Schools
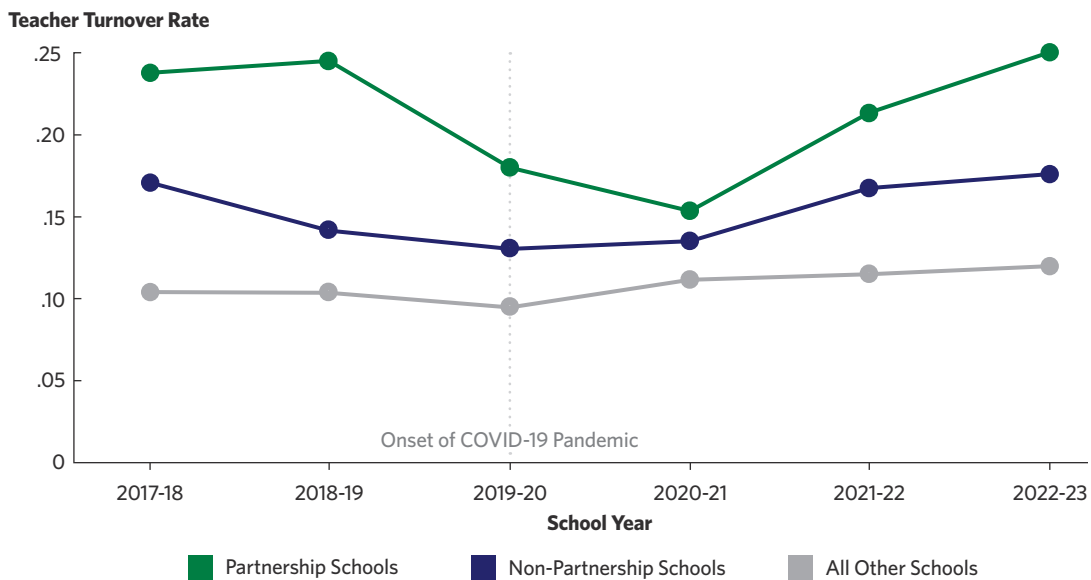
Note: Marker heights represent average turnover from school. Leaving the school includes leaving for another school within the district, leaving for a school in a different district, and leaving Michigan public education altogether. The teacher sample is restricted to just those teachers assigned to a single school. Partnership schools are those schools

*newly identified and reidentified in Round 4 for Partnership status. Schools released from Partnership status in prior rounds are included in one of the other two categories (depending on whether they are identified as CSI or not).*

Likewise, current Partnership schools have been increasingly relying upon under-credentialed teachers (Figure 3.2). Coming into the 2022-23 school year, approximately 25% of Partnership school classes were assigned to either substitute teachers or teachers whose credentials did not match the assigned course. The rate of under-credentialed teachers in Partnership schools was greater than in other low-performing schools (17%) and all other schools in Michigan (6%), and it sharply increased from the prior school year. This increase seems to be driven by charter schools' reliance on substitute teachers (Singer et al., 2023).

FIGURE 3.2. Under-Credentialed Rates Over Time for Partnership Schools, Non-Partnership CSI Schools, and Other Michigan Schools
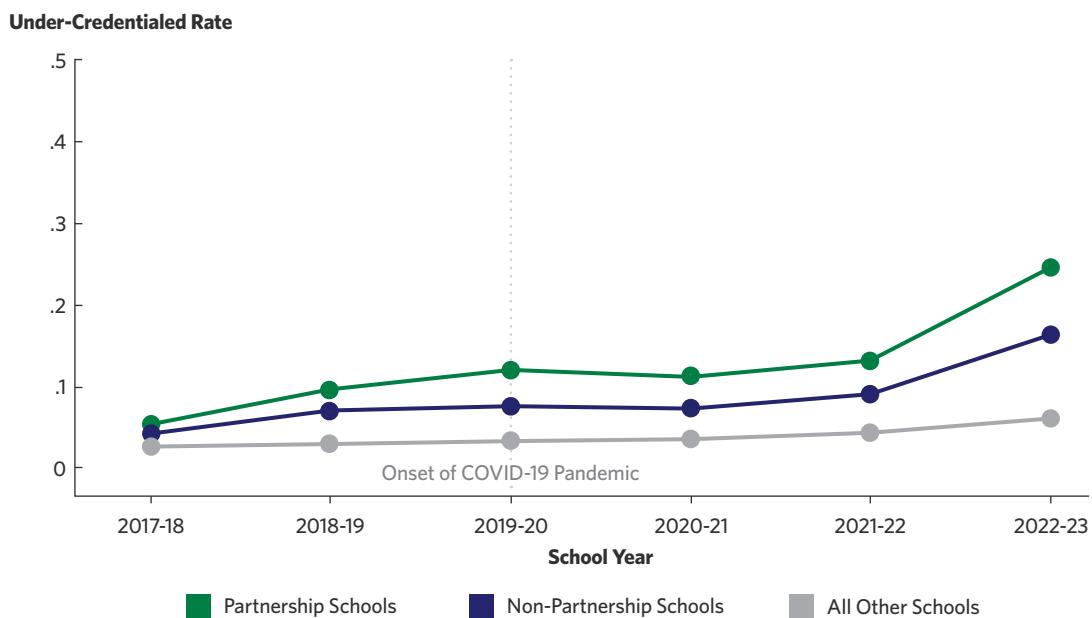
Note: Marker heights represent the average under-credentialed teacher rate. The under-credentialed teacher rate is defined as the share of teacher full-time equivalents (FTE) who are either uncertified or who are certified but teaching in a subject area for which they are not certified.

These data highlight the extent of human capital issues that Partnership schools faced before the 2023-24 school year. In this section of the report, we describe the state of human capital in Partnership districts in 2023-24 as well as their efforts to improve teacher recruitment and retention.

DESPITE SOME IMPROVEMENTS, PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS CONTINUED TO FACE CHALLENGES WITH TEACHER RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

In 2023-24, human capital challenges persisted for Partnership districts, and especially for their Partnership schools. Survey data indicate that hiring difficulties have eased somewhat since 2022-23, but nonetheless remain a significant challenge. Consequently, on average, Partnership schools (and especially charter schools) relied on substitute teachers to fill a substantial share of their teaching positions.

The Share of Principals Reporting Hiring Difficulties Declined, but Challenges Remained, Especially for Partnership Schools

While Partnership district principals report fewer challenges hiring teachers, they nonetheless continued to indicate a high degree of difficulty in doing so, especially for Partnership schools. Figure 3.3 shows the percentage of Partnership and non-Partnership school principals who reported moderate or substantial difficulty hiring teachers in both 2022-23 and 2023-24. For both groups of respondents, the share of principals who reported moderate or substantial difficulty declined: from 74% to 57% of Partnership school principals, and from 41% to 30% of non-Partnership school principals.

FIGURE 3.3. Principal-Reported School-Specific Hiring Difficulty Over Time, by Partnership Status

Percent of Principals Reporting Moderate or Substantial Difficulty
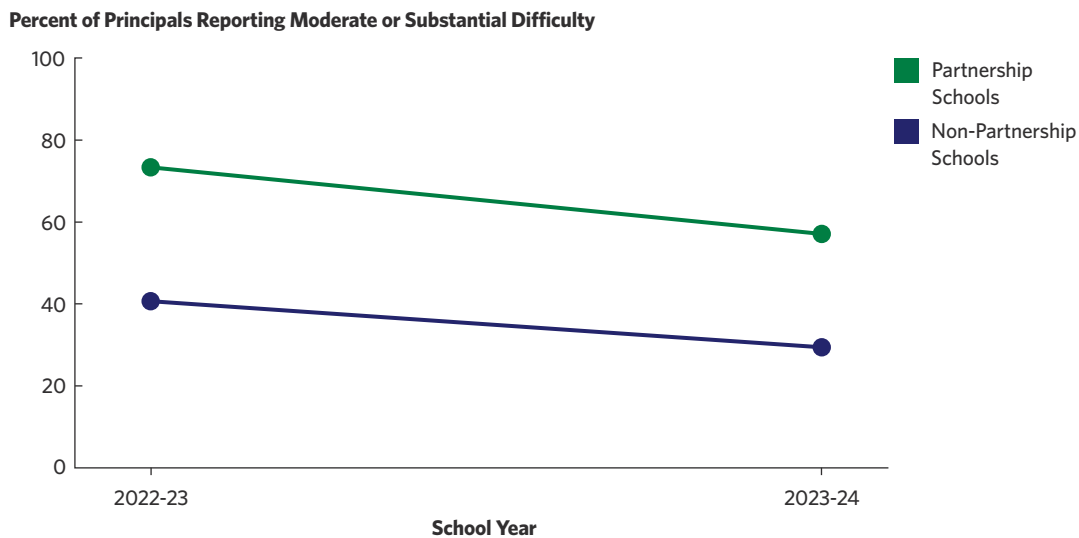
Note: Principals were asked to indicate no difficulties, minimal difficulties, some difficulties, moderate difficulties, or substantial difficulties for the following statements: "My school experienced _____ in recruiting and hiring teachers" and "My district or CMO experienced _____ in recruiting and hiring teachers."

Some Partnership districts encountered fewer hiring challenges than others. For example, Hornets had success in staffing positions during the 2023-24 school year, as they were able to hire certified teachers to fill many positions. One Hornets district leader explained that their district was close to the goal of being fully staffed, *"We're at least 90 percent full. I feel fairly confident about that goal being pretty close to accomplished."* Thus, this district leader was optimistic they would achieve their staffing goal for the year, while also being aware that not all their neighboring colleagues were in a similar staffing situation. He attributed their staffing success to the relationships their district leaders have built over time:

> *Like I said, it's not a magic wand. I reached out to quite a few people. My director of special services has brought a lot of people to the district. Our superintendent has brought a lot of great folks to the district. It's really our relationships that we have throughout the years of serving in other high-functioning districts. That's number one.*

By contrast, Ducks was one of many Partnership districts that continued to face staffing challenges. A Ducks district leader explained that the implementation of district initiatives relied heavily on having sufficient staff to address those needs. They noted that progress in instructional initiatives was hindered when full-time certified teachers could not be hired, *"I would say across the board, if we have the staffing, then that [the instructional initiative] is happening. If we don't have the staffing, then that's not happening."* As in previous years (Singer et al., 2023; Strunk et al., 2022), staffing continues to be a challenge for Partnership districts such as Ducks as they move forward with their improvement efforts.

Partnership Districts — Especially Charter Districts — Continued to Rely on Substitute Teachers

Because of these persistent staffing challenges, a large share of schools in Partnership districts continued to rely on substitute teachers. As shown in Figure 3.4, Partnership districts' self-reported reliance on substitute teachers declined for both traditional public and charter schools, through it remained high, especially for charter schools. On average, traditional public school principals employed substitute teachers for 14-27% of their teaching positions; and charter school principals reported staffing 39-56% of their teaching positions with substitute teachers.

> **Charter school principals reported staffing 39-56% of their teaching positions with substitute teachers.**

FIGURE 3.4. Principal-Reported Reliance on Substitute Teachers in Partnership Districts Over Time, by Sector
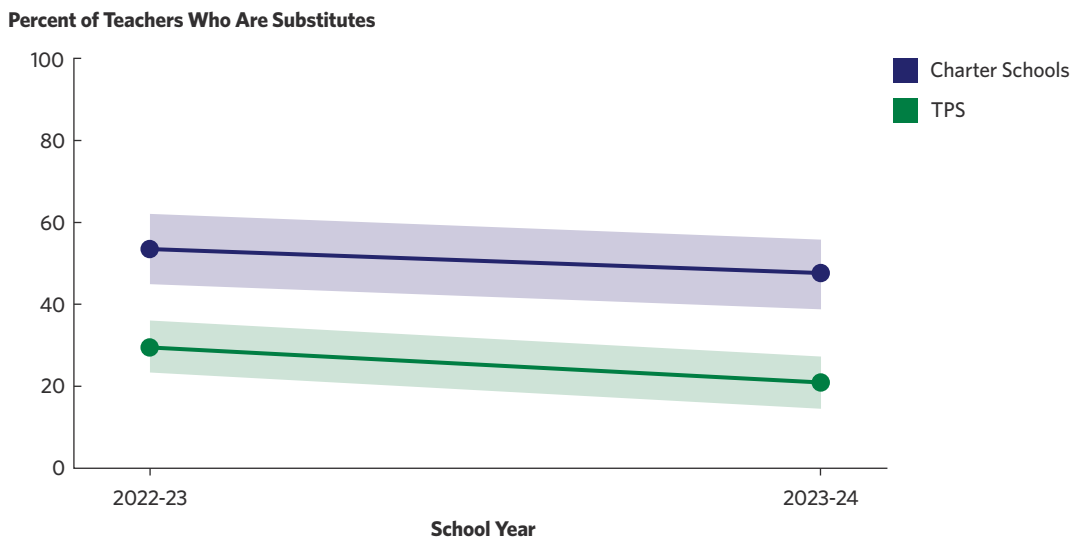
Notes: Principals were asked what percentage of teaching positions on a typical day in a typical week during the 2023-24 school year are filled by substitute teachers. Options were: less than 10%, 10-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-90%, and greater than 90%. The solid lines represent the average response based on range midpoints (e.g., 17.5% for 10-25%) and the shading shows the average lower and upper bounds (e.g., 10% and 25% for 10-25%). Our survey asked principals to report approximately what proportion of teaching positions in their school were filled

by substitute teachers in 2023-24. (We specified that this could include day-to-day substitute teachers, long-term substitute teachers, and emergency-permitted substitute teachers.)

Blizzard district leaders shared how they relied on their pool of substitute teachers to meet instructional needs. The district leaders issued substitute permit extensions to ensure some instructional continuity. One Blizzard district leader explained:

> *We are relying on subs, and so what we're doing is trying to keep a consistency of subs...the staff applies for the permits. I apply for the extensions. If we can, we extend. If there's someone that's really good, we attempt to get a full basic permit, but they have to meet the criteria. If not, we seek emergency permits to help support them.*

The Chargers district faced similar circumstances but implemented a different solution to meet their instructional needs. Chargers faced several vacancies and struggled to hire certified teachers. To fill vacant positions, they relied on hiring long-term substitutes and reassigning instructional leaders. A Chargers district leader explained their solution to filling certified teaching roles:

> *We have gotten creative with the positions that we have in our building structures and utilized instructional coaches and often times leaders in a different way where they are teaching sections of classes for those critical high-need areas. We have had the ability to find more permanent subs that we are working with from a pedagogy standpoint.*

Both districts relied on their substitute teachers to fill teaching vacancies; however, they approached the hiring of substitute teachers differently. Blizzard focused on growing their substitute teacher pool while the Chargers filled their open teaching positions with long-term substitute teachers and instructional leaders.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS CONTINUED TO USE BONUSES, SALARY INCREASES, AND GROW-YOUR-OWN INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

As in the past school year (Singer et al., 2023), the most common recruitment and retention strategies among Partnership districts focused on strengthening the pipeline of teachers and providing financial incentives (Figure 3.5). The majority of principals in Partnership districts reported that in 2023-24, their districts were implementing a grow-your-own (GYO) initiative (64%), offering recruitment bonuses (62%), and increasing teacher salaries across the board (55%). There were no significant differences in the proportion of districts reporting the use of various retention and recruitment strategies between 2022-23 and 2023-24, with one notable exception: a significant share of principals reported that their districts were helping to pay for teachers' college debt (from 5% to 13%; $p<0.05$). The increase may be related to Michigan's recently enacted student loan repayment program for educators (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.).

