



RESEARCH REPORT

# Examining Implementation of the West Michigan Teacher Collaborative: A Grow Your Own Initiative

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## DISCLAIMER

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Hayley Weddle, Jennifer Moriarty, and Katie Shanahan

## Executive Summary

Like many other states, Michigan is experiencing teacher shortages and has recently invested in Grow Your Own teacher preparation initiatives to improve the teacher supply (Moriarty et al., 2025). Representing one such initiative, West Michigan Teacher Collaborative (WMTC) aims to prepare and retain the next generation of excellent teachers. To understand the implementation of WMTC, researchers from the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) interviewed 22 WMTC members and 19 program leads and partners, including leaders from the Michigan Department of Education, leaders at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), and district and school leaders.

Key successes of the initiative include:

**Support for WMTC's mission and design provided a strong foundation for preparing and retaining high-quality educators in the region.**

Teacher candidates and program partners described clear alignment between the program's mission and actions. Alongside the emphasis on high-quality preparation, district and school leaders appreciated that WMTC's program design allowed members to remain employed in their schools while pursuing their credentials. Further, the comprehensiveness of WMTC's approach ensured that teacher candidates were ready to teach relevant content and build meaningful relationships with students and families.

**Reduced financial barriers enabled WMTC candidates to pursue and complete their credentials.**

Teacher candidates, program leaders, and partners strongly emphasized the value of financial support provided by the program, which included tuition coverage and a stipend in addition to members' district-provided staff wages. Many members described financial support as the reason that they applied to WMTC, sharing that otherwise they would not have been able to pursue their teaching certification.

**Teacher candidates benefited from a network of support spanning WMTC, GVSU, and their districts.**

Several leaders noted the importance and uniqueness of WMTC's partnership with GVSU, including that the program was developed with input from university leaders. Teacher candidates benefited from WMTC-led capacity building that modeled best practices, as well as influential support from mentor teachers at their school sites.

**Strong relationships within cohorts created additional layers of support and accountability among members.**

Program leaders and teacher candidates noted the benefits of WMTC's cohort model. Members frequently mentioned the relationships they developed with their cohorts, and many described building lasting friendships. For many members, their cohort was a significant source of accountability while balancing coursework with their work in schools.

**Responsive and consistent communication from WMTC leadership fostered trust and clarified expectations with candidates and partners.**

WMTC's efforts to expand the teacher pipeline and improve students' access to excellent teachers required close partnership and responsive communication with districts and schools. Teacher candidates commonly referenced strong communication from program leaders as a primary reason for their confidence in the program.

**Initial program successes set the stage for ongoing improvements in the teacher pipeline.**

Illustrating the importance of WMTC, several interviewees noted the need for continued GYO programming to address educator shortages across the region. Demonstrating the strong foundation for continued effect, leaders and partners identified several expansion areas, such as continuing to recruit new teacher candidates for high shortage areas, further diversifying the candidate pool, and expanding partnerships with other nonprofits, businesses, and community organizations.

Interviews also revealed challenges related to program launch and scaling, such as:

**MTTC teacher licensing exams caused stress for members, sometimes creating an additional barrier to earning teacher certification.**

The most common challenge identified in interviews with teacher candidates was passing the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTCC). While experiences varied, many candidates reported feeling unprepared for the exams and expressed a desire for more comprehensive support. Leaders echoed these concerns, noting that some candidates were unable to pass the required certification tests.

**In some cases, misalignment between candidates' pathways and local hiring needs led to challenges securing employment.**

Many leaders mentioned the difficulty of aligning the WMTC program with distinct district-level hiring needs, particularly in severe shortage areas. Because some WMTC members pursued credentials in areas that were not aligned with local hiring needs, or were placed in schools with little turnover, they were surprised about the competitiveness of available positions and shared disappointment in not being hired by their current district in the credential area they pursued.

**Members' experiences with coursework, capacity-building, and mentor teachers varied, with some describing insufficient preparation or support.**

Concerns related to coursework were often specific to teacher candidates' program pathways. All pre-residents mentioned some challenges related to their coursework, expressing a desire for more structured learning opportunities. Residents pursuing special education credentials faced unique challenges as their coursework was more extended than they anticipated. Some residents had challenging experiences with their mentor teachers due to communication differences, unclear expectations, or negative attitudes toward the participant.

**For some members, balancing the expectations of the WMTC program with full-time work requirements was challenging alongside personal responsibilities.**

Some members described challenges meeting fast-paced coursework requirements, particularly those that were 6-week courses. Others struggled to meet instructional hour requirements for teacher certification. Finally, it was challenging for the WMTC program to meet the extent of members' needs including food insecurity, homelessness, health issues, and immigration-related issues.

**Leads and partners navigated multiple priorities and capacity constraints as they launched the initiative.**

Reflecting on the complexities of launching a new initiative, many leads and partners described bureaucratic challenges, particularly related to paying expenses. Additionally, program and district leaders described some communication challenges across organizations in the first year. Finally, capacity constraints meant that the new initiative was supported by relatively small teams at the program and state levels.

The successes and challenges above have important implications for GYO efforts within and beyond Michigan. Findings reflect the need for (1) communication and collaboration across organizations to promote coherence and align teacher candidates' pathways with local-level needs; (2) robust support networks to address financial barriers for prospective teachers, build capacity, and develop lasting community; (3) coupling relevant coursework with structured practical experiences to ensure candidates are well-prepared for the complex work of teaching; and (4) sustained investment in GYO programs to continue improving the teacher pipeline and, subsequently, students' access to excellent teachers.

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## Section One: Introduction

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Across the country, Grow Your Own initiatives are becoming an increasingly popular approach for bolstering the educator workforce (Garcia, 2020; Gist, 2022). Grow Your Own is an umbrella term describing efforts to recruit and support individuals from local communities to become teachers and work in their home contexts (Sanderson Edwards, & Kraft, 2025). While such approaches are a promising strategy for addressing pervasive educator shortages and diversifying the teacher workforce, research on implementation is limited. Addressing this gap is important, as evidence of effective GYO implementation can expand students' access to well-prepared teachers.

### PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

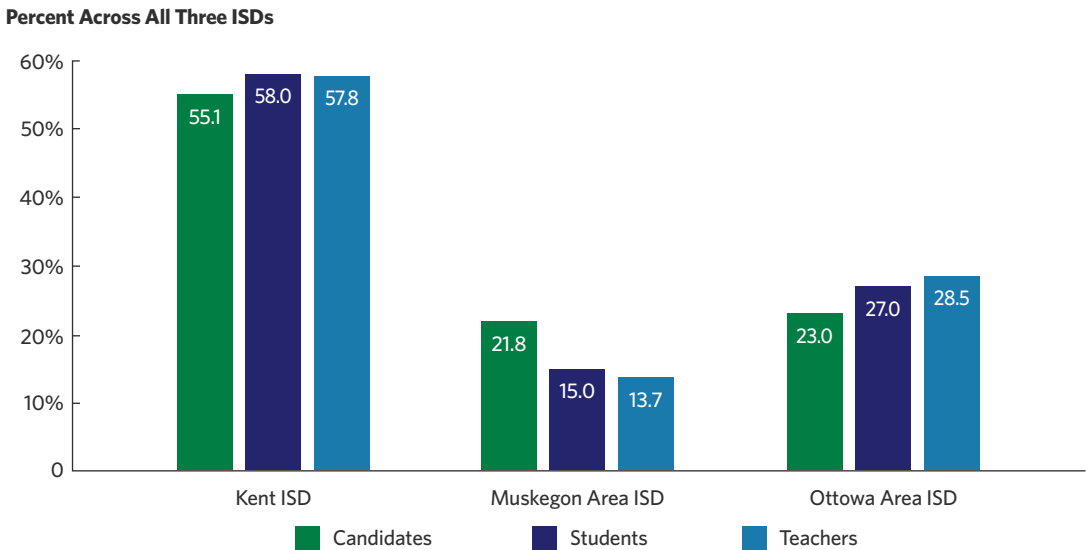
This qualitative report is part of a broader mixed-methods study examining the implementation of a large GYO program in Michigan, the West Michigan Teacher Collaborative (WMTC). Like many other states, Michigan is experiencing teacher shortages and has recently invested in innovative solutions to improve the teacher supply (Moriarty et al., 2025). Representing one such solution, WMTC aims to prepare and retain the next generation of excellent teachers. WMTC is now in its second year of operation across three intermediate school districts, encompassing 40 total local school districts in West Michigan. The purpose of this qualitative report is to outline successes and challenges of program implementation as well as considerations for improvement. These considerations are designed to support WMTC leaders and partners with their continued work, as well as to inform the broader field about promising approaches for addressing teacher shortages.

## ABOUT WMTC

WMTC is a consortium of three intermediate school districts (ISDs) in West Michigan which seeks to collectively address persistent local teacher staffing problems. Kent ISD represents most school districts in the greater Grand Rapids area, while Muskegon Area and Ottawa Area ISDs represent more suburban, town, and rural districts to the northwest and west of greater Grand Rapids, respectively. As reflected in Figure 1.1 below, 55% of WMTC members are in Kent ISD, 22% in Muskegon, and 23% in Ottawa. Across the three ISDs, WMTC aims to address shortages of teachers with appropriate credentials and of teachers who reflect the demographic characteristics of students in this region. Figure 1.2 compares the share of WMTC members with students and teachers from the participating ISDs across geographic locale, gender, and race and ethnicity.

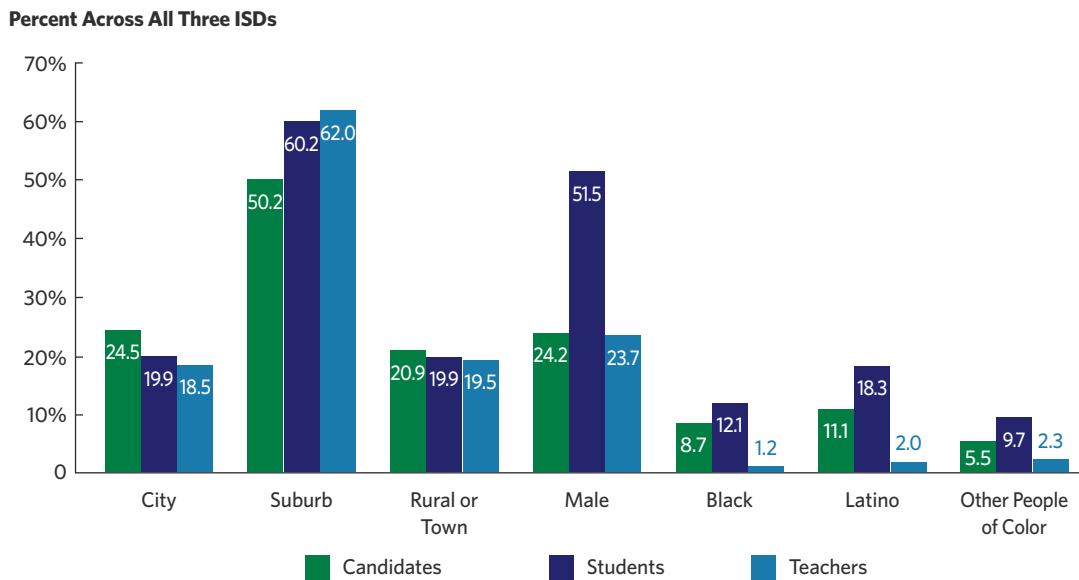
The WMTC program is a GYO model of recruiting new teachers from existing non-certified school staff, as well as increasing the capacity of already-certified teachers by earning additional teaching endorsements. As reflected in the Theory of Change included in this report, WMTC’s GYO model relies on three mechanisms to expand and diversify the teacher workforce: collaborating with local district leaders, reducing barriers for members to earn teacher certification, and providing robust support networks for members.

