CONSENSUS BUILDING FOR EDUCATION REFORM IN MICHIGAN:

SEARCHING FOR COMMON GROUND

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A capstone dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP


MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

2015


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to *The Blob*.

Even if you don't know who you are, we do, and we love you.

ABSTRACT

CONSENSUS BUILDING FOR EDUCATION REFORM IN MICHIGAN:

SEARCHING FOR COMMON GROUND

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TURNER, Christopher. Michigan State University, 2015.  172 pp.
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To find areas of common ground in Michigan's education reform landscape, we studied not only the reform areas present in Michigan's current educational climate, but also the process involved in uniting coalitions to better understand the supports and barriers related to reaching consensus. Research question 1 -- "Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?" -- speaks to this first purpose, while the second purpose was approached through the following three research questions:

- In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?

- What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?

- What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan?

Data collection and analysis centered on two primary sources: interviews of influential players in Michigan's education system who are representatives of important groups in the state, and observations of consensus-building meetings.

Building consensus in education reform is difficult, especially when so many people have divergent views of what's best for the education system. Through interviews of stakeholders and observations of a working advocacy coalition, we were able to demonstrate that there are education reform issues that people believe are necessary to change things for the better in Michigan. Some areas of common ground, such as school funding, are contentious and will require much time and intentionality to gain broad support, but other issues like dual enrollment and early childhood programming are less controversial and more likely to move quickly through an intentional consensus building process toward policy action. We learned that a group of diverse stakeholders will find more success in reforming education if it takes the time and effort to find good leadership, plan thoughtfully, invite a cross-section of people to the negotiation table, communicate with one another, and be guided by common beliefs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

**Introduction**

Many individuals and groups claim stakes in Michigan's education system, from the students themselves and their families, to educator associations, legislators, and partisan think tanks. All public education stakeholder groups seek a high quality education for students, but they often disagree on the means to achieving it or even how it may appear. These groups, combined with the media, have identified major issues facing Michigan's educational systems -- the teacher evaluation process, the schools of choice debate, accountability for charter and traditional public schools, the design and impact of standardized tests, transition to and validity of the Common Core State Standards, the influence of unions and teacher collective bargaining rights, among others -- that impact what and how children learn. The dilemma for broad-based education reform initiatives, and what is currently absent in policy discussions, is a common, unified voice made up of these diverse factions; that is, the voices of the individuals and groups who genuinely desire to improve education in Michigan and are willing to collectively push for reform. The question that remains, then, is how do groups move from places of splintered interests to the more ambitious goal of working collectively toward clear objectives that will positively impact education policy?

This research study examined the process of reaching consensus related to education policy efforts in Michigan ranging from actions within small coalitions all the way to the state House and Senate floors. Coming to consensus is an arduous and complex task, considering how many different and often divisive facets of education

reform are in play at any given time. In December 2014, for example, there were three bills pending in the Michigan House related to collective bargaining and union rights; thirty bills pertaining to a myriad of "education policy" issues, such as charter school accountability, emergency management of failing schools, and minimum required test scores for promotion past third grade; ten bills related to wages, benefits, and/or retirement in the public school system; and twelve bills centered on budgets for statewide education (MEA bill tracker, 12/05/14). The people who try to influence the voting on these bills are students, teachers, parents, administrators, business owners, philanthropists, and lobbyists; their perspectives and opinions are as varied as their understandings of how public education works and what is needed to better serve Michigan's 1.6 million students.

Currently, one of the most contentious issues that public education faces in Michigan is school funding, which is closely linked to school choice. Since the passage of Proposal A in 1994, Michigan's per pupil funding follows the student from district to district, be it of the traditional, online, or charter environment. Proposal A represented an effort to rectify inequities in school operational funding, and it managed to keep disparities between the "haves" and the "have-nots" from getting too large. Recently, there has been a push for increased choice in education, multiple formats for public schooling, and an "unbundling" of the per pupil allowance, which would enable parents to potentially split the per pupil funding between several districts to provide their children with an education at "Any Time, Any Place, Any Way, Any Pace" (Arsen, 2013). Education advocacy groups with a more conservative orientation, such as the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP) and The Mackinac Center, support a market approach to

public school system, in which there are numerous vendors and more freedom for parents to decide how their children are educated. Their opponents worry about a lack of accountability and regulation of these innovative new schools, and they fear that under-privileged students will end up with fewer high-quality options than their wealthier peers who can afford to travel to or pay extra for better schools.