FIGURE 3.5. Partnership District Teacher Retention and Recruitment Strategies Over Time

District Strategies

Pipeline

Grow-Your-Own Teacher Preparation Programs

New Partnerships With Colleges of Education

Financial

Financial Incentives to Recruit New Teachers to the District

Increased Salary/ Compensation for All Teachers

Increased Salary to Competitive Level With Surrounding Districts

Financial Incentives to Retain Current Teachers in the District

Increased Salary for High-Need Subject Areas

Financial Incentives to Reward Teacher Performance

Tuition Funds for Continuing Education

Housing Assistance (e.g., Housing Cost Subsidies)

Payments Toward College Loan Debt

Organizational

Screening Teacher Applicants for Good Fit With the District

New District-Level Systems to Facilitate Teacher Recruitment

New Career Advancement Opportunities in the District

Wellness

Mental Health Program for Teachers

Physical Wellness Program for Teachers

Percent of Principals Reporting Over Time

Notes: Principals were asked to select all the teacher recruitment and retention initiatives (presented in the graph) that their districtes were currently implementing. The arrows show the change from 2022-23 (point) to 2023-24 (arrowhead). Arrows with no dot and line (i.e., only an arrowhead) represent no change from 2022-23 to 2023-24. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Our case studies reinforced this ongoing investment in recruitment and retention strategies. Chargers, for example, applied for grants this school year to invest in their GYO programs. Their district leadership shared that even though they allocated money toward teacher salaries and bonuses, these strategies were ineffective in retaining teachers when there are many competing districts in the area. They expressed their appreciation of their district's approach toward salary increases, but some frustration when it came to bonuses:

> We have done a really good job as an organization with our finance department
> during the budget season to make paying educators a priority. We can't compete with
> traditional districts when it comes to their pay structures, but we can get pretty close.

At the same time, Charger leaders described their frustration with bonuses as a strategy:

> They [teachers] can get another sign-on bonus, maybe bigger, maybe they're making
> more money at a traditional school, maybe they moved out of state. It didn't seem like
> that sign-on bonus was really enough to have them stay through the whole year.

Other districts employed different approaches to address retention and recruitment issues. For example, a Blizzard district leader shared how they use professional development as a retention strategy for both principals and teachers. The leader explained:

> For retention, this year we have a new service—principal coaching services, 'cause
> principals are often out there on an island, especially if they come brand-new to
> the district. We've utilized grant funds to have one-on-one training with an expert
> principal coach...Then the instructional coaches and culture and climate coaches, we
> feel, are a really good tool for retention, because if your teachers are struggling in
> academics, you have a coach right there.

Partnership districts used many retention and recruitment strategies, including financial incentives, professional development, and continuing education opportunities. Although financial incentives were a quite common strategy, many Partnership districts also attempted other strategies to address retention and recruitment challenges.

In Districts That Adopted a Human Capital Goal in MICIP, Principals Reported Increases in the use of key Human Capital Strategies

While Partnership districts' recruitment and retention efforts remained similar overall to the previous year, districts with specific human capital goals in their MICIP plans showed notable increases in their implementation of two major strategies. First, principals in these districts reported a sharp increase in GYO programs as a district-level staffing strategy (Figure 3.6). In 2022-23, before MICIP plans were written, only 40% of principals reported a GYO initiative. In 2023-24, as districts started implementing their MICIP plans, the share of principals reporting the presence of a GYO initiative for districts with human capital goals increased to 67%. Districts without human capital goals in their MICIP plans had essentially no change in their use of GYO programs from 2022-23 to 2023-24.

FIGURE 3.6. Use of Grow-Your-Own Initiatives in Partnership Districts Over Time, by Presence of Human Capital Goals in MICIP Plans
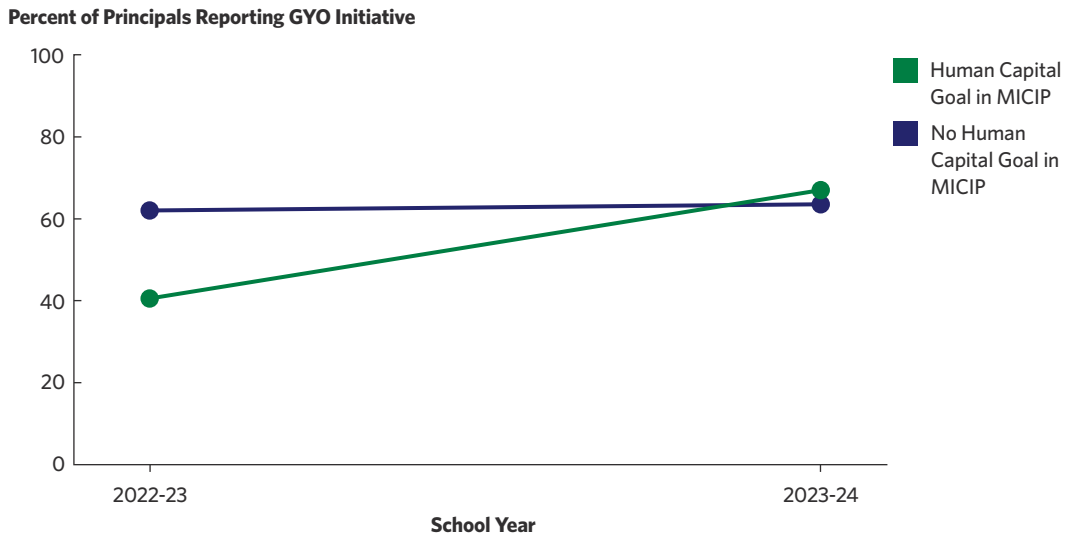
Percent of Principals Reporting GYO Initiative

Note: Principals were asked to indicate whether their districts were currently implementing grow-your-own initiatives.

Second, those districts with human capital goals in MICIP had an increase in the share of principals reporting salary increases as a district-level staffing strategy (Figure 3.7). This change followed a similar pattern to GYO initiatives. In 2022-23, before MICIP plans were written, those districts who eventually put human capital goals in MICIP trailed behind the other districts based on principal responses (33% vs. 62%) but reached same level by 2023-24 (55%).

FIGURE 3.7. Use of Teacher Salary Increases in Partnership Districts Over Time, by Presence of Human Capital Goals in MICIP Plans
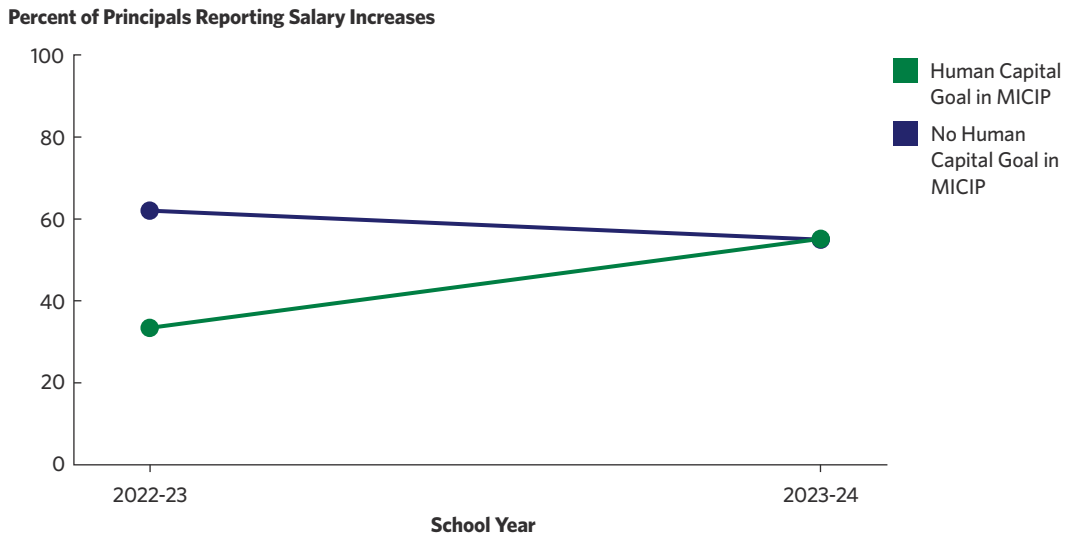
**Percent of Principals Reporting Salary Increases**

Note: Principals were asked to indicate whether their districts were currently implementing teacher salary increases.

These examples highlight how some districts' plans for human capital translated into action in 2023-24. The planning process is a key aspect of school improvement and turnaround policies, including the Partnership Model (Burns et al., 2023). For some strategies related to human capital and other areas of practice (discussed below), the planning was more than just an exercise in compliance—it was linked to actual changes in school practices (Cullum et al., 2024).

MORE PARTNERSHIP TEACHERS PLANNED TO REMAIN IN THEIR SCHOOLS THAN LAST YEAR

On average, the share of teachers in all schools in Partnership districts who planned to return to their current school the following year increased between 2022-23 and 2023-24. The increase was greatest for newly identified Partnership schools (5pp, with 77% of teachers reporting their intention to stay), though there was also an increase for reidentified Partnership schools (2 percentage point increase, to 78% of teachers) and non-Partnership schools (1 percentage point, to 82%). Though slightly fewer teachers in Partnership schools than non-Partnership schools planned to return, those differences were not statistically significant, suggesting roughly similar intentions among teachers across these school types. While teachers' expressed employment plans do not perfectly predict their actual decisions, they are a meaningful signal (Harbatkin, Nguyen, et al., 2023). Thus, teachers' reported intentions for next year suggest that Partnership districts may be poised to improve their teacher retention rate, especially for Partnership schools.

FIGURE 3.8. Teacher Employment Intentions in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools Over Time

Percent of Teachers Who Plan to Stay in Their Current School Next Year
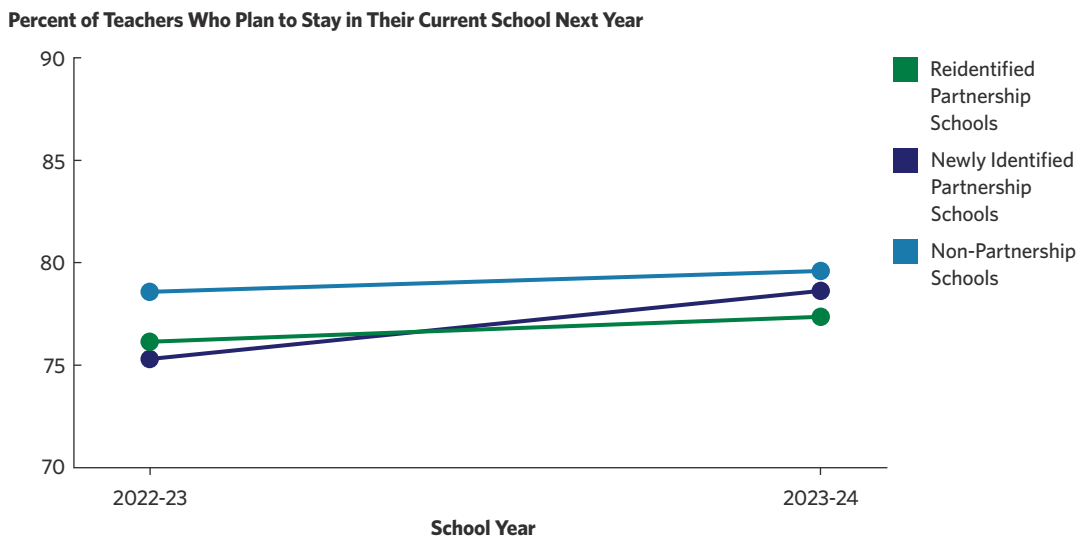
Notes: Teachers were asked, "Which of the following best describes your plans for next school year?" The options were: continue teaching in this school; serve in a different position next year, but in this same school; continue teaching in my district, but in a different school; leave this district next year to work in a different district or charter network; leave next year to pursue a job not in education; and retire. This figure shows the percentage of respondents who selected that they would continue teaching in their school or serve in a different position in the same school.

In sum, teacher recruitment and retention remained substantial challenges in the 2023-24 school year, although there were some improvements. Hiring difficulties decreased slightly compared to the previous year but remained greater for Partnership schools than non-Partnership schools; and many schools still relied heavily on substitute teachers. Some districts had better success in staffing while others continued to struggle. Districts continued to use a variety of strategies—including salary increases, recruitment bonuses, and grow-your-own initiatives. Those with specific human capital goals in their MICIP plans showed increased levels of implementation from the previous year. Additionally, more teachers in Partnership districts planned to stay at their schools than in the previous year, indicating potential improvements in retention.

04

Section Four:
Curriculum and Instruction

Achieving consistent, high-quality instruction is a key intermediate outcome in the Partnership Model theory of change (Burns et al., 2023). Partnership school and district leaders identified improving core instruction and academic intervention as a top priority for improvement (Woulfin et al., 2023), and just about every Partnership district has goals focused on improving academic processes and outcomes (Cullum et al., 2024). This section describes Partnership districts' instructional improvement efforts in 2023-24.
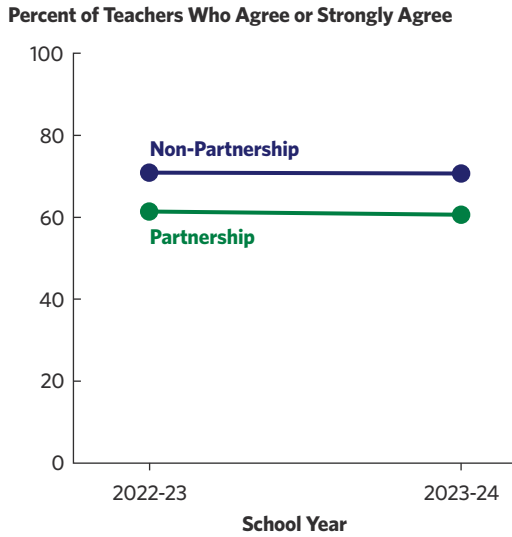
AVERAGE PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY HAVE NOT CHANGED

Educator perceptions of instructional quality in Partnership districts has not changed much since 2022-23. As shown in Figure 4.1, there are at most very slight differences (none of which are statistically significant) in the percentage of teachers who agree their school does a great job with literacy instruction, math instruction, meeting students' academic needs, and effectively engaging students in learning. On all four measures, fewer Partnership school teachers than non-Partnership school teachers agreed, suggesting that a gap in instructional quality remains. Findings from our cases studies offer two potential explanations for why Partnership district teachers on average rated their schools' instructional quality the same as they did in the previous year.
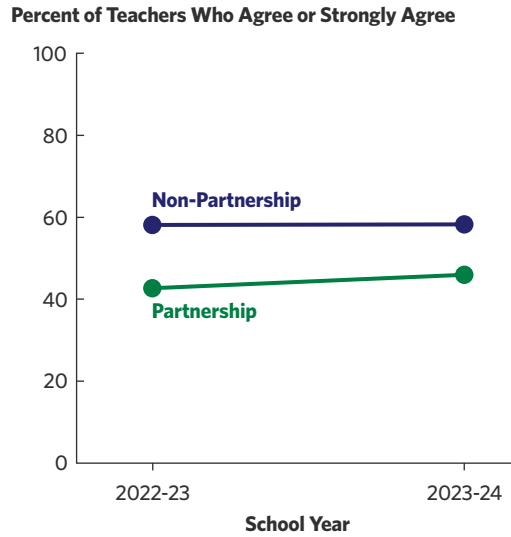
FIGURE 4.1 Teacher-Reported Instructional Quality Over Time in Partnership Districts, by Partnership Status
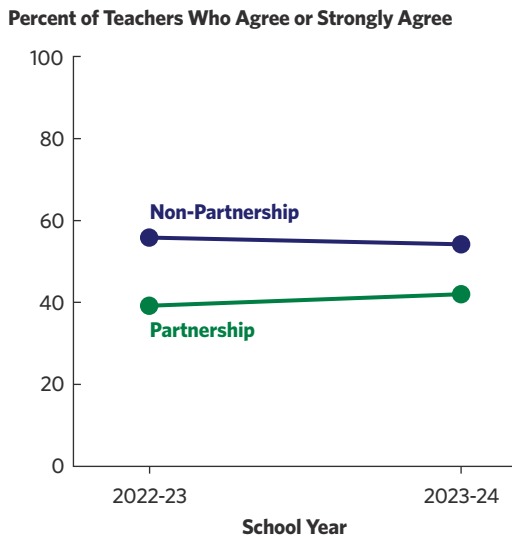
Engaging Instruction