**FIGURE 1.1. Share of WMTC Candidates, Students, and Teachers Across All Participating ISDs**



*Notes: Counts include WMTC candidates in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, as of April 2025. Student and teacher counts are from the 2024-25 school year and reflect their percentages from the three ISDs that are situated within each. “Teachers” include anyone actively employed in a teaching assignment and does not include virtual teachers. “Students” include students in traditional public schools, charter schools, and state-run schools within each ISD.*

**FIGURE 1.2. Share of WMTC Candidates, Students, and Teachers Across the Three Participating ISDs, by Demographic Subgroup**

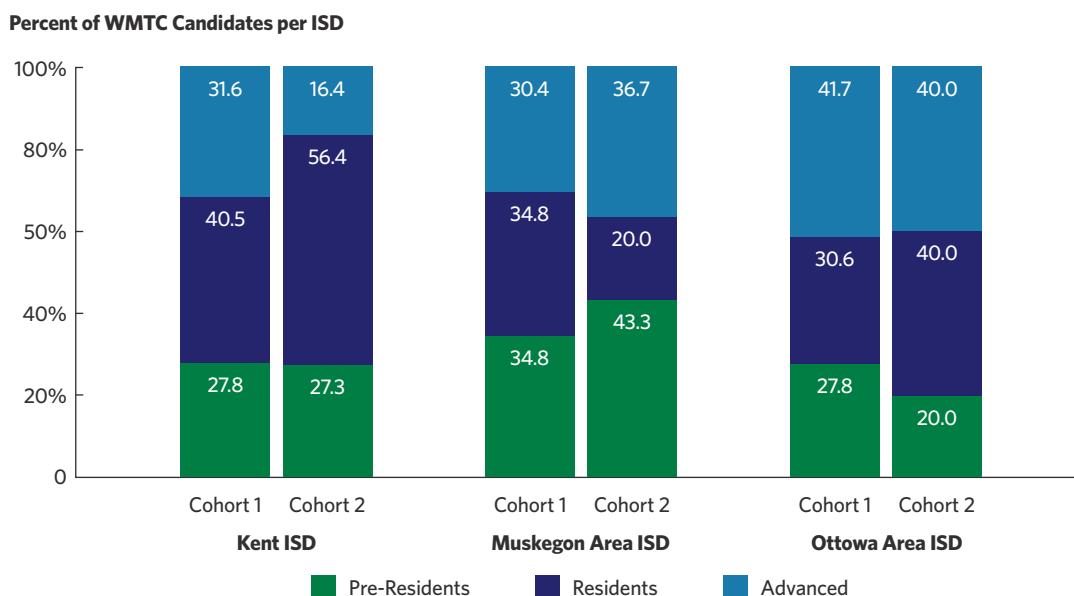


Notes: Counts and demographic data for WMTC candidates represent members in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, as of April 2025. Student and teacher counts and demographic data are from the 2024-25 school year. “Teachers” include anyone actively employed in a teaching assignment and does not include virtual teachers. “Students” includes students in traditional public schools, charter schools, and state-run schools within each ISD. Due to low counts of WMTC candidates and teachers in race and ethnicity groups other than Black and Latino, individual percentages for those groups are not shown to protect anonymity.

WMTC seeks to address the range of hiring needs in districts across the three participating ISDs through close collaboration with local leaders who inform the recruitment and selection of teacher candidates into the training program. WMTC organizes candidates into pre-residents, residents, and advanced groups:

- Pre-residents still need to complete their bachelor’s degree, which they are able to do through an Integrative Studies program at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), WMTC’s sole teacher preparation partner. Once pre-residents have earned their bachelor’s degree, they join other not-yet-certified teacher candidates as residents.
- Residents work over the course of one school year to earn their teaching certificate through GVSU’s Grow Your Own Graduate Teacher Certification program in an elementary or secondary track, or for two years if pursuing special education certification. Residents are employed as staff in a West Michigan classroom under the guidance of a mentor teacher.
- Advanced candidates continue working in a participating school district as a certified teacher while simultaneously taking master’s-level courses to earn an additional teaching endorsement through GVSU.

Below, Figure 1.3 depicts the percentage of members in each WMTC program track (pre-resident, resident, and advanced) for each ISD.

**FIGURE 1.3. WMTC Candidate Tracks, by ISD**

*Note: Shares of WMTC candidates reflect percentages within each track as of April 2025.*

WMTC's program, including coursework through GVSU, reduces barriers to the teaching profession by covering financial costs for members. Neither pre-residents, residents, nor advanced candidates pay out of pocket for their educational expenses, including tuition, books, and course fees. In addition to covering educational expenses, WMTC offers a \$20,000 stipend to resident candidates who are working full-time as paraprofessionals, substitutes, or aides while simultaneously working toward initial teacher certification. Because residents are working full-time at relatively low wages compared to certified teachers, the stipend is intended to support candidates while they complete the time-intensive accelerated certification program and prevent the need for residents to work a second job.