Other issues that divide stakeholders include the format and use of standardized assessments, adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the teacher evaluation process. The Michigan legislature has approved the adoption of the CCSS, but there is disagreement over which assessments to use to evaluate students' knowledge and skills. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) was ready to adopt the Smarter Balanced assessments, but were stopped by the legislature and told to use variations of the old assessments for two more years. In 2013, Michigan became a right-to-work state and the power of the teachers' unions has been significantly diminished, which is problematic when issues that directly affect teachers loom on the horizon, like the state-mandated standards for evaluating teachers that will "go live" in 2015-16. Right now, districts are struggling to coordinate with local unions to create their own fair and implementable evaluation systems.

We believe the findings of this study will provide value-added guidance for building consensus in the future as education reform work progresses on these and other issues. The study's main objective was to find possible areas of consensus, or "common ground," that can be starting points for shared, cross-sector education reform. We observed groups to witness how coalitions are formed and how the members weighed the costs and benefits of working together, and we interviewed a wide range of people

involved in Michigan's education reform conversations. We saw that individual and group relationships and belief systems all play parts in how reform efforts are undertaken and, ultimately, how successful they are. The rest of this chapter discusses the research questions, methods, and context as an introduction to the role that consensus building plays in Michigan's education reform efforts.

**Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the role consensus plays in Michigan's education policy-making process, and whether any areas of consensus currently exist among key education oriented groups across the state. The critical nature of this investigation reveals itself when a comparison of Michigan's education system and student achievement is made with other states, exposing a picture that is, at best, mediocre and, at worst, dismal. In financial terms, the local public school revenue as a percentage of combined state and local revenue in 2012-13 is 21.5%, which ranks 46th among all states in the nation (Education Week, 2013). In terms of Michigan public school academics, the number of high school graduates in this state has decreased over the past decade and placed Michigan 42nd (NEA Research, 2013), and an overview of performance and gains by low-income students conducted by the non-partisan public policy think-tank American Legislative Exchange Council finds Michigan 46th on the list (Ladner & Myslinski, 2013). *Education Week*'s "chance for success" indicator, which assigns a value to the role of education in a person's life from cradle to career, ranks Michigan at 30. Similarly, the publication's "K-12 achievement" indicator reveals Michigan ranks 41st in the United States (Education Week, 2013). There are many indications that Michigan's education system is ailing, but what has been unclear is

where reform efforts should begin. This study aims to identify areas of common ground in education reform, ideas around which stakeholders can rally and use as starting points in the quest to begin repairing Michigan's schools, and to realize improved student achievement.

**Purpose of the Study**

To find areas of common ground in Michigan's education reform landscape, the research team studied the process involved in uniting coalitions to better understand the levers and barriers related to reaching consensus. The strategy for data collection was threefold: to interview established and influential players in Michigan's education system who are representatives of important groups in the state, to observe consensus-building activities and meetings, and to analyze documentation produced by and related to the participants. The research team chose an "a priori specification of constructs" approach, where they identified potentially important concepts from reviews of literature, press releases, reports, and other relevant documentation connected to education reform (Eisenhardt, 2002). These constructs were measured, in part, by using an interview protocol. Interviews allowed the team to construct the values of each of the actors and their groups, as well as their stated positions on policies; in addition, the interviews helped illuminate relationships between various stakeholders at local and state levels. These interviews were analyzed to determine the role that social interactions played as educational stakeholders attempted to move their objectives forward. Finally, participant observations were utilized to observe groups in action that were working to build consensus around education reform issues. In other words, this study included an examination of areas of potential consensus, how people and organizations felt about

consensus, what they did to bring people and groups together, and ultimately, the potential impact on students. As recurrent themes in the interviews and observations were revealed to be important as the study progressed, the team adapted to this new, emergent theory (Eisenhardt, 2002).