Percent of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree

Literacy Instruction

Percent of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree

Meets Students' Academic Needs

Percent of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree

Mathematics Instruction

Percent of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree
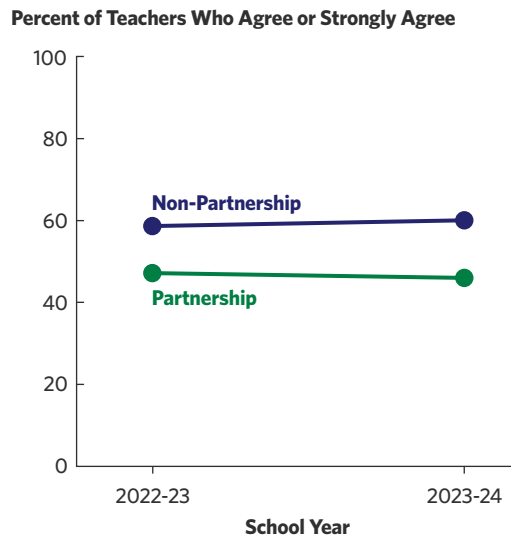
Note: Teachers were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "This school does a great job with literacy practice and instruction," "this school does a great job with mathematics instruction," "teachers effectively engage students in learning," and "this school does a great job meeting students' academic needs." Answer options were strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

Districts Focused on Developing Instructional Resources

In the 2023-24 school year, Partnership districts focused on piloting, adopting, and developing educators' capacity on curriculum materials. Curriculum resources were at the forefront of Partnership districts' initiatives, and although many districts did not fully implement new curricula,

they focused their efforts on creating systems and processes to assist with curriculum development and eventual rollout. For example, a Chargers district leader shared that this year, their district was focused on building an online curriculum platform for their teachers. The district leader explained, *"We're partnering with a new platform...kind of an all-encompassing, one-stop shop for the teachers and the teams where they can access their high-quality curriculum resources."* This online curriculum platform will eventually include other instructional resources such as curriculum mapping and lesson planning. As another example, the Hornets were piloting a new curriculum for the next school year. A Hornets district leader expressed that their district was in the process of selecting an ELA curriculum resource for their high school, *"We paused it due to testing. We're going to pick it back up, and we're looking into piloting two curriculum resources to make a final decision by the end of May and take it to the board for approval."* Both examples show how that for some instructional resources, Partnership districts were in a developmental more than a full implementation phase, which may explain why teachers and principals are not yet reporting improved perceptions of instructional quality. Other Partnership districts focused on shoring up foundational instructional and curricular resources for teachers. Ducks was able to hire a curriculum and instruction coordinator that focused their efforts on training and equipping teachers to access curriculum materials. A Ducks district leader explained:

> *Some of the things that we have done was to ensure that people knew what the curriculum was, had access to the documents, had access to the resources, those types of things that it was more willy-nilly, it seemed like, just ensuring that people had what they needed to even provide Tier 1 instruction based on what we have in our curriculum.*

In other words, Ducks needed to start with simply informing teachers about the curriculum and other tools available, before they could shift their focus from curriculum use to fidelity of implementation and quality of instruction.

Teacher Turnover and Reliance on Substitute Teachers Limited Progress on Instructional Quality

Although many Partnership districts made progress in developing instructional resources, teacher turnover ultimately hindered their ability to sustain that progress. For example, Blizzard district leaders attributed their inconsistent attention on instruction to teacher churn. One leader shared:

> *Tier 1 instruction in the district is at different phases, depending on who the educator is, because we still are having challenges with teachers leaving and new teachers coming on board. And onboarding new teachers to a curriculum initiative is hard.*

Thus, as we have seen in prior years in Partnership districts, teacher turnover negatively affected instructional improvement efforts, particularly by hindering teacher development.

Some Partnership districts tackled teacher development while simultaneously addressing challenges related to teacher turnover, but these efforts focused more on ensuring a baseline acceptable level of instruction rather than making substantial progress on instructional quality. Chargers leaders, for example, expressed their frustration with developing new staff with different types of credentials

and levels of experience. District leaders explained they invest a lot of time and energy in training new staff members, but many leave the district either mid-year or at the end of the year:

> *We are finding that we're in a cycle that, at the beginning of the school year, we are retraining and providing more support for new teachers and new team members. Then it's like a constant cycle of going back and, okay, let's build the capacity of these new team members, and then others leave. Let's build the capacity of these team members, and then we find that they leave.*

Chargers found themselves in an ongoing cycle of training and retraining new staff members throughout the school year, which ultimately interfered with making progress on their instructional initiatives.

In addition to turnover, districts' reliance on substitute teachers created obstacles to instructional improvement. As shown in Figure 4.2, 57% of Partnership school principals and 35% of non-Partnership school principals reported a lack of certified teachers as a hindrance to school improvement. Though these represent slight declines from 2022-23 (in line with the improvement in staffing discussed in Section Three), these differences are not statistically significant. The lack of certified teachers remains a substantial challenge for Partnership districts, and especially Partnership schools, as they seek to improve instructional quality.

The lack of certified teachers remains a substantial challenge for Partnership districts.

FIGURE 4.2 Principal-Reported Lack of Certified Teachers as a Hindrance to School Improvement Over Time, by Partnership Status

**Percent of Principals Who Report Great or Greatest Hindrance**
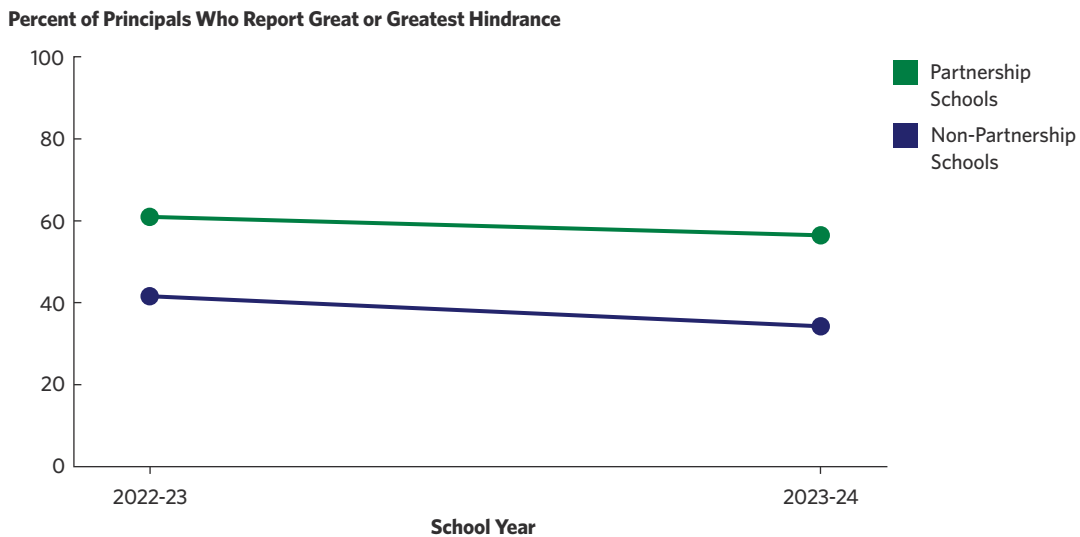
Note: Principals were asked the extent to which an insufficient supply of certified teachers was a hindrance. Answer options were: not a hindrance, a slight hindrance, a moderate hindrance, a great hindrance, and the greatest hindrance.

Most Teachers Reported That Their Curriculum Adequately Covered Assessed Content

Our survey data provide some evidence that Partnership districts' investments in curriculum resources may be helping teachers improve their instruction. We asked teachers to report the extent to which their district- or school-provided curriculum was adequate for a number of instructional purposes (Figure 4.3). While we do not have data to measure a change over time, the majority of teachers in this school year reported that their curriculum was adequate for covering benchmark and state assessment content (77%) and for helping students master state standards (69%). Additionally, most teachers reported that their curricula were adequate at providing strategies to improve instruction, a manageable number of topics to teach, and lessons that were easy to implement. Though still a bare majority, teachers were least likely to agree their curriculum was adequate to accelerate learning for below-grade-level students (51%). Importantly, a sizeable minority of teachers reported that their curriculum was *inadequate* for one or more of these purposes, and more teachers rated their curriculum somewhat adequate rather than completely adequate. Still, overall, most teachers in Partnership districts have a relatively positive view of district-provided curricular materials.

FIGURE 4.3 Teacher-Reported Adequacy of Curriculum in Partnership Districts, 2023-24

Percent of Teachers
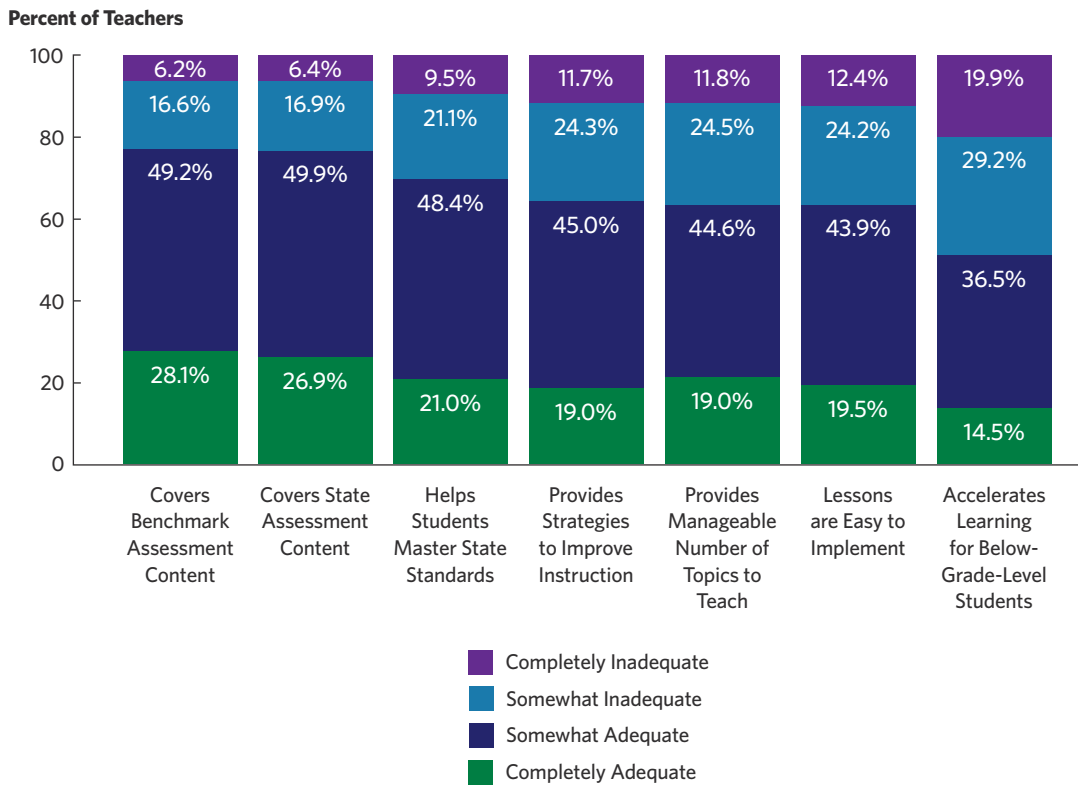
Note: Teachers were asked to report the adequacy or inadequacy of their curriculum for the purposes shown in the figure.

SOME DISTRICTS HAVE INCREASED INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

Although teachers had a generally positive view of their curricula, most teachers (68%) reported that their district's curriculum was not adequate for at least one instructional purpose. The majority of these teachers reported they would turn to another teacher (55%) for assistance with addressing any inadequacies in their curricula, followed by an instructional coach (43%) (Figure 4.4). Relatively few teachers said they would turn to school or district administrators, or external consultants; about 16% of these respondents said there was no one they would turn to for help.

FIGURE 4.4. Teacher-Reported Sources of Help With Curriculum in Partnership Districts, 2023-24

Percent of Teachers
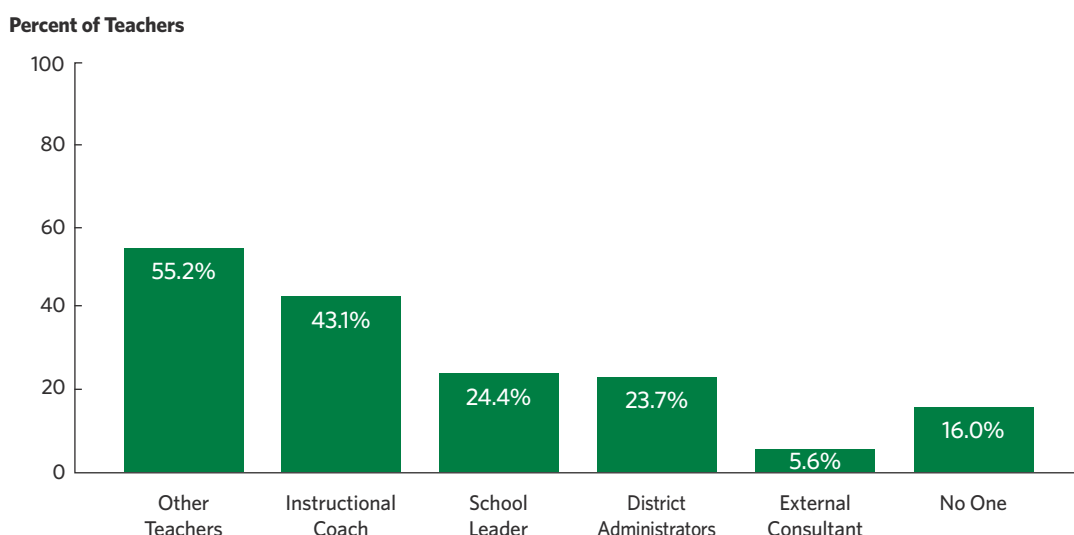
Note: Teachers were asked to indicate who they would turn to for support if they felt their curriculum was inadequate for some instructional purpose. They were only prompted to answer if they reported that their curriculum was inadequate for at least one instructional purpose in an earlier survey question. They could select more than one of the options.