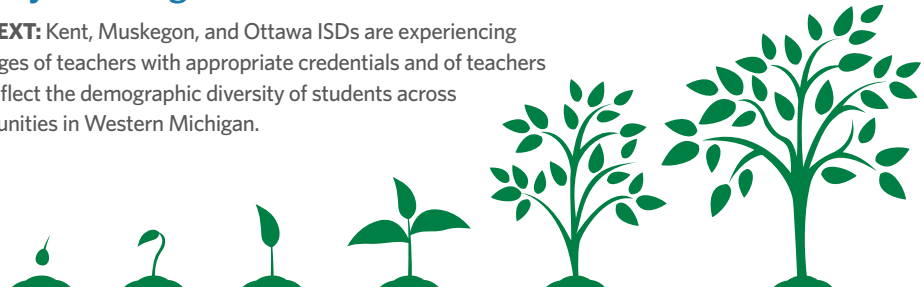
Members are part of a cohort, a group of peers accepted into the program during the same year. WMTC intentionally creates time for cohort bonding and community-building during monthly in-person meetings and ongoing online communication. The program delivers its own professional development during its in-person "cohort days," when candidates come together for and have dedicated space to build community with dedicated time to strengthen relationships with their cohort peers across all three ISDs. Candidates' support networks are further bolstered by GVSU personnel, including academic advisors and clinical supervisors, as well as district and school partners such as mentor teachers, grade-level teacher teams, and school administrators. In addition, WMTC offers increasing levels of targeted assistance for candidates who are struggling to meet academic or professional expectations. This may include additional check-ins or closer monitoring of candidate progress.

Through intentional selection of members and implementation of the supports outlined in this report, WMTC seeks to develop teachers who earn high-need certifications, reflect the demographic characteristics of their communities, and are desirable candidates for employment in their local districts. Through continuing refinement of the program, WMTC seeks to be a model of high-quality teacher preparation that can meet localized needs in ways that existing systems do not. WMTC's main activities and goals are summarized below in a Theory of Change.



## West Michigan Teacher Collaborative (WMTC) Theory of Change

**CONTEXT:** Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa ISDs are experiencing shortages of teachers with appropriate credentials and of teachers who reflect the demographic diversity of students across communities in Western Michigan.



### GR0W YOUR OWN

Community-based, locally representative teacher recruitment and training



### WMTC Program Objectives

#### Address Local Needs

- Evaluate diverse staffing needs of school districts
- Select participants with input from local leaders to participate in:
  - Pathway to complete a bachelor's degree
  - Residency pathways for elementary, secondary, and special education
  - Advanced degree pathways for current teachers

#### Reduce Barriers and Raise Standards

- No-cost pathway to certification
- Rigorous preparation through GVSU- and WMTC-provided capacity building, with a focus on developing excellent teachers
- Stipend in addition to district employment wage

#### Establish Support Network

- Cohort model in which participants establish strong connections with peers
- GVSU academic advisors and clinical supervisors
- Mentor teachers at placement site
- WMTC-led activities, professional development, and coaching
- Varied program support levels

### Short-Term Outcomes

Candidates complete WMTC and GVSU requirements with no disparities across race, age, gender, language, first-gen status, etc.

District leaders:

- Are satisfied with WMTC program
- View WMTC teacher candidates as competitive applicants

Increased supply of teachers who:

- Possess high-needs credentials
- Are representative of the students and communities they serve

### Intermediate Outcomes

Newly certified teachers are hired in a WMTC district

Teacher workforce more closely mirrors the diversity of students

WMTC teachers have a network of support

WMTC teachers foster student learning & contribute positively to school community

### Long-Term Outcomes

Districts have stable & sufficient supply of well-prepared teachers

Retention of diverse and community-based teachers

Improved student outcomes (academic, social, behavioral)

WMTC model is replicated in other regions in Michigan

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## Section Two: Methods

### DATA COLLECTION

During summer 2025, the qualitative research team collected data from participants, program leaders, and key partners as part of our evaluation of WMTC’s program implementation. As outlined in Table 2.1 below, we conducted 22 interviews with teacher candidates across WMTC’s three program tracks, as well as 19 program leads and partners including higher education professionals at GVSU, leaders in the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), and district and school-level leaders who supported or hired WMTC participants, for a total of 41 interviews.

<b>Role</b>	<b>Number of Interview Participants</b>
Pre-resident track members	5
Resident track members	12
Advanced track members	5
WMTC program leads and staff	5
GVSU partners	4
MDE leaders	2
ISD and district-level leaders	4
School-level leaders	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>

Interviewees were purposively selected to participate in this research. All WMTC program leaders and staff participated in interviews and collaborated with the research team to identify additional program-level partners (e.g., GVSU leaders, MDE staff, and ISD collaborators). The research team then selected participants across WMTC’s three program tracks (pre-resident, resident, and advanced) with the goal of generating a diverse sample across identity characteristics (e.g., age,

race, gender, etc.) and credential areas. All WMTC members who participated in an interview were from the first cohort, which began the program in summer 2024. The confidential interviews took place in summer 2025 and focused on participants' experiences navigating implementation of the WMTC program from the launch to the present. Depending on their track and individual progress, some participants had completed certification, while others were continuing in the WMTC program. Interview questions prompted participants to reflect on their perceptions of WMTC's goals, barriers to entering the teaching profession, and successes and challenges related to key program features. For example, members were asked to reflect on experiences with GVSU coursework, WMTC-led capacity building, support from mentor teachers, the MTTC licensure tests, and job-search support. Interviews were semi-structured so each conversation was tailored to the participant and their role.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis began with thematic coding (Miles et al., 2019) using a set of codes aligned with the literature on teacher shortages and implementation (e.g., supports, barriers, and school context). We created analytic matrices to document implementation successes and challenges described by each interview participant. Finally, the research team engaged in ongoing analytic discussions to refine our assertions, helping to promote the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

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## Section Three: Findings

### IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESSES

Reflections across interviews revealed six successes of WMTC program implementation: 1) widespread support for WMTC’s mission and design; 2) reduced financial barriers that enabled WMTC teacher candidates to earn their credentials; 3) robust networks of preparation and support spanning WMTC, GVSU, and districts; 4) strong relationships within cohorts that provided support and accountability; 5) responsive and consistent communication from WMTC leadership to foster trust and clear expectations and; 6) building a strong foundation for ongoing improvements to the teacher workforce.