**Research Questions**

For the purpose of this study, the researchers addressed the "what" and the "how" of consensus building in Michigan. Research question 1 -- "Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?" -- addresses the areas around which consensus can be built, while the following questions address how consensus is built:

- In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?

- What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?

- What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Three main theoretical frameworks grounded this research study, all of which will be explored in more detail in the review of literature (Chapter 2). First, the idea that building consensus improves organizational performance and accomplishment of objectives grounded the study's research questions. The improvements and objectives that were witnessed during the course of this study appeared to be, in large part, due to the power of relationships that were built through the process of working cooperatively.

Second, the concept of an "advocacy coalition" came to life, with groups and individuals weighing the costs and benefits of working together, as well as being guided by their belief systems. This was seen through participant observations as they allowed the research team to see a coalition identify, negotiate, and work toward common goals. Two models -- the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and collective impact framework -- helped us make sense of what we were seeing and hearing as we collected data.

The third theoretical framework -- engaging in democratic dialogue -- relates mostly to the process that the group we observed followed as they developed education policy recommendations. The individuals who participated in the group were engaged in both representative and participatory democracy as they crafted recommendations and captured the will of their respective organizations. The processes we observed, and heard about in interviews, were similar to those we read about for the purpose of this literature review, and they are processes that could be replicated by education reform groups in the future if they are deemed effective.

**Context of the Study**

The political climate in Michigan in 2014 and early 2015 was one of shifting power, strong partisan stances, and a great deal of pending legislation involving education. The state's Republican governor was elected in the fall to a second term, a lame-duck session followed the election, and both the House of Representatives and Senate would be under Republican control in 2015. Recent bills passed that changed the handling of "snow days," enabled the state to dissolve school districts that failed to adopt and/or implement a deficit reduction plan, and reduced taxes on vehicle sales that had

previously generated millions of dollars for schools, among other bills. In fact, of the twenty-three education-related bills that passed into law in 2013 and 2014, at least half of them affected school funding (MEA bill tracker). With all of these changes being enacted, Michigan still lacks a cohesive definition of what constitutes an adequate education for all students, and the people leading the way in education reform have varying degrees of experience in K-12 classrooms. The current political reality has legislators bogged down by politics and economics that could create more and more complexities for public schools.

Within this political scene, education organizations have attempted to strengthen their positions through professional development, lobbying efforts and convening education professionals to highlight issues of importance. These organizations, which we define as groups of education practitioners that share common goals and often job functions, have found that their voices are stronger in legislative arenas when they work with other like-minded groups to put forth recommendations. We were able to identify and access a group of powerful, state-level organizations to observe as they collaborated to put forth a common vision of what education in Michigan should look like for all students, how school governance should be handled, and how to build a sustainable system. We also sought out individuals -- both inside and outside of this group -- to interview regarding their perceptions and beliefs about the role of consensus in Michigan's education reform efforts.

**Overview of Methods**

The research was designed around interviews and participant observations to develop a deeper understanding of consensus building in the development of educational

policy, as well as to discover which educational issues are of significant concern to various stakeholders. Documentation was collected from state organizations related to policy and reviewed and then triangulated with participant observations and interviews to further validate themes and patterns uncovered in the observations in the interview process.

Interviews of vetted subjects within the education community were conducted to generate key themes, and uncover the political and organizational context for the participant observations. Doing so required careful consideration of who the subjects would be, who would examine the subjects for relevance and completeness of the list, and what questions would be asked. Because the acts of choosing people to interview and writing interview questions were both likely to be biased, the research team invited educators who were not participating in the study to help shape the interviewee list. The use of peer informants increased the number of "key players" in the Michigan education reform arena and created the most complete and representative interview pool possible.

We selected an explanatory case study design because of the questions' focus on "how" and "what," we had little control over how events unfolded, and because the focus was on contemporary situations rather than historical cases (Yin, 2011). This approach allowed us to gather details from multiple sources of evidence and develop a clear picture around the development of consensus. By having more than one researcher gathering evidence in a variety of ways, the research team was well positioned to find converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2011). Having limited access to a larger sampling pool was also a rationale for selecting a case study design. The interviews provided context for the case

study, while the observations provided evidence to support the theories that emerged as the researchers analyzed the interviews.