Notably, in districts that included instructional coaching as an improvement strategy in their MICIP plans, teachers were more likely to report seeking curriculum support from an instructional coach. As shown in Figure 4.5, 57% of teachers in those districts who felt their curriculum had shortcomings said that they would turn to an instructional coach for help — a meaningfully larger share than reported by teachers in districts without instructional coaching as a MICIP strategy (36%) and on par with the share of teachers overall who turn to other teachers for support (i.e., the most common source of help). These results suggest that at least some districts that planned to focus on instructional coaching as an improvement strategy have successfully done so.

Figure 4.5 Teacher-Reported Help From Instructional Coaches by Presence of Instructional Coaching in MICIP Plan, 2023-24

Percent of Teachers
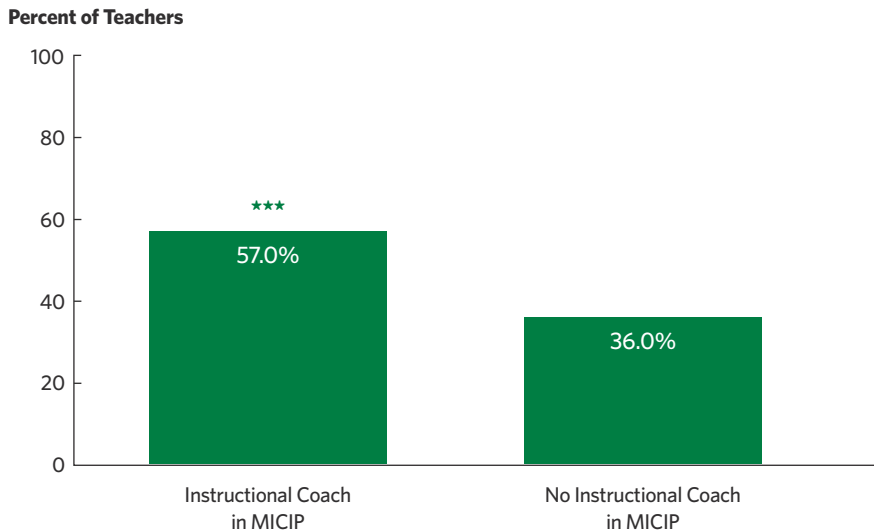
*Notes: Teachers were asked to indicate whether they turned to an instructional coach for support if they felt their curriculum was inadequate for some instructional purpose. They were only prompted to answer if they reported that their curriculum was inadequate for at least one instructional purpose in an earlier survey question. They could select more than one of the options. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

Many Partnership districts hired instructional coaches this school year to support their instructional initiatives. Other districts obtained instructional coaching support through their ISDs. For example, while Ducks already had an instructional coach position filled, they found additional coaching support through their ISD. They needed additional support with coaching because of staffing challenges created by vacancies in the district. The instructional coach Ducks hired was tasked with other duties unrelated to coaching. One district leader explained, *"There was an instructional coach hired to support with Tier 1 instruction and do coaching cycles, but that's not really what she does. That person really is more programmatic around transitioning the school into a [themed] school."*

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICT PRINCIPALS REPORTED LITTLE CHANGE IN MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT BUT INCREASED PRIORITIZATION OF TUTORING

Academic intervention is another component of Partnership school improvement. A large share of Partnership districts planned to use multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as a framework for providing academic intervention, and some also planned to provide tutoring to accelerate student learning (Cullum et al., 2024; Woulfin et al., 2023). Districts' progress using academic intervention

varied, however. On one hand, Partnership teachers and principals reported similar levels of MTSS fidelity of implementation as in the prior school year, likely due to their districts' focus on improving core instruction. On the other hand, principals reported an increased prioritization of in-person tutoring, especially when their districts included extended learning opportunities as a planned activity in their MICIP plans.

Partnership District Educators Report Similar Levels of MTSS Implementation as the Previous School Year

We asked teachers to rate the fidelity of implementation for their school's academic MTSS. On every measure—whether related to screening and classification, specific practices, or organizational infrastructure—teachers, on average, reported the same levels of implementation as the previous year (Figure 4.6). (Note that while Figure 4.6 shows the percentage of teachers who reported full implementation, our analysis also showed no practically meaningful or statistically significant changes in the percentage of teachers who reported partial implementation.)

Partnership district leaders described emphasizing core, Tier 1, instruction as their main focus for improvement, rather than Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction and interventions. The quality of Tier 1 instruction varied within and between Partnership districts, which leaders mainly attributed to the varied skill levels teachers and leaders have with instructional practices and the ongoing challenges of staffing. For example, a Ducks district leader shared how they elected to modify their core instruction initiative by shifting their district's Tier 1 instruction to an intervention curriculum:

> *Yeah, so not exactly what we would like to be in terms of that Tier 1 instruction in some places. We made a decision due to student academic performance on NWEA in the fall, we kind of shifted to Math 180, Read 180 [both intervention programs]... That's where we are, and at the same time, where we are still trying to support high-quality Tier 1 instruction, but it's been a struggle in some places because of circumstances. That's just the truth.*

The Ducks district leader articulated that their decision to modify their Tier 1 instruction initiative was driven by student academic needs but constrained by staffing challenges, *"I think Tier 1 core instruction was what we should have put all our eggs in for, but that's not what actually happened, and [now we are] trying to do both at the same time. Staffing was part of it."*

Partnership district leaders described emphasizing core, Tier 1, instruction as their main focus for improvement.

FIGURE 4.6. Teacher-Reported Instructional MTSS Implementation Over Time

Screening and Classification

Percent of Teachers Reporting Full Implementation
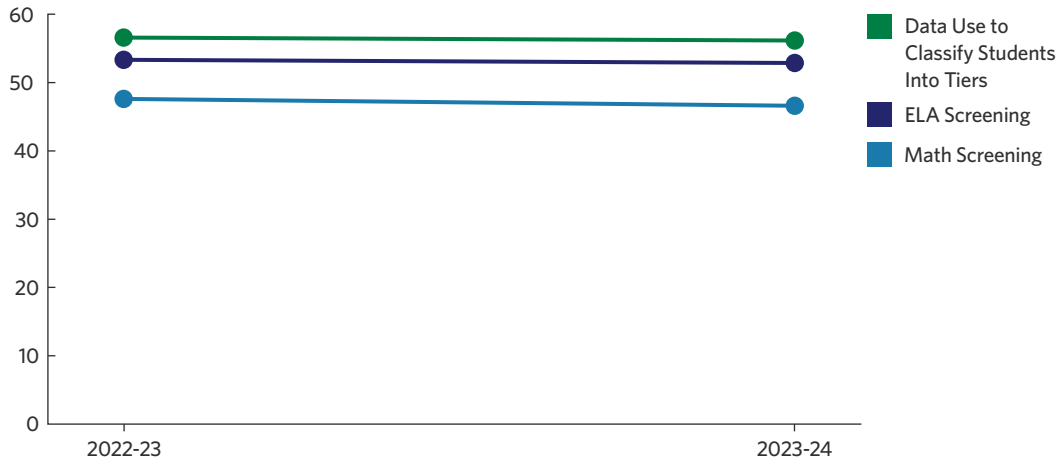
Implementation
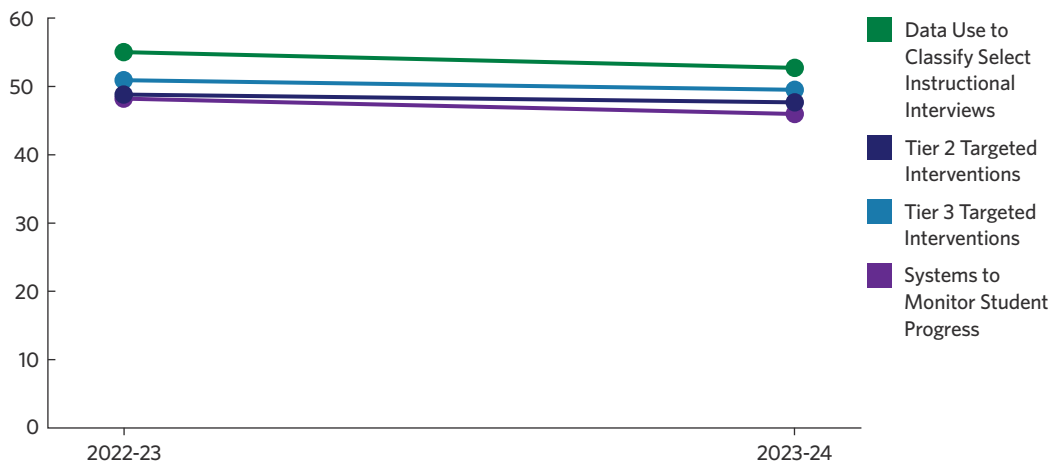
Infrastructure
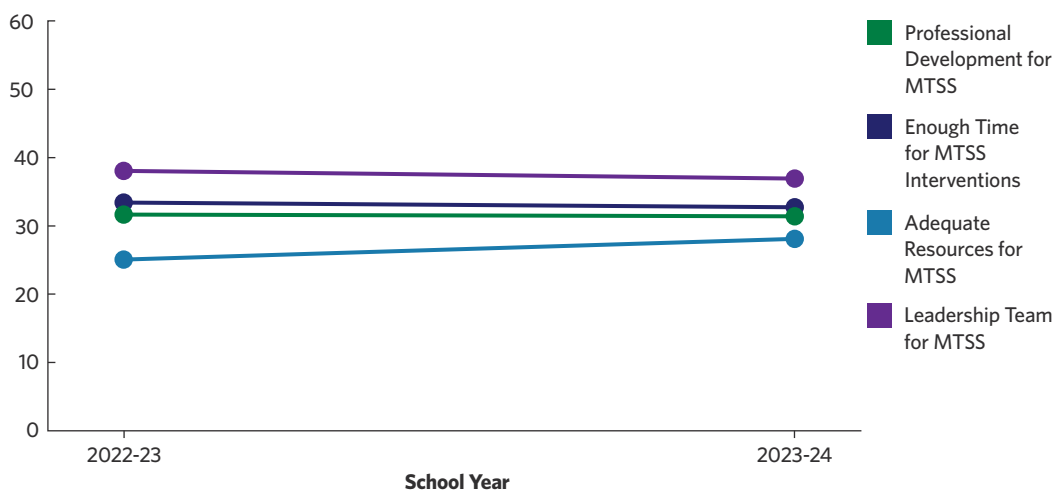
Note: Teachers were asked the extent to which their schools had implemented various elements for their instructional MTSS. Answer options were: not at all implemented, partially implemented, or fully implemented. Teachers could also select "I don't know" and those responses are excluded from the this figure.

Partnership Districts Expanded Tutoring Opportunities, Especially in Partnership Schools

Some Partnership schools increased their focus on tutoring. An increased share of Partnership school principals reported that in-person tutoring was a major or top priority (Figure 4.7). Between 2022-23 and 2023-24, the percentage of Partnership school principals who reported prioritizing one-on-one in-person tutoring increased from 17% to 39%, and the share who reported prioritizing small-group in-person tutoring increased from 37% to 57%. The share of non-Partnership school principals who reported prioritizing tutoring, however, essentially remained the same. Overall, fewer principals reported prioritizing virtual tutoring compared to in-person tutoring. (While there are some changes from 2022-23 to 2023-24 in non-Partnership schools, none of the changes were statistically significant.)

FIGURE 4.7. Principal-Reported Prioritization of Tutoring in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools Over Time
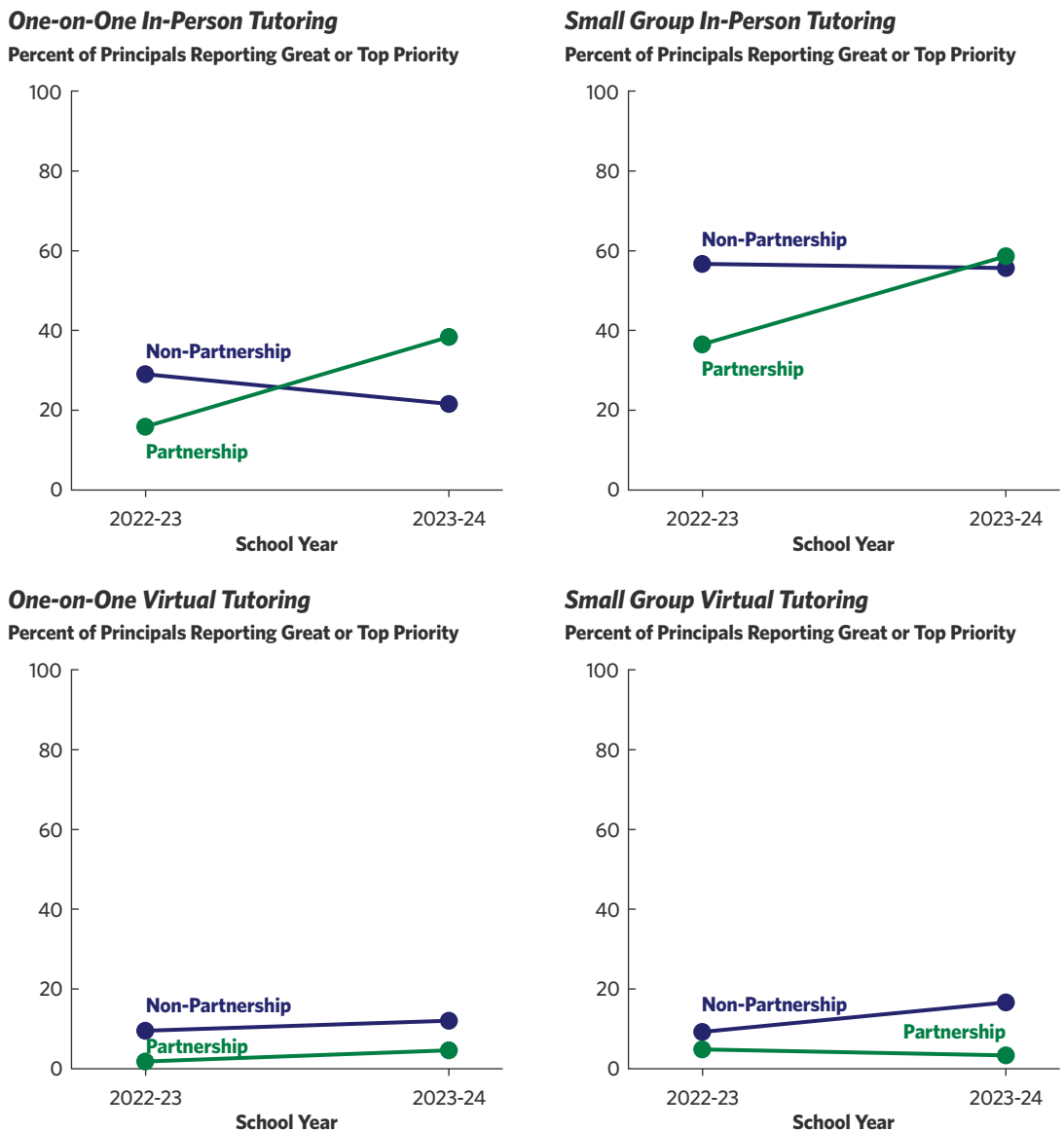
Note: Principals were asked the extent they were prioritizing the one-on-one and small-group in-person and virtual tutoring as strategies to accelerated learning and/or to address student needs in the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. Answer options were: not at all, to a minimal extent, to a moderate extent, to a great extent, or this is a top priority in our school.