**Support for WMTC’s mission and design provided a strong foundation for preparing and retaining high-quality educators in the region.**

Across all interviews, teacher candidates and program partners appreciated the importance of the mission of WMTC and felt there was clear alignment between the program’s mission and actions. Many leaders noted the importance of WMTC being a “collaborative” and “community-based” approach, connecting multiple organizations across the region. A district leader explained, “[WMTC] understands what it is we are doing on a daily basis here in this three-county area.” Others praised the program for focusing on high quality preparation, as opposed to solely increasing the number of certified teachers. A WMTC leader explained:

*We are setting out to address a greater need than just our community, but we are specifically addressing it in our community. [In] these three counties, there is a shortage of teachers in our school systems or even certified positions. So we have people who are in those roles, but they are under a temporary or emergency certification. And so we want to make sure all students have access to highly trained and highly qualified teachers and that this is not a privilege in some places, but a right that students have.*

Aligning with this perspective, teacher candidates and program partners shared reflections on program quality. A resident shared, “I think they did a great job preparing us to teach students of all backgrounds, and to also encourage that relationship-centered approach, where you build the students’ trust, and focus on them and their needs.”

Alongside the program’s emphasis on high-quality preparation, district and school leaders appreciated that WMTC’s program design allowed participants to remain employed in their schools while pursuing their credentials. This was especially important given that many schools were experiencing educator shortages. Leaders and WMTC members appreciated how the WMTC program ultimately produced competitive applicants for vacant roles, with several leaders sharing examples of hiring or planning to hire WMTC program alums. Reflecting on the quality of the preparation they received in alignment with hiring needs, a resident explained:

*My district has told me when I’m done and I have my cert, if there’s an opening and I’m qualified for it—I am going to have a job. That is not just because of getting my degree, but [because] they have seen my work. They have seen what I do, they have seen how I can handle a classroom. They have seen how I interact with students, how I interact with parents—they have been seeing that all the way through.*

For this participant and many others, the comprehensiveness of WMTC’s preparation, including its partnerships with GVSU and districts, helped ensure that teacher candidates were ready not only to teach relevant content but to build meaningful relationships with students and families. This community-centered approach aligned well with district and school leaders’ expectations for prospective teachers, reflecting the strength of WMTC’s mission and design.

**Reduced financial barriers made it possible for WMTC candidates to pursue and complete their credentials.**

Teacher candidates, program leaders, and partners strongly emphasized the value of program-provided financial support, which included tuition coverage and a stipend in addition to members’ district-provided wages. Many members described financial support as the reason that they applied to WMTC, sharing that they would not have been able to pursue teacher certification otherwise. Reflecting on the power of removing financial barriers to the profession, a participant shared, “One thing [WMTC] should be proud of: they are helping people fulfill their dream.” Similarly, others shared that, the WMTC financial support alleviated stress and allowed them to focus more fully on their studies and daily work in schools.

Many members shared a sense of relief that they would not have student loan debt after completing the program, which one participant described as a “blessing.” Another member noted, “I think once a week how grateful I am that [WMTC] exists.” Members mentioned that the additional stipend made it possible to meet their family and professional obligations without needing another job. Importantly, members also talked about how becoming a credentialed teacher supported economic mobility. One teacher candidate described how becoming a teacher would “drastically improve” their financial future. They went on to explain that the tuition coverage and ability to continue earning their regular employment wage during the program meant that they could continue to pay bills while pursuing their career goals.

**Teacher candidates benefited from a network of support spanning WMTC, GVSU, and their districts.**

Across almost all conversations, interview participants identified the network of support for teacher candidates as a success of program implementation. For example, several leaders noted the importance and uniqueness of WMTC’s partnership with GVSU, including that the program was developed with input from university leaders. Additionally, several teacher candidates named GVSU

coursework, professors, and clinical supervisors as key supports during the program. Reflecting on their GVSU supervisor, one participant shared that they provided *“consistent frameworks and specific feedback”* to support them with improving their instruction. Other participants shared examples of drawing on GVSU coursework in their professional roles, with one resident explaining that content from their coursework inspired them to *“try things in real time”* at their school site.

Alongside GVSU coursework, teacher candidates benefited from WMTC-led capacity building that modeled best practices. Members shared many examples of benefitting from monthly WMTC professional learning “cohort days,” with one noting that these meetings are *“where you learn to be a teacher.”* Program leaders and teacher candidates noted the importance of applied skills and research-based methods taught during these sessions, such as differentiation, scaffolding, and lesson planning. Members noted the applicability of the content to their own school roles, with several describing the cohort days as modeling engaged teaching and collaboration with colleagues. A resident candidate described WMTC capacity building as:

*Experiencing what it is like to be a student again, and what it should feel like between us and our cohort is what we want to embody in our classroom. [...] We got constant opportunities to talk with each other about our own experiences and our own ideas about our content, and how we’re going to apply that in our work. It is hugely helpful, and that is the kind of work that you want to do when you’re a teacher with your colleagues.*

Candidates and leaders highlighted the networking opportunities provided during cohort days as a standout feature, noting that visits from superintendents, authors, and education leaders from other states were particularly meaningful. Several candidates noted how leaders cultivated a safe space during cohort days, where they felt comfortable asking questions and being vulnerable. Finally, many teacher candidates appreciated the explicit focus on promoting equity and meeting the needs of all students.

Many interview participants discussed the important roles districts and schools played as WMTC partners, which rounded out the network of support. Beyond providing employment opportunities for current program participants, districts offered influential support through mentor teachers, who provided practical experience and feedback. One resident explained that they had frequent opportunities to lead-teach and engage in collaborative planning with their mentor. Another mentioned staying in touch even after being hired in another district. Some teacher candidates shared examples of collaborating with their mentor teachers to adapt content and strategies from their coursework to better support the students in their classroom. Reflecting on collaboration with their mentor teacher, one resident explained, *“we have actually implemented some things that I’ve learned this year into our classroom, and they have really gone well.”*

### **Strong relationships within cohorts created additional layers of support and accountability among members.**

Beyond the supports outlined above, program leaders and teacher candidates noted the benefits of WMTC’s cohort model. Members frequently mentioned the relationships they developed with their cohorts, and many described building lasting friendships. Others described gratitude for peers to turn to for support as they encountered *“struggles”* in their professional roles. Some residents appreciated the social community-building days hosted by WMTC, such as going to a baseball game with their families. Reflecting on the value of these relationships, one resident shared:

*Not only did I have the mentors, but we also have our little cohort. We have a group chat—any questions, we were there for one another. We are helping everyone. I never felt like I was alone, and I heard from the other students that it is one blessing we gained, that we had one another always helping and pushing each other.*

Aligning with the perspective above, several members mentioned the group chat as a helpful place to ask questions, share resources, and receive encouragement. For many members, their cohort was a significant source of accountability while balancing coursework and working in schools.