This study is an expansion of an earlier pilot study on the role of consensus in state level reform and student standardized assessment, conducted by the research team (Barnes, Belote, Heaviland, Slee and Turner, 2014). In fact, a selection of the previous study's interview questions was adapted to fit this broader study design. The pilot study informed the interview protocol for this current study. This iterative approach to the study design allowed us to work from experience and integrate refinements from the previous pilot project. The final interview protocol for this study, built on the previous work, can be found in Appendix B.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is centered around the idea of consensus and its impact on education reform. The research team sought to answer the question of how educational stakeholders approach consensus around policy reform, how individuals approach consensus building at the state and local level, what factors constrain organizations from reaching consensus, how these ideas of consensus impact Michigan kids, and finally, the issues identified as important for these stakeholders. This study has potential to impact the educational landscape in Michigan by revealing the issues that have the potential for broad-based support (and which do not); sharing these areas of common ground will hopefully create a positive change in education reform efforts by indicating where education organizations and other reformers should put their efforts. Reports about the findings will help make visible what the researchers observe about consensus, including what happens among and between individuals and groups when agreements are reached.

**Background and Roles of Researchers**

  The researchers involved in this project all work as active practitioners in public education. Each is perceived as a leader in his or her own right, with diverse roles. While the roles are diverse, each researcher is in a position to promote positive change, both at the district and state levels. There is a school-level improvement coordinator, a district technology director, a secondary principal, an intermediate school district (ISD) employee who has primary responsibilities with policy reform, and a superintendent. In addition to their primary roles, many are participants in state educational organizations such as the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA), the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principal's Association (MEMSPA), and the Michigan Education Association (MEA).

  As representatives of state organizations or local school systems, we acknowledge that our experiences cause us to have our own biases. Also, educational experiences over the last two years as part of the Doctor of Education Leadership Program at Michigan State University have helped us develop new insights around equity issues and the marginalization of students, which contributes to our individual and group biases. The research team is comprised of Caucasian, middle class citizens. As results were analyzed and interpreted, the perceptual lenses used by the individuals and group as a whole were recognized and challenged.

**Definition of Terms**

  For the purposes of this study, *consensus* is defined as a group decision making process that seeks agreement by most of those parties involved, while *education reform* is

the improvement of education systems by removing or correcting the system's deficiencies and not merely the addition of more funding. It is important to note that this definition of consensus does leave room for stakeholders to compromise, and, in fact, based on the complex nature of the education reforms, will actually require some compromise to occur. Throughout the research process, the researchers operated under the understanding that consensus can be reached under this definition, and that even if it requires compromise, it will be visible as agreement on a concept in words and in actions.

The group observed for this study can be considered a *coalition*, a partnership between two or more parties that develops when joint action is needed for a common cause. An *education reform coalition*, then, consists of organizations and individuals who want to change educational systems to better serve students, educators, parents, and communities.

One of the research questions asked about the impact of *intentional non-consensus* on education reform efforts, which is defined as the purposeful avoidance of consensus or compromise as a tactical strategy.

**Limitations**

It is essential to point out that the study does have some weaknesses. We recognize that all education groups or education stakeholders are not represented, thus limiting the scope of the study. However, the number and variety of organizations chosen is adequate for a thorough study. Aside from this issue, it is important to note that there are many, many reform issues that could be examined; given limited resources, this study could not be conducted around every single one. The team, then, examined only significant themes that emerged from the interviews and observations. Finally, it is

important to note that student voice does not play a significant role in the study, despite the fact that these reforms ultimately impact the experiences of real kids in real classrooms. The inclusion of student voice at a real and reliable level would have created a tremendous burden on the project, and in fact, could be a study in and of itself, so it was unrealistic to include student voice at this time.