Notably, the increase in prioritizing in-person tutoring was concentrated within districts that included extended learning opportunities as a strategy in their MICIP plan (Figure 4.8). Our survey results show a 24 percentage point increase in prioritizing one-on-one in-person tutoring and 16 percentage points increase in prioritizing small-group in-person tutoring for principals in districts with a tutoring-related strategy in MICIP. Thus, while there was also some increase in prioritization of tutoring by principals in other districts, this increased prioritization appears to be driven by districts' MICIP plans.

FIGURE 4.8. Principal-Reported Prioritization of Tutoring Over Time, by Presence of Extended Learning Strategies in MICIP Plan
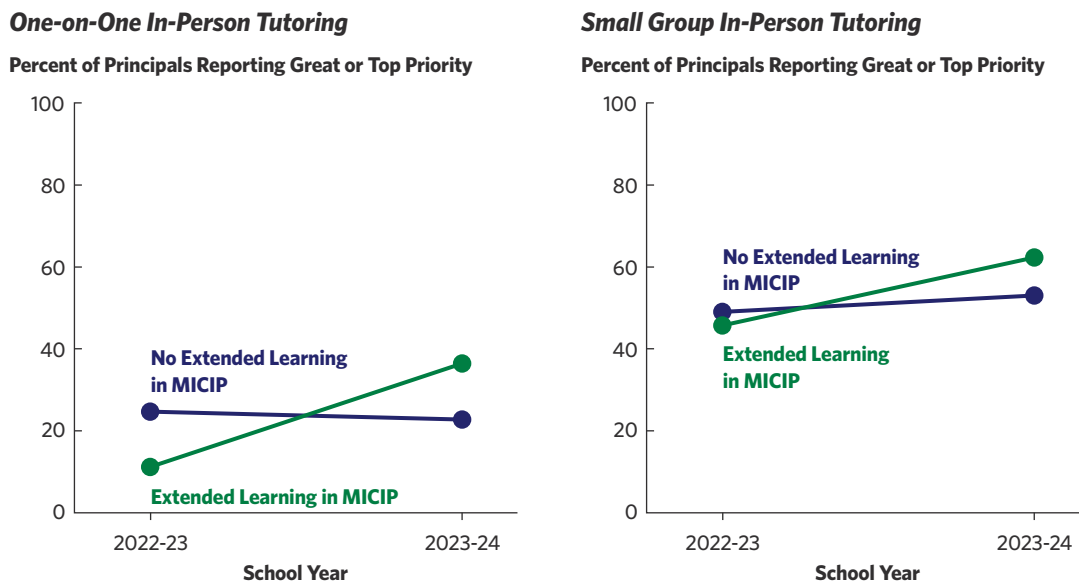
One-on-One In-Person Tutoring

Percent of Principals Reporting Great or Top Priority

Small Group In-Person Tutoring

Percent of Principals Reporting Great or Top Priority

Note: Principals were asked the extent they were prioritizing the one-on-one and small-group in-person tutoring as strategies to accelerated learning and/or to address student needs in the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. Answer options were: not at all, to a minimal extent, to a moderate extent, to a great extent, or this is a top priority in our school.

For several Partnership districts, tutors in literacy and math were part of their Partnership plan, and some were able to find the staff to fill these positions. However, some districts had to transition their tutors to fill other urgent instructional roles and thus relied on other approaches to address their math tutoring goals. For instance, Ducks successfully hired literacy tutors for their schools, but the tutors were reassigned to fill classroom teaching roles due to teacher turnover challenges. One district leader shared an example of how they were ultimately left without any literacy tutors in their district because of teacher turnover, *"There became a need for a science long-term sub because the other one quit, that person [the hired literacy tutor] took that position, which left us with no literacy tutors."* The district was thus left with no literacy tutors for the remainder of the school year.

Although Ducks did not have literacy tutors, they provided math support via an online platform. A district leader explained, *"Some of the middle schools are using Khan Academy to support students as well, but that's not as structured. Yeah, that's pretty much where we are with that, and*

currently planning for 2024-25 for math tutors in schools." The district acknowledged that their math support was not as structured as they'd wanted, but they were hopeful that in the next school year math tutoring would be implemented differently.

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP REMAIN AT SIMILAR LEVELS TO THE PREVIOUS SCHOOL YEAR

Finally, we turn our attention to measures of school climate and school leadership. These organizational factors play an important role in creating the conditions for instructional improvement (Harbatkin, 2022; Harbatkin & Henry, 2019; Pham, 2023). Indeed, in the previous rounds of the Partnership Model, those districts with the greatest academic progress had consistently stronger measures of school climate and school leadership in our surveys (Singer & Cullum, 2023). We create constructs to measure school climate and school leadership based on a set of questions answered by teachers (see Appendix B for details). We asked these same questions for six consecutive years, which allows us to track these measures over time. The results are displayed in Figure 4.9.

Teacher-reported measures of school climate and school leadership in 2023-24 remain largely unchanged from 2022-23. Newly identified and reidentified Partnership schools scored lower than non-Partnership schools for both measures, highlighting a gap in school climate and school leadership. Notably, however, reidentified Partnership schools scored higher on the leadership measure than they did before reidentification for the second consecutive year, suggesting some sustained improvement in school leadership. Finally, while we did not find appreciable changes between 2022-23 and 2023-24, this is largely aligned with the historical trends. As shown below, we did not register improvements in school climate and leadership for multiple years for Partnership schools in Rounds 1, 2, and 3.

Partnership schools scored higher on the leadership measure than they did before reidentification for the second consecutive year, suggesting some sustained improvement in school leadership.

In sum, Partnership districts in 2023-24 focused on improving curriculum and instructional resources, but teacher perceptions of instructional quality remained unchanged from the previous year on average, with Partnership schools still trailing non-Partnership schools. Efforts to enhance curriculum were more developmental than fully implemented, and challenges like teacher turnover and reliance on substitute teachers hindered progress. While most teachers found their curricula adequate for covering assessed content, many reported shortcomings in areas like accelerating learning for struggling students. Instructional coaching emerged as a key support—especially in districts that listed instructional coaching as a strategy in MICIP. Overall improvements in school climate and leadership were limited.

FIGURE 4.9. Measures of School Climate and School Leadership
Over Time by Partnership Status

School Climate

Percentile

School Leadership

School Year
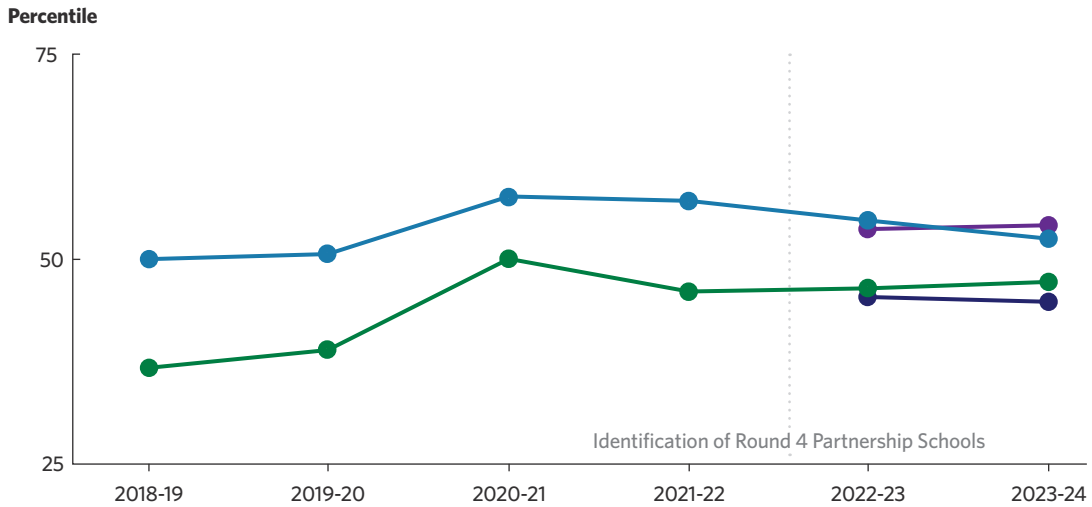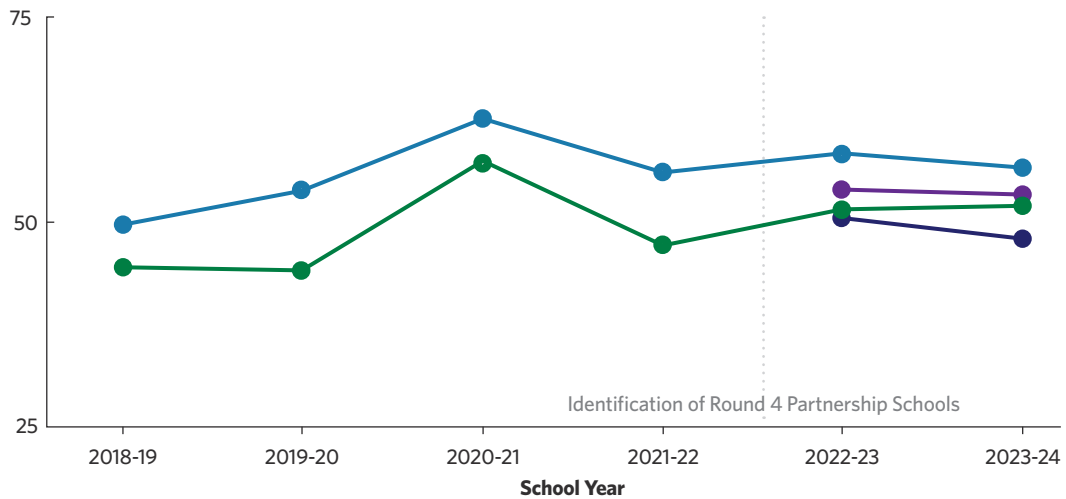
■ Reidentified
■ Newly Identified
■ Released
■ Never Identified

Notes: Marker heights represent mean percentiles of reidentified, newly identified, released, and never identified schools in response to items related to school climate and school leadership, asked in all six survey waves. The 50th percentile denotes the average response across teachers and principals in all six years. A mean response above this line indicates that a given group reported more positive school climate or school leadership than the average respondent across teachers and principals in the six survey waves. A mean response below this line indicates that a given group reported a more negative climate or school leadership.

05

Section Five:
Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism

Student attendance and chronic absenteeism are one of the most salient concerns for Partnership districts. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the current round of Partnership schools already had high rates of chronic absenteeism. Those attendance concerns increased during the pandemic, and chronic absenteeism rates have remained at elevated levels in the subsequent school years (Singer et al., 2024). Most Partnership districts planned to develop a robust organizational infrastructure for addressing attendance—in other words, to develop clear systems and routines that could support new attendance practices (Cullum et al., 2024). This section describes Partnership districts' challenges with attendance and implementation of attendance practices in 2023-24.

STUDENT ATTENDANCE REMAINED A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS

As in prior years, the share of teachers reporting attendance as a major or the greatest challenge for students remained high, highlighting the persistence of attendance issues (Figure 5.1). As in 2022-23, a larger share of Partnership school teachers (73%) described student attendance as a major or the greatest challenge for their students than non-Partnership teachers (62%). The share of teachers reporting attendance as a hindrance to school improvement increased for both Partnership schools (77% to 80%) and non-Partnership schools (66% to 71%) (Figure 5.2).

FIGURE 5.1. Partnership District Teachers Reporting Attendance as a Major Challenge for Students Over Time, by Partnership Status

Percent of Teachers Reporting Major or Greatest Challenge
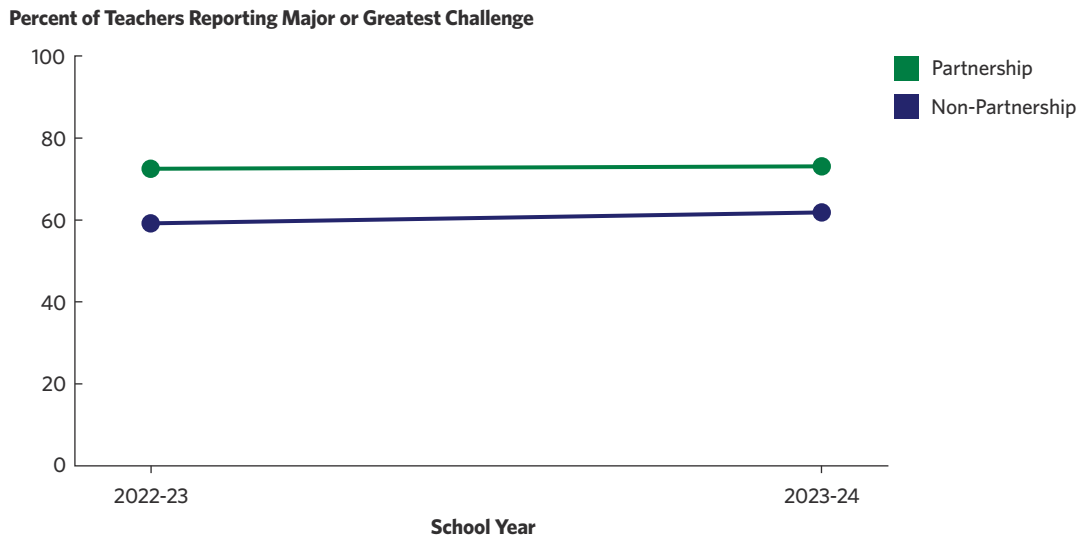
Note: Teachers were asked to what extent student attendance was a challenge for their students. The options were: not a challenge, a minimal challenge, a moderate challenge, a major challenge, the greatest challenge, and not sure. Results displayed in this graph exclude respondents who selected not sure.

FIGURE 5.2. Teacher-Reported Attendance as Hindrance to Improvement Over Time, by Partnership Status

Percent of Teachers Reporting Great or Greatest Hindrance
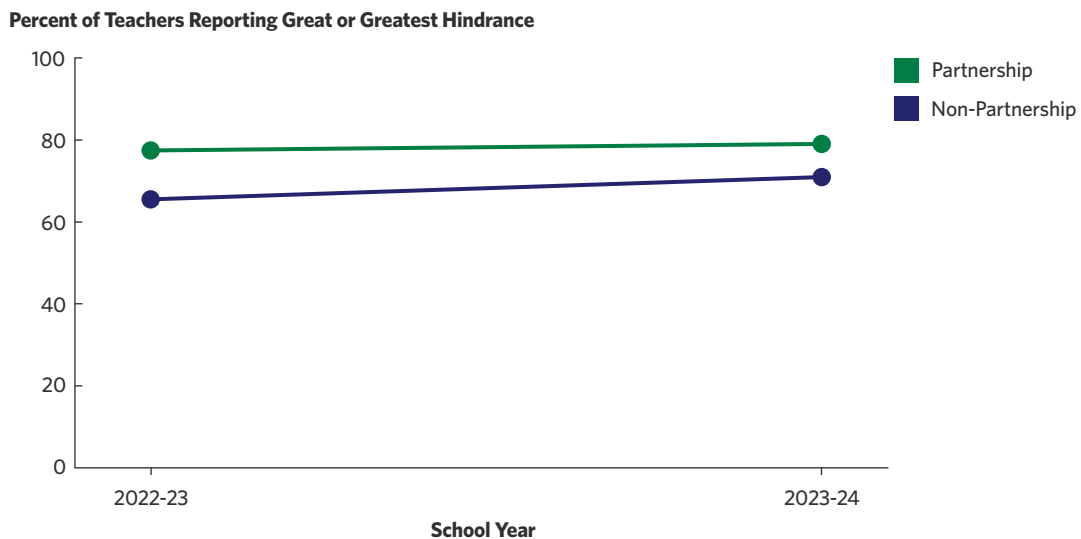
Note: Teachers and principals were asked to indicate the extent to which "student attendance" was a hindrance to school improvement. Options were: not a hindrance, a slight hindrance, a moderate hindrance, a great hindrance, and the greatest hindrance.