Reflecting on the value of the cohort model, a program leader suggested that the strength of relationships could contribute to high overall retention within WMTC. This leader viewed the cohort as a lasting form of support for WMTC members, explaining, “*This is not for just while you are in this program [...] we are building a community.*” In this sense, the cohort model was both a program feature and a potentially lasting outcome of participation.

**Responsive and consistent communication from WMTC leadership promoted trust and clear expectations with candidates and partners.**

Members commonly referenced direct and prompt communication from program leaders as a primary reason for their confidence in the program. Members mentioned that strong communication practices eased their mental load considerably, and one participant noted that WMTC leaders made them feel valued as an individual, and “*not just a number on a list.*” Several specifically appreciated the role of leaders in keeping them accountable and organized as they pursued certification and providing ongoing encouragement. Reflecting widespread trust in program leadership, a teacher candidate explained, “[WMTC leaders] *don’t just say and not do, they actually do.*” Another resident explained:

*Seeing the teamwork that the (WMTC) team has put in, always making everybody feel included, like, ‘we are working on this, here is what we are doing’—it makes me want to be like that as an adult and as an educator. I want everybody to be involved, I want to overshare, I want to make sure that everybody’s anxieties are always eased. [...] I want to bring that into a 5th grade class now and be like, ‘when you walk in this room, all you have to worry about is learning.’ They did that for us.*

For this teacher candidate and many others, support from WMTC leadership both supported their program completion and provided a model for responsiveness.

Program partners across higher education and local districts and schools appreciated the consistent and collaborative communication by WMTC leadership. Reflecting on the responsiveness of the partnership, one leader noted, “*they are listening.*” District leaders felt confident that WMTC leadership would be accessible and communicative if there were future issues. One district partner described their collaborative problem-solving process with WMTC as, “*we get together and say, under what conditions can this happen?*” Importantly, WMTC leadership viewed partnership and responsive communication as key to implementation. A WMTC leader explained:

*District leaders being satisfied with the WMTC partnership and program is really important as a short-term outcome, because if they don’t buy into this, and if we don’t [do well with] who we are sending into their buildings or how we are partnering with and listening to them, this gets shut down.*

As reflected above, WMTC's efforts to expand the teacher pipeline and improve students' access to excellent teachers required close partnership with and responsiveness to local districts and schools.

### **Initial program successes set the stage for ongoing improvements in the teacher pipeline.**

Several interviewees illustrated the importance of WMTC by noting the need for continued GYO programming to address regional educator shortage. Demonstrating the strong foundation for continued impact, WMTC leaders and partners identified several exciting growth areas. One program lead noted the importance of continuing to recruit teacher candidates for high-shortage areas such as secondary science and math, English learner education, and dual-language programs supported by Spanish-speaking teachers. Leaders discussed further diversifying the candidate pool and expanding partnerships with other nonprofits, businesses, and community organizations. Reflecting on the power of such partnerships, a WMTC program leader explained, "*[Community business partner is] pouring into our people because they believe in this program and the people who have been called to be a teacher.*"

Program leads and partners shared plans to expand existing WMTC structures and supports to further improve the program. For example, WMTC plans to formalize support for program graduates who are now serving as first-year teachers. Such work may be critical for retention. A WMTC leader made connections to research that illustrates the many challenges new teachers experience and explained, "*we want to ensure that the people who are going through our program are high quality teachers, and they stay in the profession.*" Additionally, WMTC leaders are deepening their engagement with mentor teachers to ensure all residents have access to high quality practical models and support as they complete the program.

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

While perspectives shared during interviews were very positive overall, participants did share challenges related to implementation of such a large and innovative change effort. These challenges included: 1) MTTC teacher licensing exams as a barrier to earning teacher certification; 2) occasional misalignment between candidates' pathways and local hiring needs, leading to job-search challenges; 3) varied experiences for some teacher candidates with coursework, capacity-building, and support from mentor teachers; 4) difficulties balancing the expectations of the WMTC program and GVSU coursework alongside full-time work requirements; and 5) launching a large initiative across organizations with distinct priorities and constrained capacity.

### **MTTC teacher licensing exams caused stress for members, sometimes creating an additional barrier to earning teacher certification.**

The most cited challenge across interviews with teacher candidates was passing the MTTC. About half of the members mentioned feeling unprepared to take MTTC tests and expressed desire for more comprehensive support. Several leaders mentioned challenges related to MTTC, including some teacher candidates being unable to pass the necessary tests. While WMTC leaders provided additional preparation support (e.g., study groups, test preparation materials, etc.), they also acknowledged the pervasiveness of the challenge.

