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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

MICHAEL F. RICE, Ph.D.
STATE SUPERINTENDENT

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Subject: Response to Partnership Turnaround: Year Three Report

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is grateful that our research partner, Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) continues to conduct an independent evaluation of the Office of Partnership Districts (OPD) regarding the Partnership Model as a turnaround strategy to improve student achievement. Even though the pandemic gripped our nation through the entire 2020/21 school year, there are improved perceptions of Partnership districts and schools as evidenced by the responses from teachers and school leaders.

The Partnership Model is rooted in evidence around what works with low-performing schools. Many of the challenges faced by Partnership districts are large systemic issues that span beyond the education realm, so any solutions require partners, time, and honest conversations about deep-seated changes that are necessary. To do that, we need ongoing evidence while we implement the model.

The MDE is engaged in this independent evaluation because we are committed to using research and evaluation to drive our decision-making and policy implementation efforts. The MDE saw an opportunity to have a transparent and independent process to evaluate our efforts and allow us to improve based on data and evidence as we continued to implement the Partnership Model.

It is in that spirit that we issue this response to the Partnership evaluation. In this response, we will highlight 1) what the MDE finds exciting in the report, 2) what the MDE is working to improve based on the report, and 3) issues that are seen in Partnership districts but that are indicative of larger issues facing the education world in Michigan overall.

What the MDE finds exciting in the Year Three Report

The majority of teachers who responded to the survey perceived their principals to be effective regarding the central mission of the school. The OPD has diligently worked with all Partnership districts and Partnership schools to provide long-range strategic planning and administrative stability. During the first two years of implementation, many Partnership schools had a new principal in place at the beginning of each new school year. Most Partnership schools retained their school leader for the 2020/21 school year, and it is hoped that this pattern continues for the 2021/22 school year.

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Also, it was important to the OPD that almost all Partnership districts reported receiving support from their Intermediate School Districts (ISD) because OPD fully promotes networking between Partnership districts, their ISD, and the OPD.

The MDE was also encouraged that the data show a much greater percent of teachers plan to stay in their same position and same school for the coming school year. Again, the OPD tries to work closely with Partnership districts' school leaders, and in the case of charter schools their management companies, to facilitate principal stability in each school.

What the MDE is Working to Improve

The EPIC report highlighted the MDE's efforts to standardize processes and procedures to streamline the Partnership Model and help districts use the Partnership Agreement and associated planning toward further improvement efforts. As we approach another round of Partnership district identification in the fall of 2022, we are continuing to develop a more standardized process for onboarding the districts to assist them with the development of their plans, and to provide more intensive support for any district that is re-identified as a Partnership district.

It is disappointing that graduation rates in Cohort 1 districts decreased after showing increases during the first two years of their Partnership agreements. This decrease could be linked to health care, housing instability and student attendance issues that faced Partnership districts because of the pandemic.

Additionally, the MDE believes that all Partnership district schools should focus on [Accelerated Learning](#) for the 2021/22 school year. As educators work to define student learning loss or forgone learning because of the pandemic, it is important to stress the concept of accelerated learning over remedial teaching. Also, the MDE and the OPD will work with our Partnership districts to recruit and retain Black teachers and focus on early intervention of literacy skills. Both efforts are in line with MDE's [Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#). In the 2021/22 school year, the Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Process (MICIP) will provide all districts with a whole-child focused tool for assessing needs and creating high-quality plans. This tool will be particularly useful for Partnership districts in developing the kind of plans the Partnership Model encourages, particularly the goals that were determined by each district and included in their Partnership Agreement.

Of course, we need to maintain our focus on student achievement as we work through the pandemic during the 2021/22 school year.

Broader Issues: Again, in the Year Three report, we find one of the greatest challenges facing Partnership districts is human capital—the need to recruit and retain high quality teachers and leaders. The Year Three survey accentuates the issue of the number of long-term substitutes in schools, as well as the dilemma of finding high quality daily substitutes, which absolutely needs to be addressed. These two issues are extremely

important with respect to student achievement. Districts have implemented several strategies to address these persistent recruitment challenges, including working to improve teacher compensation and instituting “Grow Your Own” programs. They have also worked to improve teachers’ working conditions to increase teacher retention. Efforts to this end include improving teacher compensation, removing additional responsibilities from teachers so they can focus on core instruction, working to build trust and a sense of belonging, and focusing on teacher development via instructional coaching and targeted professional development activities. The solution to this problem is found in every layer of our system—not solely within the MDE’s purview. There is a critical role for many stakeholders, such as the legislature, districts, schools, and educator preparation programs, to enhance and strengthen the educator workforce.

The MDE used 21h funds (dollars appropriated to Partnership Districts) to help provide retention bonuses for teachers.

Also, as the survey data indicated, this coming school year, the OPD must assist all Partnership districts with increasing the level of student motivation and parent engagement.

Final Thoughts

The MDE thanks EPIC for its collaboration on this important evaluation and report. We also thank our Partnership districts for participating in the evaluation activities and providing survey and interview data to the research team so that we can collectively work to improve the success of this model.

Questions or comments about Partnership districts should be directed to William Pearson, Director of the Office of Partnership Districts, at pearsonw1@michigan.gov or 248-444-4524.