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS INCREASED THEIR FOCUS ON ATTENDANCE

While educators from both Partnership and non-Partnership schools continued to report substantial challenges with attendance, only Partnership school principals reported focusing more on attendance in 2023-24 than in the prior school year (Figure 5.3). In 2022-23, a larger share of principals in Partnership schools than in non-Partnership schools reported attendance as one of their top five focus areas (55% vs. 48%), likely reflecting the greater attendance challenges that Partnership schools face. In 2023-24, a greater share of Partnership school principals reported attendance as one of their top five focus areas relative to the prior year (72%, or a 17 percentage point increase), while there was no significant change among non-Partnership school principals (50%).

FIGURE 5.3. Principal-Reported Focus on Attendance as a Top Priority Over Time, by Partnership Status

Percent of Principals Placing Attendance in Their Top 5 Focus Areas
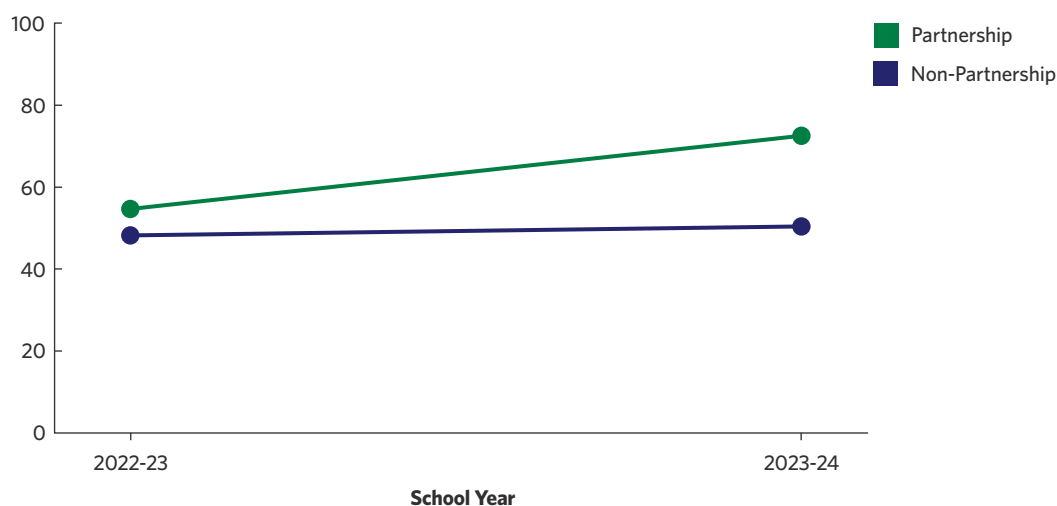
Note: Principals were asked to select their top five priorities for 2023-24 from a list of sixteen different potential options (e.g., improved curriculum and instruction, academic interventions, teacher recruitment strategies, multi-tiered systems of support). This figure shows the percentage of principals who selected "student attendance interventions" as one of their top five priority areas.

Our case studies reinforce how Partnership districts across the board have prioritized attendance initiatives. Some Partnership districts have well-established systems and strategies to improve attendance and are focused on quality of implementation. For example, a Ducks district leader elaborated on their district's work implementing attendance processes and procedures:

> *They are goals that have been implemented throughout the school year, so ...*
> *implemented, but implemented with fidelity is not the case at all of the buildings.*

Have those processes been implemented? Are there attendance teams? Are they looking at caseloads? Absolutely. Across the district, some buildings, the fidelity piece isn't as strong as the other schools, and we can see that in the data.

Other Partnership districts hired personnel and developed new attendance systems during 2023-24. For example, Hornets hired and trained attendance liaisons to assist schools with attendance. One Hornets district leader elaborated on the role of their attendance liaisons and the procedures that they implement, *"So, every school has their own attendance liaison. At three absences...the attendance liaison takes those names and makes a personal phone call to the parent. If they don't get 'em, they'll make another call to the parent."* Other districts trained current staff to carry out attendance processes, such as monitoring data and communicating with parents and students. Chargers focused on training their office managers to deliver the appropriate attendance strategies, as explained by one district leader:

Communicating with students and parents about attendance remained the most frequent practice.

We've provided a lot of support with our office managers where before we met with them quarterly, in person, and we offered a whole series of webinars, but they were more like virtual PLCs where we got on and we talked about the challenges with attendance, we talked about ways to celebrate.

These examples illustrate how Partnership districts were prioritizing attendance. District schools and leaders were focused on developing and initially implementing new attendance strategies, which included identifying areas for improvement, defining new procedures, and training personnel.

PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS USED SIMILAR ATTENDANCE PRACTICES AS THE PREVIOUS YEAR

We found little change in the specific attendance strategies districts used between 2022-23 and 2023-24. As shown in Figure 5.4, communicating with students and parents about attendance remained the most frequent practice. Working more intensively with families (e.g., making a plan, home visits) remained less frequent, as did connecting families with resources (e.g., social services, transportation).

FIGURE 5.4. Attendance Strategies Reported by Principals
in Partnership Districts Over Time
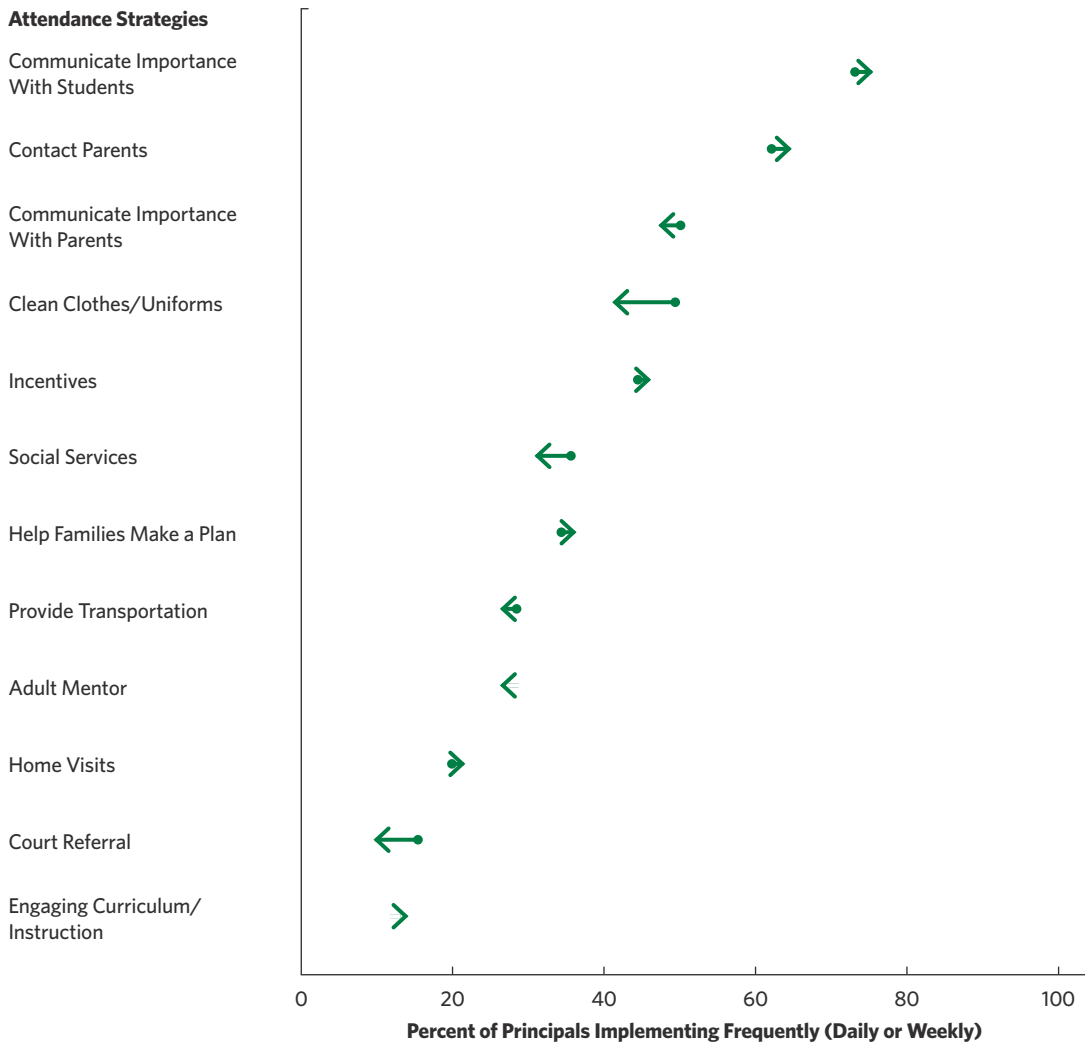
Notes: Principals were asked, "How often do staff members in your school use the following practices to improve student attendance?" Options were: never, once or twice a year, once or twice a month, weekly, or daily. We considered a practice to be implemented frequently if a principal selected weekly or daily. The arrows show the change from 2022-23 (point) to 2023-24 (arrowhead). Arrows with no dot and line (i.e., only an arrowhead) represent no change from 2022-23 to 2023-24.

Notably, in districts that included incentives as an attendance strategy in their MICIP plans, a larger share of principals reported using incentives in 2023-24 than in the prior school year. As shown in Figure 5.5, in districts with attendance incentives as a strategy listed in MICIP, the share of principals who said they frequently use incentives increased 32pp, from 27% in 2022-23 to 59% in 2023-24. The share of principals in other districts who reported frequently using attendance incentives declined slightly, but that change was not statistically significant. Incentives were the only attendance strategy that followed such a pattern; there was no increase in principals reporting frequent use of other attendance practices associated with their presence in district MICIP plans.

These results highlight the challenge of addressing attendance, especially in high-absenteeism contexts. Districts can more easily design and implement school-based strategies such as incentives, which are not likely to substantially affect attendance (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018), compared to more time- and resource-intensive interventions that require substantial organizational capacity and access to external resources.

FIGURE 5.5. Principal-Reported Use of Attendance Incentives Over Time, by Presence of Attendance Incentives in MICIP Plan

Percent of Principals Implementing Frequently (Daily or Weekly)
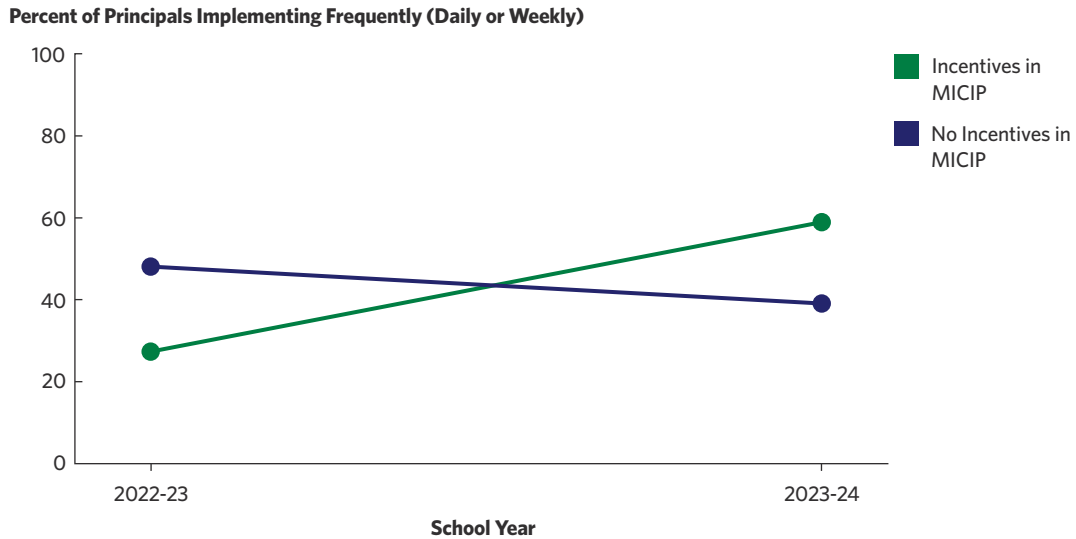
In sum, student attendance and chronic absenteeism are ongoing challenges for Partnership districts, and especially Partnership schools. Districts focused on developing new attendance systems and practices, though the type and frequency of practices to improve attendance remain similar to the prior year (with the exception of incentives in districts that listed this as a strategy in MICIP).

06

Section Six: Support from OPD and ISDs

Support from OPD and the ISDs is a central component of the Partnership Model theory of change. Partnership agreement liaisons are meant to help districts navigate policy requirements and access available resources, and ISDs are expected to provide additional support to Partnership schools and districts, such as professional development, training, and coaching (Burns et al., 2023). In addition, while the Partnership Model is based on identifying schools, it involves an agreement with the whole district, because part of the focus is on improving district-level systems and increasing the district's capacity to support school improvement (Burns et al., 2023). This section describes the extent and nature of support provided by districts, IDSs, and the OPD, according to Partnership district and school leaders.

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL PRINCIPALS REPORTED SUPPORT FROM THEIR DISTRICTS AND ISDS

For a variety of topics (e.g., curriculum and instruction, academic interventions, school climate, attendance), we asked principals to report whether they receive support from their districts and other external agencies and organizations. We found that levels of overall support increased for Partnership schools, and particularly for newly identified schools, with increased support from districts and high levels of support from ISDs.

Few Newly Identified School Principals Reported No Support, Driven by Increased Support From Districts

In prior reports, we documented that during 2022-23, a large share of principals in newly identified Partnership schools reported receiving no support in key areas of practice, such as teacher recruitment and retention, academic intervention, school climate, and attendance (Singer et al., 2024; Woulfin et al., 2023). This contrasted with principals in reidentified Partnership schools who reported higher levels of support. For 2023-24, we found that across the board, the share of principals reporting no support decreased meaningfully.

Figure 6.1 shows the trend over time in principals reporting no support—for newly identified schools, as well as for reidentified schools and non-Partnership schools as a point of comparison—in four

key areas of practice. In all four areas, far fewer principals in newly identified schools reported no support in 2023-24 than in 2022-23. Among reidentified schools, the share of principals reporting no support declined substantially in the area of teacher recruitment, while other areas remained consistently low. There was also no statistically significant change in the share of non-Partnership principals reporting no support.