Challenges related to MTTC varied across members. For some pursuing the elementary track, the number of tests required for their credentials was challenging. For other members, the timing of the test created a barrier. One pre-resident explained, "*To be a secondary teacher and to get into the grad [program], you have to take the [MTTC] first. [...] If you go the secondary route, you're at a*

*pretty big disadvantage.*” Aligning with this perspective, a few residents on the secondary track mentioned that passing their required test before starting their coursework<sup>1</sup> felt like a barrier. For other WMTC members, the expedited information-dense nature of the coursework made it challenging to feel well prepared for MTTC. One resident explained, *“That kind of information is hard to get in one year, and it’s hard to retain, too.”* A few teacher candidates mentioned grappling with test anxiety, with one wondering, *“isn’t there another way we could do this?”* For a small number of members, the timing or number of MTTC tests for particular credentials ultimately informed what pathways they chose. For example, a pre-resident who struggled to pass the MTTC for their desired secondary path switched to the elementary track, explaining, *“you don’t have to pass the test to get into the residency program.”*

**In some cases, misalignment between candidates’ pathways and local hiring needs led to challenges securing employment.**

About half of the partner organization leaders who participated in interviews mentioned the difficulty of aligning the WMTC program with the distinct district-level needs across the region. Respondents mentioned that high-needs certifications were not fully addressed across the region in the first year of implementation. However, they described improvements over time such as closer collaboration between WMTC, district leaders, and school partners in the second year of implementation and beyond. Reflecting on this responsiveness, a district leader described WMTC as committed partners who worked with them to address, *“How do we make this right?”*

Because some WMTC members pursued credentials in areas that were not aligned with local hiring needs, or were placed in schools with little turnover, they were surprised about the competitiveness of positions they applied for. Relatedly, some mentioned disappointment in not being hired by their current district to work as a teacher in the credential area they pursued. One candidate explained, *“It’s been a lot more competitive than I would have expected—just finding a job interview has been really challenging.”* Related to this challenge, a few residents and advanced track members mentioned wanting more support with their job searches, including preparation for interviews.

**Members’ experiences with coursework, capacity building, and mentor teachers varied, with some describing insufficient preparation or support.**

Concerns related to coursework were often specific to teacher candidates’ pathways. All pre-residents who participated in interviews mentioned experiencing some challenges related to their coursework, with several expressing a desire for more structured instructional learning opportunities (e.g., practice lessons) prior to starting their residency. One pre-resident explained, *“They want you to get a bachelor’s as quick as possible. [But] the bachelor’s itself is not set up for being prepared to be a teacher.”* Beyond pre-residents, a few teacher candidates and one program partner raised concerns about whether the coursework fully prepared candidates for the complex realities of teaching, with a few suggesting that more support with lesson planning would be helpful. Others expressed a desire for more in-person or hybrid learning opportunities.

Residents pursuing special education credentials faced unique challenges as their coursework was more extended than WMTC originally communicated to them. All special education-track residents who participated in interviews mentioned disappointment in the change in expectations for the length of their certification program, including frustrations that their stipend was not expanded to accommodate an additional year of working at a lower wage. Of the special education-track members who participated in interviews, some felt *“forgotten”* or *“like afterthoughts”* at cohort days and other WMTC events, and mentioned feeling separated from their peers in other tracks.

Relationships with mentor teachers were another area of variation. As noted in the successes section of this report, many members highlighted and credited their mentor teachers with helping them complete their residency. However, some residents had more challenging experiences with their mentor teachers due to communication differences, unclear expectations, or negative attitudes toward the member. This contrast points to the significant influence mentor teachers have on candidates' overall experiences.

**For some members, balancing the expectations of the WMTC program was challenging alongside full-time work requirements and personal responsibilities.**

While all WMTC members were grateful for the opportunity to earn their regular wages while pursuing their credentials and appreciated the many supports the program provided, some described difficulties balancing participation with other responsibilities. Some members stated that meeting the coursework requirements often meant staying up late or otherwise altering personal or family schedules, which was particularly challenging for caregivers. This was especially relevant for pre-residents, who engaged in fast-paced 6-week courses. Additionally, meeting instructional hour requirements for the teaching certificate was difficult for some residents whose clinical experiences were more complicated. One resident explained that their time was split across multiple classrooms and that they did not have planning time with their mentor. They shared, *"It didn't always feel like I had the full experience. That was frustrating."*

While navigating the time-intensive requirements of the program, several members were experiencing hardships that affected their participation. All district leaders interviewed mentioned that some participating WMTC members were experiencing challenges beyond what the program was prepared to support. Reflecting on the depth and breadth of challenges that members faced, a WMTC program leader explained:

*Part of the work is removing barriers and not just financial, but other barriers as they come up. But we are running into things that we just did not really expect, and we are not best positioned to handle—food insecurity, homelessness, health issues, immigration issues. These are things that are happening to our members and they are coming to us because we say, 'come to us.'*

While WMTC leaders were committed to reducing barriers to high-quality teacher preparation and supporting members as best as they could, some challenges fell outside of what the program was initially designed to address.

**Leads and partners navigated multiple priorities and capacity constraints as they launched the program.**

Reflecting on the complexities of launching a new initiative, many leads and partners described bureaucratic challenges. For example, paying the expenses associated with each participant was challenging given the large number of districts involved in the program and existing rules about whether/how resources could be used. A WMTC leader explained that while there were many benefits of being situated within an ISD (e.g., access to the large ISD leadership team), this also brought challenges. They explained that WMTC functioned similarly to a startup that needed to be *"very agile and move quickly,"* which was sometimes difficult in a large established system.

In addition to challenges navigating bureaucracy, almost all program and district leaders interviewed mentioned some degree of communication challenges in the first year. For example,

much of the initial collaboration and communication about candidate and mentor selection was at the ISD and district levels, with principals being less included in early discussions. Recognizing the important roles school leaders play in supporting WMTC implementation, particularly for residents, WMTC leaders made several changes in year two to better collaborate with district and school-level leaders, including more regular meetings. Reflecting on the importance of these touchpoints, a local-level leader explained, “[WMTC leaders] are trying to be solution oriented and hear from the people that are the boots on the ground that have to make it work.”

