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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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October 1, 2019

Subject: Response to Partnership Turnaround: Year One Report

When the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) reached out in the fall of 2017 to our strategic research partner, Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) and requested that they embark on an independent evaluation of our newest school and district turnaround strategy, we did so for two important reasons.

The first is that Michigan has been challenged with disparate, disconnected, and constantly changing approaches to helping our lowest performing districts and schools. The causes of this scattershot approach are many—federal policy, state policy, changing leadership, grant program requirements—but the result is that, instead of enacting a research-based policy, evaluating its implementation, and modifying the intervention as needed, we have used a less measured and more reactionary approach. The MDE wanted this effort to be different. The Partnership District model is rooted in evidence around what works with low performing schools—but we also know that there is no “one size fits all” approach to solving the issues facing these districts and schools. Moreover, many of the challenges faced by Partnership Districts are large systemic issues that span beyond the education realm, so any solutions would require partners, time, and honest conversations about deep-seated changes that are necessary. To do that, we needed ongoing evidence while we were implementing the model—instead of waiting to do an “after the fact” analysis when the state had moved on to another approach.

The second reason the MDE engaged in this independent evaluation is that we, as an agency, are committed to using research and evaluation to drive our decision-making and policy implementation efforts. While it is easy to say “data-based decision making” or “evidence-based policy decisions,” it can be much more difficult to actualize. The MDE saw an opportunity to walk the talk—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.

It is in that spirit that we issue this response to the Partnership District evaluation. In this response, we will highlight 1) what MDE finds exciting in the report, 2) what 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.

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What MDE finds exciting in the Year 1 Report

- MDE was encouraged to see modest improvements in test scores. While test scores are far from the only measure of success for students (in Partnership Districts or otherwise), they are an important indicator, and they are also a measure with a high degree of external validity with key stakeholders.
- MDE was also encouraged to see that there appear to be positive impacts on teacher retention in the Partnership Districts.
- Finally, MDE is pleased to see that there is evidence of improved relationships between MDE and the districts, and between the districts and the ISDs. In a coherent education system, it is critical that the various layers of the system work together and are aligned instead of working in opposition. Previous reform efforts had often created negative relationships between MDE and districts, and sometimes created siloes or competing approaches with multiple parties working with the same schools without coherence and alignment.

What MDE is Working to Improve

The MDE acknowledges and concurs with the conclusion in the report that there was differential implementation around the model—plans varied by district, how the district implemented was different and, in general, the partnership district work was impacted by the fact that we were building the model while we were rolling it out. We had leadership change at both the state superintendent level and the School Reform Officer level, as well as within the office. It was an education reform that was rolled out with strong ideas, limited time for planning and opportunities to improve while implementing. In that sense, MDE has been working, and will continue to work, to refine the role of the liaison; the content and structure of partnership district plans; and the expectations of the partnership district model. During this last year, MDE has created new policies and procedures for all Partnership Districts, including a Comprehensive Guide for Partnership Districts that includes information regarding how a district is released from the Partnership Agreement, and has strengthened training and cross-office work so that we speak with one voice and liaisons have the tools necessary for success.

As we approach another round of identification in the next two years, we want to have a more standardized process for onboarding the districts and for helping them develop their plans. Additionally, our work with 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.

Broader Issues: Not Just Partnership Districts but Michigan As a Whole

One of the greatest challenges facing partnership districts is **human capital**—the need to recruit and retain high quality teachers and leaders. We agree wholeheartedly with this finding and the fundamental challenge it presents and have been working with Partnership Districts individually to help them craft innovative solutions, such as “grow your own” teacher programs. However, we know two additional things:

- This is not a challenge faced only by partnership districts; it is a challenge facing Michigan as a state.

- The solution to this problem is found in every layer of our system—not solely within 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.

MDE intends to continue to work on addressing the challenges in the educator workforce system and escalating our efforts, particularly in the areas of recognition, recruitment, and retention. Moreover, we need to define teacher shortage by the extent to which we can adequately staff our most struggling districts with high-quality, well-supported, and trained educators. In some cases, our Partnership Districts are “celebrating” having “only” a few vacancies. However, until and unless our partnership districts are fully staffed, we still have a teacher shortage in Michigan.

Final Thoughts

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 517-284-6970.