FIGURE 6.1. Share of Principals Reporting No Support in key Areas Over Time, by Partnership Status

Teacher Recruitment

Percent of Principals Reporting No Support
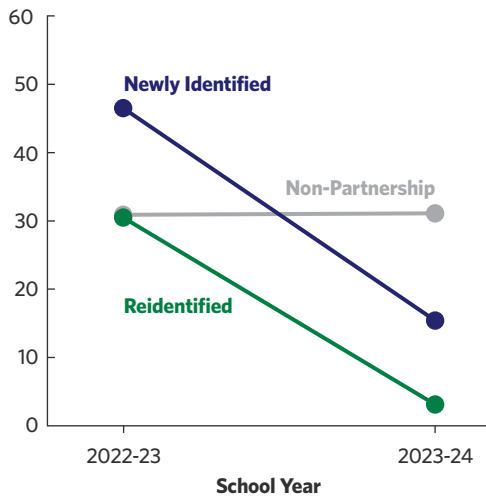
Academic Intervention

Percent of Principals Reporting No Support
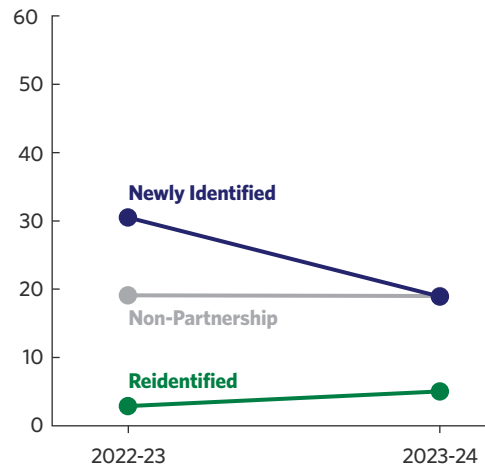
School Climate

Percent of Principals Reporting No Support
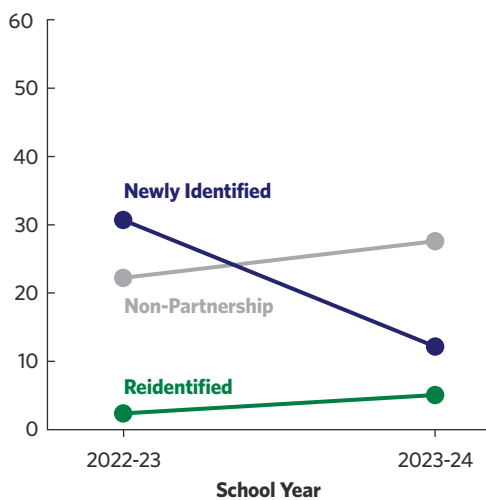
Attendance

Percent of Principals Reporting No Support
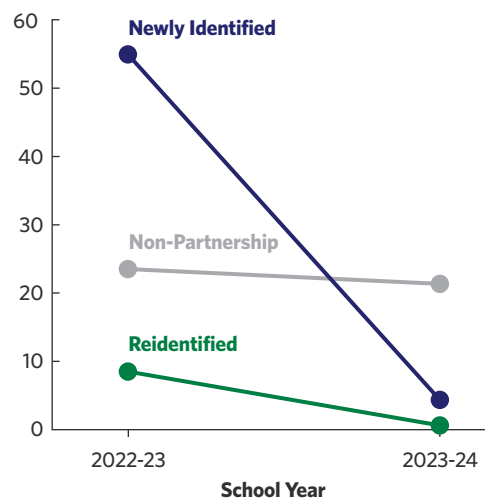
Notes: Principals were asked to indicate which organizations provided support for a variety of different areas of practice, including: teacher recruitment, academic intervention, school climate, and attendance. The options to select were: district or charter management organization, ISD, MDE, community-based organization, external educational organization, or none of these. Principals could select all that applied, though the "none of these" option was mutually exclusive of the other options.

The increased levels of support for newly identified schools appears to be driven by increased support from their districts. We combined our questions about district support in various areas into a single measure, which we use to measure overall district support reported by principals. (See Appendix B for additional detail.) As shown in Figure 6.2, principals from newly identified schools reported substantially lower overall support from districts than non-Partnership schools did in 2022-23; and reidentified Partnership schools reported the highest overall levels of district support. In 2023-24, district support increased greatly for newly identified schools and modestly for non-Partnership schools; for reidentified Partnership schools, it remained about as high as the prior year. These results suggest that Partnership districts directed additional attention and support toward their Partnership schools—and specifically their newly identified schools—in the 2023-24 school year.

FIGURE 6.2. Overall District Support Over Time, by Partnership Status
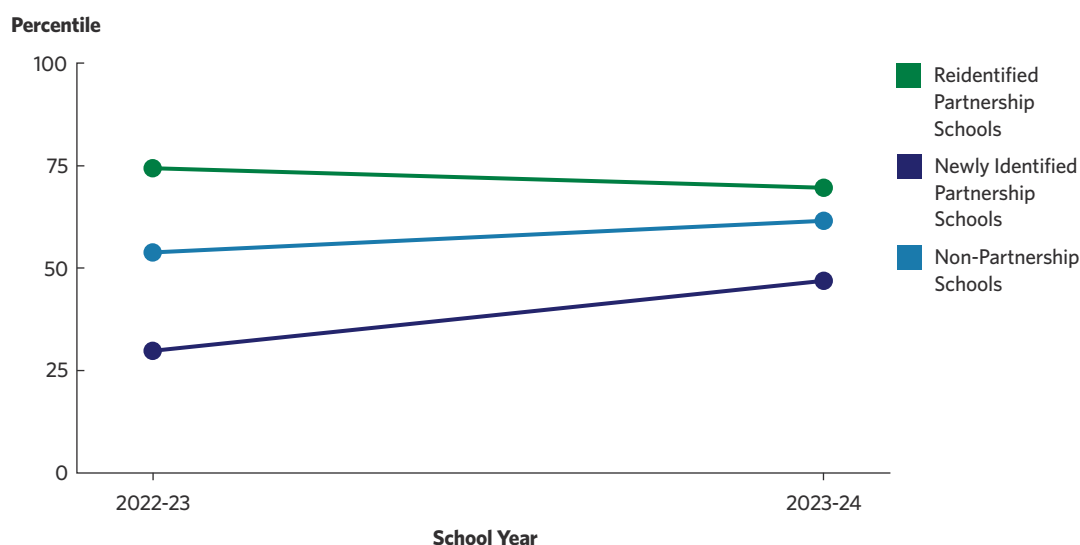
Percentile

Notes: Marker heights represent mean percentiles of reidentified, newly identified, and non-Partnership schools in response to items related to overall district support for schools, asked in two survey waves. The 50th percentile denotes the average response across principals in both years. A mean response above this line indicates that a given group reported more overall district support than the average respondent across principals in the two survey waves. A mean response below this line indicates that a given group reported less overall district support.

Partnership School Principals Reported High Levels of Support From their ISD

Principals in Partnership schools reported high levels of support from their ISDs, especially in academic areas (Figure 6.3). The large majority (73%) of Partnership school principals reported receiving ISD support for professional development. Most Partnership school principals also said they received ISD support with academic intervention and curriculum and instruction; more than 40% of Partnership school principals said they received support with school climate, attendance, and other academic areas (e.g., MTSS, data use). In every area—and especially the top areas of support (i.e., professional development, academic intervention, and curriculum and instruction)— many more Partnership school principals reported ISD support than non-Partnership school principals. These results suggest that the Partnership Model has indeed facilitated increased ISD support to Partnership schools.

Figure 6.3. Principal-Reported Support From ISDs in Partnership and Non-Partnership Schools, 2023-24

	Partnership	Non-Partnership
Professional Development	72.8%***	39.8%
Academic Intervention	54.7%***	18.4%
Curriculum and Instruction	53.5%*	32.5%
Student Behavior	49.7%*	30.3%
Culture/Climate	48.3%**	24.2%
MTSS	47.8%	32.5%
Data Use	43.9%	28.7%
Graduation	42.3%*	13.2%
Student Attendance	42.3%**	20.3%
Social-Emotional Learning	37.2%	29.8%
Social Services	34.7%**	14.1%
Teacher Retention	31.2%**	11.1%
Family and Community Engagement	27.4%*	11.8%
Budgeting	25.6%*	12.1%
Increased Learning Time	21.6%	11.4%
Teacher Recruitment	19.3%	9.5%

Percent

*Notes: Principals were asked to indicate which of the following organizations provided support for a variety of different areas of practice: district or charter management organization, ISD, MDE, community-based organization, external educational organization, or none of these. Principals could select all that applied, though the "none of these" option was mutually exclusive of the other options. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

In our case study districts, district leaders described professional development opportunities from their ISDs as very helpful. Many different types of professional development programs were available for the Partnership districts. For example, Blizzard district leader explained how their ISD has helped their district, *"They really work with our schools, initiatives to really grow student achievement. They're into providing what teachers need—our coach trainings, and our leader training… The support that I get from the ISD is invaluable."* For Blizzard district leaders, as for many other Partnership districts, ISDs serve as a key support as the districts work toward school improvement.

OPD PROVIDED USEFUL SUPPORT TO PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS

Through our case studies and observations, we found that Partnership districts received a great deal of support from the OPD through their Partnership agreement liaisons. This support revolved around the funding and resources available to Partnership districts as well as the goals and strategies they outlined in their Partnership agreements and MICIP plans.

Partnership Agreement Liaisons Helped Partnership Districts Navigate Funding, Access Resources, and Track Progress on Implementation

In meetings with Partnership district and school leaders, Partnership agreement liaisons focused on three different forms of support. First, they clarified the specific requirements associated with different funding sources, such as 21h funding for Partnership districts and Regional Assistance Grant (RAG) funding from ISDs. The grant requirements are complex, and Partnership agreement liaisons helped make sure that district leaders understood the requirements and deadlines. As one Ducks district leader remarked during a meeting with their Partnership agreement liaison, *"This clarifies a lot, I had some misunderstandings about this…I got it now, thanks."*

This support with navigating funding sources was essential for Partnership districts to take actionable next steps. For instance, during a discussion with Hornets, the district's Partnership agreement liaison emphasized the importance of timely amendments to funding allocations, *"The next window for any amendments is May 15. If there are dollars you noticed are not being used as intended and want to spend differently, you can put in for an amendment as of May 15."* Similarly, Ducks district leaders explained in a meeting that they were no longer sure investing in a specific math professional development sequence would be helpful, so their Partnership agreement liaison recommended modifying their funding request, *"As long as you make a modification for a different math PD you could do that…it doesn't make sense to keep it there if you can use those funds a different way."* These conversations went beyond compliance; they revolved around making sure districts were using the funding available to them, and doing so in a way that aligned with their plans and was responsive to the realities they faced during implementation. District leaders were grateful for

this support. As one Thunderbirds leader remarked after discussing funding requirements, *"This is great, I'm glad we're talking about this."*

Additionally, OPD facilitated connections to useful external resources that supported Partnership districts' improvement efforts. Partnership agreement liaisons frequently invite specialists from ISDs to provide targeted support. For example, a math specialist was brought in to assist the Thunderbirds with developing a strategy for academic support based on benchmark assessment results. Similarly, as one Jets district leader shared, a Partnership agreement liaison made sure that the district worked with their ISD to receive literacy coaching, *"Literacy coaches from the ISD have been included in district meetings."* These connections extended to additional funding and training opportunities. For example, one Partnership agreement liaison recommended to Predators district leaders, *"Consider applying for a GYO grant from state department. It could support you since that's something you're already doing."*

Monitoring and assessing progress with implementation were also key components of these meetings. Partnership agreement liaisons and district leaders discussed different options for tracking progress and providing updates on implemented strategies. For example, in a meeting with the Thunderbirds, the Partnership agreement liaison asked district leaders to detail their current initiative. Similarly, with the Rangers, a Partnership agreement liaison guided district leaders through a self-assessment tool for talent management systems. This process often included providing feedback and advice on specific strategies. For instance, a Partnership agreement liaison encouraged Condors to conduct a more systematic analysis of their efforts to promote on-track graduation. A Condors district leader remarked that those conversations, *"forced me to pay attention to things I didn't pay attention to as much."* In sum, Partnership agreement liaisons helped Partnership districts navigate funding complexities, establish and maintain connections to helpful resources, and track progress on the implementation of their improvement strategies.

Most Partnership Districts Perceived OPD Support as Helpful

Among our case study districts, district leaders perceived OPD support to be of varying usefulness. Some found OPD support to be extremely helpful in many aspects that ranged from funding information to school observations and school improvement brainstorming sessions. For example, Chargers district leaders explained their relationship with OPD this way:

> *It's been a very good process in the fact that they help us make connections that we might not normally have. We also learn about additional grant resources that we may not have learned about before or knew about. I feel like the information that we get in working with them is so much better than if we weren't with them. Then also whenever we have a roadblock, they've been very helpful in getting us connected with the right person to help make this happen. I just feel like they bring a lot of resources to the table.*

Similarly, Blizzard district leaders described a positive experience with OPD. They have had a fruitful relationship with OPD and are in constant communication with their Partnership agreement liaison. As one district leader explained, *"[Our Partnership agreement liaison] connects*

with me almost every other day. So we're on the phone all the time, or she comes here. They attend our performance management meetings, and MICIP meetings, et cetera...And then we plan." In sum, Blizzard district leaders appreciated the hands-on approach that their Partnership agreement liaison took with the district, and how involved they were with their school improvement efforts.

In other districts, Partnership agreement liaisons may have been less involved, but district leaders still tended to perceive Partnership agreement liaisons as helpful. For instance, Hornets district leaders felt that the initial planning process with Partnership agreement liaisons was helpful for them:

> *It really did put us into a place to where we had to come up with a plan for our district. I think without that urgency of that Partnership agreement, we would still probably start the year off in the way that we have been for the past few years and not really having any kind of direction.*

They also found OPD support helpful when retrieving information about grants, initiatives, and training sessions. However, district leaders shared that the relationship was less hands-on and involved less frequent and informal communication than seen with Blizzard. One Hornet district leader described their relationship with OPD this way, *"I don't have any singular conversations with OPD [or our Partnership agreement liaison], it's usually as a collective. Not negatively, it just is what it is."* In other words, their communication with OPD typically occurs in meeting spaces, and they rarely engage directly with Partnership agreement liaisons outside formal Partnership meetings.

Some Partnership districts may have found OPD support less useful for their school improvement efforts and would have liked more hands-on support from their OPD liaison. Ducks district leaders described their OPD experience as being centered around funding opportunities, which they found helpful, but would have liked to see other types of support as well. One district leader shared that engagement with their Partnership agreement liaison, *"feels very much like box checking sometimes... Practical support would be [the] next [thing we would want]. Not out of their lane, not doing our job, but practical support."* In other words, Ducks leaders felt that their relationship with OPD often leaned toward compliance-driven interactions, and they hoped to shift toward more practical, hands-on support over time.

In sum, most of our case study district leaders found support from OPD and their Partnership agreement liaisons to be useful, though the level of engagement and satisfaction varied. Some experienced and preferred a high level of involvement and communication, while others limited their engagement to formal meetings. The fact that one district hoped to have a greater level of support highlights the opportunity for Partnership agreement liaisons to check in with district leaders to confirm the nature and level of engagement they would like going into the next year and make adjustments accordingly.

07

Section Seven:
Recommendations

Overall, we found that Partnership districts made progress in their school improvement efforts, from developing new instructional resources and supports to rolling out new attendance initiatives. At the same time, we did not see strong signs of progress across various intermediate indicators of success. For example, teachers reported perceptions of instructional quality and levels of academic MTSS implementation that were similar to the prior year.

There are several reasons why this may be the case. First, measurable progress on intermediate indicators may not have appeared this year because Partnership districts were still in the development and initial implementation phases of their improvement plans. This aligns with what we found in Partnership districts' improvement plans: most districts did not plan for full implementation of new strategies until the second year (Cullum et al., 2024).