Further illustrating the importance of coherence across organizations, some program leads and partners discussed the need for strong alignment across WMTC and GVSU. Reflecting on the need to ensure members received cohesive information and training across the two organizations, a WMTC leader wondered, “are we talking about education in the same way?” Several leaders reflected on the need for shared vision and programming about high-quality teaching, as well as a deep understanding of requirements. One leader described “learning as we go” during the first year of implementation, including the essential features of field placements and what can count as required hours for residents to earn their credentials.

The small team of WMTC leaders meant that each team member took on a range of duties to support program implementation. Some leaders mentioned challenges in offering the necessary level of differentiation for individual members, ensuring role alignment and compensation, supporting members who were accepted into the certification program at GVSU and were successfully navigating coursework, and partnering with districts and GVSU GYO leaders to secure required teaching hours and access to high-quality mentors. Reflecting on the extensive work of WMTC, a pre-resident noted, “I think the ratio of staff to the amount of work they have is very imbalanced.” Importantly, these capacity constraints were not unique to the WMTC team as partners across organizations described similar challenges. State leaders acknowledged that staffing at the state level was similarly stretched, and that a small team was responsible for supporting new GYO initiatives.

## SECTION THREE NOTES

1. In Michigan, a secondary content major is typically required for secondary certification. However, GVSU received approval of an expedited/experimental secondary program that allows for waiving R 390.1123(1)(c) of the Teacher Certification Code. This allows candidates with any earned bachelor’s degree and demonstrated proficiency (via the MTTC) of appropriate Michigan teacher preparation standards to complete professional coursework to earn a Standard Teaching Certificate in secondary level discipline areas. Participants in this experimental/expedited program thus take the MTTC before beginning coursework.

## 04

## Section Four: Implications

The successes and challenges included in this report highlight the benefits and complexities of implementing new teacher shortage initiatives. In this section, we offer implications for GYO efforts within and beyond Michigan.

**Communication and collaboration across organizations are vital to promote coherence and align candidates' pathways with local-level needs.**

WMTC's consortium model offers a promising structure that distributes responsibility across the region rather than relying on one district or institution. Members, leaders, and partners recognized the advantages of this approach, describing WMTC as community-based and collaborative, and saw alignment between the program's mission and its implementation. District and school leaders valued having high-quality candidates remain employed while earning credentials, and some had already hired or planned to hire WMTC graduates.

At the same time, findings indicate the complexities of a multi-organization partnership. Challenges included bureaucracies related to paying expenses, limited initial collaboration with school-level leaders, and, in some cases, mismatches between candidate pathways and district hiring needs. Strengthening shared systems and routines for collaboration can ensure that candidates receive clear, cohesive information, and that preparation aligns with the realities of teaching. Such alignment is essential to ensuring cross-system collaboration. Perhaps most importantly, ongoing collaboration across systems with clear feedback channels can ensure GYO candidate pathways align with local hiring needs, helping to address pressing shortages.

**Robust support networks are needed to address financial barriers for prospective teachers, build capacity, and develop lasting community.**

Members overwhelmingly reported that financial support made participation possible. Tuition coverage and a stipend, in addition to their district-provided wages, removed key financial barriers, which reduced stress and enabled members to focus on learning rather than taking on additional employment. Members expressed deep gratitude and saw this support as *life-changing* with some describing how financial relief allowed them to provide for themselves and their families while progressing toward certification.

Findings make clear that support must extend beyond finances, as WMTC’s relational leadership structure, GVSU coursework, and school-based mentoring played central roles in members’ success. Members described their WMTC cohort as a source of emotional support, accountability, and persistence through challenges, reflecting the important and lasting role of community. While members benefited from these supports, many identified the MTTC as a barrier. Thus, findings suggest that additional licensure exam preparation (e.g., test-prep programming, study groups, tutoring) may be needed within networks of support to fully promote candidates’ success.

**Coupling relevant coursework with structured practical experiences can ensure candidates are well-prepared for the complex work of teaching.**

Residents described frequently applying strategies from GVSU coursework and WMTC professional learning directly in their classrooms and credited these opportunities with helping them grow as educators. However, the quality of these experiences varied across members. All pre-residents majored in integrative studies for their bachelor’s coursework, and some described feeling a bit rushed and wanting more structured opportunities to practice the instructional skills they would later be held accountable for during student teaching and in their full-time role. Thus, GYO candidates may benefit from earlier and more frequent opportunities to practice teaching and engage in lesson planning.

Mentor teachers played a pivotal role in shaping the quality of practical experience, but experiences with mentors were uneven. Many residents shared positive examples of collaboration—being included in lesson planning, receiving feedback, and co-teaching—which made coursework feel relevant and actionable. Others, however, described unclear expectations, lack of communication, or mentors who held negative attitudes toward members. This variation points to the need for intentional mentor selection, training, and ongoing support, as well as protected time for collaboration between residents and mentor teachers (e.g., shared planning periods, structures for feedback, etc.).

**Sustained investment in GYO programs is essential to continue improving the teacher pipeline in Michigan.**

The early successes of WMTC indicate that the program is already affecting the regional workforce. Leaders identified several opportunities to continue growing the program, including further expansion into high-shortage certification areas and new partnerships to diversify the candidate pool. However, findings suggest that scaling and sustaining the program will require long-term financial investment. Program leads and partners described complex issues facing members including housing instability, food insecurity, and immigration challenges—issues that will be essential to address moving forward.

To realize the long-term pipeline effects of GYO initiatives, funders and policymakers must invest in programs that offer robust networks of support. The pause in the pre-residency track in year two reflects that robust GYO programs are resource-intensive: recruiting from community pipelines, supporting working adults, and providing stipends requires sustained investment. This could include dedicated funding streams that cover the full range of GYO program costs (e.g., tuition, stipends, capacity-building, mentorship, MTTC prep, etc.) and multi-year commitments to promote continuity. It may be important to consider resources for cross-organization data systems to track candidate progress, persistence, and employment outcomes over time. Ultimately, sustained investment is needed to recognize that high-quality, community-based teacher preparation is not a short-term initiative, but rather long-term workforce development.

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