Second, human capital challenges persisted in Partnership districts in 2023-24. Although challenges with turnover, vacancies, and hiring have eased a bit, Partnership districts continued to struggle with teacher recruitment and retention. Partnership schools faced greater difficulty than non-Partnership schools in Partnership districts. Disruptions from teacher turnover and vacancies meant that some Partnership districts had to shift resources away from certain initiatives to others. A reliance on substitute teachers meant focusing more on foundational pedagogical support rather than pushing toward high-quality instruction and reliable academic intervention. In sum, staffing challenges often limited the progress that Partnership districts could make on some of their initiatives.

Though progress for Partnership districts and schools was mixed, the support they received from OPD and their ISDs was positive. District leaders reported benefitting from the direct support that OPD and ISDs provided through new funding, resources, and professional development. In addition, they appreciated the relationship with their Partnership agreement liaisons, who helped them navigate the available resources and supports and keep track of progress on their improvement goals and strategies. Based on these findings, we offer the following recommendations for Partnership districts and for OPD.

CONTINUE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS TO INCREASE THE SUPPLY AND RETENTION OF HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS

Human capital challenges—and in particular difficulty retaining and recruiting high-quality teachers—remain among the most significant hindrances to improvement for Partnership schools. Teacher workforce stability is critical to facilitate and sustain Partnership districts' instructional improvement efforts.

Lawmakers should continue funding pipeline initiatives such as fellowships and scholarships for aspiring teachers, GYO programs, student teaching stipends, and teacher mentoring and induction. These efforts should maintain a focus on strengthening the pipeline of teachers from teacher preparation and GYO programs (Kilbride et al., 2023; Michigan Department of Education, 2023). Partnership districts, in particular, would benefit from direct support and resources, including additional 21h funding to use for salary increases or recruitment/retention bonuses, and ongoing involvement of Partnership agreement liaisons and ISD personnel to continue improving Partnership districts' the human capital systems and practices.

SUPPORT ADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES FOR HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION

Dedicated time and prioritization of the academic and instructional elements of Partnership agreements and improvement plans remain necessary. Deeper changes to the instructional core are pivotal for shifting the trajectory of student and school outcomes, and such changes will require concerted attention. Without adequate resources directly supporting the infrastructure for instructional improvement and, ultimately, the implementation of particular instructional reforms, educators will be impeded in efforts to change classroom practice and raise student achievement.

Adequate funding and resources are thus crucial for Partnership districts to move forward with their strategies to systemically improve the nature and quality of instruction (Jackson et al., 2016; Jackson & Mackevicius, 2024). Budgetary constraints place challenges on district and school leaders as they attempt to conduct instructional improvement initiatives. Conversely, adequate funding for curricular resources, professional development, instructional coaches, and teacher stipends all contribute to advancing the implementation of instructional elements in the districts' Partnership agreements. Policymakers should thus consider increasing funding allocations for Partnership districts as they pursue these improvement strategies.

CONTINUE OPD SUPPORTS FOR PARTNERSHIP DISTRICTS

Our results indicate Partnership system and school leaders detected multiple benefits from engaging with OPD. As such, OPD should continue supporting districts, particularly in their efficient and effective use of financial and instructional resources. Our findings highlight how ongoing OPD support helped district leaders access useful resources and assess and bolster their infrastructure for improvement. OPD should continue to provide these supports, with a close eye towards developing robust plans and high quality, evidence-based professional development. Partnership district leaders may prefer different levels of engagement or types of support, and Partnership agreement liaisons should remain responsive to their expressed needs. Since some district leaders feel they are not receiving as much support or the type of support that they would like, OPD leadership should consider periodic check-ins with district leaders or alongside Partnership agreement liaisons and help adjust district-Partnership agreement liaison relationships accordingly. OPD can continue to clarify specifically how Partnership agreement liaisons will provide support related to different parts of the Partnership agreement and improvement plans.

PROVIDE FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT COACHING FOR PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS

Our results also demonstrate that district and school leaders could benefit from coaching aligned to the academic priorities and strategies of their Partnership agreements and improvement plans. That is, targeted and tailored hands-on support for instructional improvement could deepen leaders' understanding of instructional reforms as well as offer opportunities for leaders to gain or refine leadership strategies to promote reform in their context. Policymakers could fund additional positions within OPD—instructional or school improvement coaches — who could work alongside Partnership agreement liaisons to provide more direct coaching in key instructional areas. Or additional funding could be provided to ISDs to increase the level of coaching support that they can provide to Partnership schools and districts. Finally, we emphasize the importance of aligning coaches' work with specific components of Partnership, as opposed to generic school improvement coaching. For instance, these coaches could offer ongoing professional learning opportunities to principals about how they can frame ELA curriculum adoption to their teachers or enable MTSS implementation in their schools.

PROVIDE GUIDANCE, SUPPORT, AND SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES RELATED TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Since chronic absenteeism remains a major challenge and a top priority for Partnership districts and schools, they can benefit from ongoing guidance, support, and supplemental resources.

Many Partnership schools dedicated time and resources to develop and initially implement new systems and practices meant to improve student attendance. Districts should carefully monitor the implementation and effect of these practices over the coming school year and adjust course as necessary. Districts and schools may need support from Partnership agreement liaisons and ISD personnel for monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement, especially since educators have less expertise and organizational infrastructure for attendance systems and practices than they do in other areas such as instruction (Singer et al., 2024). In addition, Partnership districts and schools are likely to need external resources to address persistent barriers to student attendance that are beyond educators' locus of control (Singer et al., 2021). Partnership agreement liaisons could connect district and school leaders to resources offered by community-based organizations and local and state agencies that can directly assist students and their families. More broadly, MDE, other state agencies, and state lawmakers should explore other ways that the agencies can coordinate with one another and enhance available programs and resources to reduce persistent out-of-school inequalities at the root of high chronic absenteeism rates.

CONTINUE TO USE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING TO PROMOTE CHANGES TO SCHOOL AND DISTRICT PRACTICES

We previously found that Partnership district leaders found the planning process helpful (Cullum et al., 2024). Our findings suggest that after the first year of implementation, the plans facilitated some meaningful changes in school and district practice. Across human capital, academics, and attendance, we found that that having a specific strategy in one's MICIP plan was associated with increased use of that strategy. In many cases, it appeared that districts accurately recognized a gap in their practice—they were using a strategy less than other districts—and used this school year to catch up to other districts. This finding validates that the planning process was helpful for districts to identify areas for improvement. At the same time, including a strategy in MICAP did not result in increased use or implementation for all areas of practice. This may be because districts faced capacity constraints or were focused on developing new systems and routines before rolling out a new strategy. Whatever the case, OPD should help Partnership districts take stock of the progress they've made implementing their plans so far and—in line with the continuous improvement ethos of the plans (Cullum et al., 2024)—adjust course as needed (i.e., implement strategies as intended or revise the plans accordingly).

KEEP THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL TIMELINE IN MIND

The findings also call attention to the relatively short window of time for Partnership schools to show improvement. While current Partnership schools were identified in November 2022, they did not finish their Partnership agreements and improvement plans until the summer before the 2023-24 school year. Therefore, the Partnership Model's three-year window for improvement is, in actuality, truncated into one year for planning and two years for implementation. As we highlight

in this report, the first year of implementation involved considerable—and ongoing—planning and development. This is in line with their improvement plans and goals overall (Cullum et al., 2024). Thus, it is not entirely surprising that we did not see greater levels of improvement on intermediate measures. Indeed, research on school turnaround shows that the positive effects of reform—improved systems and practices, and ultimately better student outcomes—come incrementally over a long period of time (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015). Moving forward, policymakers may want to consider a longer time-horizon for turnaround schools, or a reidentification process that accounts for some forms of intermediate progress in the prior round and allows for continuity of efforts if schools do not meet their outcome goals.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

Table A1. Partnership Survey Sample and Response Rates for Round 4					
	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)*
Teachers	48.9% (988)	40.3% (2,216)	42.1% (2,878)	47.3% (326)	42.6% (3,204)
Principals	60.2% (62)	44.5% (101)	47.0% (135)	65.1% (28)	49.4% (163)
Total Wave 6	*49.7% (1,058)*	*40.6% (2,328)*	*42.5% (3,032)*	*48.3% (354)*	*43.0% (3,386)*

We also used survey data for reidentified and released Partnership schools from the first four survey waves, which occurred during the prior rounds of the Partnership Model. Survey response rates for those survey waves can be found in the appendix of the Year 4 report on the Partnership Model (Strunk et al., 2022).

APPENDIX B: 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 2023-24 surveys can be found here.

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.

Construct Analysis

In addition to examining item-level descriptives, we also conduct factor analyses to create broader constructs from multiple survey items. In order to make comparisons across years, we draw from items that were asked over multiple survey waves. For these items, we stack teacher and principal responses for all four (or in some cases, two or three) years and conduct exploratory factor analyses on subsets of items intended to capture broader constructs using principal component factors. We determine the number of factors using parallel analysis (Horn, 1965), and use orthogonal varimax rotation to identify the separate factors. Because we are interested in comparing subgroups, we examine factor loadings and internal consistency across populations (i.e., teachers vs. principals, Partnership vs. non-Partnership schools) and survey waves. Ultimately, we adjust to ensure meaningful and coherent factors that have (a) acceptable internal consistency based on Cronbach's alpha, and (b) similar factor loadings across subgroups. Drawing from the exploratory factor analyses, we run confirmatory factor analyses and generate factor scores for each respondent. Table B1 summarizes each construct that was developed in the confirmatory factor analyses.

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.

Table B1. Summary of Constructs				
Constructs	**Items**	**Population**	**Waves**	**Cronbach's Alpha**
School Climate	**Agree/disagree:** school meets students' academic needs, teachers have high expectations for students, teachers have strong rapport with students, school meets students' socioemotional needs, students are enthusiastic to come to school/learn	Teachers, Principals	Waves 1-6	0.76
School Leadership	**Agree/disagree:** works with staff to meet curriculum standards, communicates central mission of school, uses evidence to make data-driven decisions, works with community partners, facilitates professional development, encourages parent engagement, communicates improvement goals and strategies with teachers	Teachers	Waves 1-6	0.94
District Support	**District provides support with:** increased learning time, improved curriculum and instruction, academic interventions, school culture and climate initiatives, teacher professional development programs, teacher retention strategies, teacher recruitment strategies, family/community engagement strategies, student attendance interventions, behavioral interventions, student social-emotional and mental health initiatives, social supports and services for students' basic economic needs, effective budgeting and resource allocation, data use to inform instruction, multi-tiered systems of support, graduation rates	Principals	Waves 5 and 6	0.94

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

We conducted interviews with district leaders in Fall 2023 and Spring 2024. We used a detailed interview protocol with primary and follow-up questions. We used different parts of the interview protocols, or adjusted them, based on the role and area of expertise of the district leader with whom we were speaking. Below, we provide examples of the primary questions we included in our interview protocols.

Fall 2023 Interviews

Human Capital

1. What are your vacancies looking like right now?

2. Have you increased salaries?

3. Did you use financial incentives for recruitment and retention this year?

4. Do you have a grow-your-own program in place?

5. What other recruitment pipelines do you have in place (e.g., with universities)? In what ways have those helped?

6. What are some strategies or activities your district is carrying out to improve teacher working conditions to support retention and recruitment?

7. To what extent are you addressing staffing issues for non-academic positions?

Attendance/Absenteeism

1. What systems do you have set up/are you trying to set up at the district and school levels for attendance?

2. Consider the following three different ways that someone could spend their time trying to improve attendance: communicating with families about their children's attendance and the importance of attendance; using rewards and incentives to encourage students to come to school; or doing case work with individual students/families and connecting them with resources to help them get to school. Which of those three sounds most like what your district's focus is? Can you elaborate?

3. What responsibilities do the school-level personnel have vs. the district-level personnel when it comes to attendance?

4. How would you describe the quality of implementation for attendance practices right now (At the district level? At the school level?)?

5. In your view, what are the main reasons that students miss school in your district? What would you say is behind your district's high absenteeism rates?

Core Curriculum and Instruction in ELA and Math

1. What core curricula are you using for ELA at the elementary, middle, and high school levels? How did you select these programs? And, from your perspective, what are their strengths and any weaknesses?

2. What core curricula are you using for math at the elementary, middle, and high school levels? And, from your perspective, what are their strengths and any weaknesses?

3. In addition to the curriculum selection and adoption, what instructional systems and related organizational infrastructure are you focused on for improvement this year?

4. How are teachers responding to core curricula?

5. What is the role of principals in the implementation of curricula? What are the priorities for how they support curricular implementation?

6. To what extent are you providing professional development on curriculum?

7. In what other ways are district leaders supporting curriculum implementation?

8. How is the district monitoring and evaluating the implementation of these programs?

9. What role is MTSS playing in your efforts related to curriculum and instruction?

For all Focus Areas/Major Initiatives

1. When we talk again in the spring, what are the things you want to be able to say, "we've seen progress on this"?

2. How connected is this effort to the Partnership status specifically?

3. When you're thinking about this focus area, what support are you getting from:

    - MDE or OPD, and Partnership Agreement liaisons (PALs) specifically
    - ISD
    - Any other sources of support?

Spring 2024 Interviews

We're going to start by checking in on a few goals you shared with us during our prior interview. You told us you want to see progress related to *[fill in items from prior interviews here]*.

Implementation Progress in Focus Areas/for Major Initiatives

1. How far along are you with implementation of these goals? Would you say you are still in development, at the initial implementation, or full implementation?

2. What factors have shaped the extent of your progress so far? What has enabled success for this initiative?

3. How have you modified the initiative or your plan for implementing it, if at all?

4. Are you feeling positive, negative, or neutral about this initiative so far? Please explain.

Relationship With OPD and ISD

1. In what ways have you worked with OPD or your PAL over the past few months? And your ISD?

2. Can you provide a specific example of a way that OPD or your PAL has helped you? And for your ISD?

3. How frequently do you interact with your PAL or someone else from OPD? With your ISD?

4. Is there anything you'd want to change about the way you work with OPD or your PAL, or the support they provide? And what about with your ISD?

APPENDIX D: BASELINE CHARACTERISTICS FOR SCHOOLS IN ADMINISTRATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Table D1. School-Level Descriptive Statistics by Partnership Identification Status			
Items	**Round 4 Partnership Schools**	**Non-Partnership CSI Schools**	**All Other Schools**
Enrollment (number of students)	402.862 (281.699)	442.197 (498.175)	430.417 (328.025)
Economically disadvantaged	0.899 (0.103)	0.792 (0.153)	0.571 (0.246)
English learner	0.043 (0.110)	0.079 (0.157)	0.064 (0.128)
Special education	0.163 (0.061)	0.159 (0.087)	0.187 (0.197)
Black	0.780 (0.256)	0.415 (0.344)	0.153 (0.251)
Hispanic or Latino	0.058 (0.097)	0.096 (0.132)	0.085 (0.117)
Asian	0.008 (0.025)	0.012 (0.032)	0.028 (0.069)
Other race	0.047 (0.051)	0.058 (0.048)	0.057 (0.059)
White	0.108 (0.174)	0.419 (0.313)	0.677 (0.283)
Charter	0.314 (0.465)	0.273 (0.446)	0.095 (0.293)

Note: School-year descriptive statistics for schools that were identified as Partnership (for Cohort 3, regardless of prior Partnership status), non-Partnership CSI schools, and all other schools in the state. This panel of schools includes all schools between the years 2017-18 and 2022-23. Schools are maintained within their respective grouping across the entire panel, so, in other words, schools do not drop out of their grouping for different years.