**Summary**

Despite its limitations, the study has the opportunity to shape the landscape of the education reform debate. Even if it were revealed that groups could only come to consensus around one issue, a united front among educational stakeholders would have tremendous power in educational and political arenas. On the other hand, understanding where consensus cannot and will not be built has merit as well. After all, if groups know that there are areas where they will never agree, they can eliminate those from the conversations with other groups and focus only on the areas in which consensus can be reached. This will help focus the greater debate and compartmentalize the issues that should and should not be tackled.

The chapters that follow will delve into the theoretical frameworks upon which the study is built, describe the methodology developed to study the consensus building process in Michigan as it relates to education reform, analyze the study's findings, and discuss its implications.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Introduction**

To understand how groups work toward consensus, it is important to understand

some of the reasons why they would want to join forces and pursue common goals. In a

democratic society, it is often assumed that getting people to agree on issues is the best

way to get things done. Is this really the case? Do we need consensus to make positive

things happen? This review of the literature around consensus building suggests that it

can be a beneficial process for individuals, groups, and democracy in general. It is a

process that brings people together, helps them build relationships, engages them in

meaningful and constructive conversations, and often leads them to areas of common

ground upon which they can advocate for change.

**Consensus Building to Improve Organizational Performance**

A review of the literature is critical to establish that consensus, under certain

conditions, can lead to improved organizational performance. Many of the studies around

consensus building examine the processes in the business world or medical fields. For

example, Bourgeosis (1980) and Dess (1987) both demonstrated that consensus around

goals or strategies leads to increased outputs, while Nie and Young (1997) showed that

consensus around goals between top, middle, and operational level managers improved

organizational outputs as well. Finally, Amason (1996) examined the effects of cognitive

conflict as the consensus building process, and determined that high levels produced

better decisions, understanding, and acceptance of initiatives. Thus, if facilitated properly

in these arenas, building consensus has been shown to improve organizational

performance and objective accomplishment.

It is unclear if the lessons learned by these researchers are applicable to the

education field, specifically education reform. While the evidence above suggests that

there is reason to believe that consensus has positive effects in organizations, there is still

the question of how consensus is reached both within and across organizations. This

reality, in part, led to the development of this research study.

**Building Consensus**

Slee (2014 working paper) presents a theoretical model for finding "common

ground" in education reform that outlines four phases: coming together, defining purpose,

reaching consensus, and bringing change. This literature review and the research study

that follows focus on the first three phases of this model in order to understand how

cross-sector coalitions build consensus (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

Four Phases of Developing Common Ground

| | Key Elements |
|---|---|
| **Phase 1: Coming Together** | Coalition building, social capital, individual & group identities, trust and collaboration |
| **Phase 2: Defining the Purpose** | Clarification of purpose, evaluation of cost benefits, commitment to work together |
| **Phase 3: Reaching Consensus** | Co-create vision for change, skilled facilitation and negotiation, diversity of stakeholders engaged |
| **Phase 4: Actions to Bring Change** | Cross-sector community action teams, policy reform, align community resources, create staffing to facilitate, communicate and analyze shared data metrics |

Consensus building requires people and groups to work cooperatively, and it allows them to build upon their relationships and social networks to obtain more collaborative results. Coordination of efforts between groups with similar norms can lead to a more efficient society (Mix, 2011). In a study of a wide range of consensus building cases, Innes and Booher (1999) found that "In every process we observed, participants contended that they established new or stronger personal or professional relationships and built up trust, which allowed genuine communication and problem solving." In most of

the cases, relationships helped decrease hostility, increase knowledge sharing, and foster effective negotiation (Innes & Booher, 1999).

When relationships and interests intersect, coalitions may emerge. A coalition, in its simplest sense, is a (usually) temporary partnership between two or more parties that develops when joint action is needed for a common cause. A coalition can be represented by the following equation: relationships between stakeholders (leaders and participants) plus "glue" (an issue or problem) (Malec-McKenna, 2013). When groups rally around a common cause and come to consensus about how to solve a problem, they cooperate with others who have overlapping interests without losing sight of their own. Coalitions emerge when an alliance of similarly-minded people need to address a large problem, one that is more likely to be solved when its radius of impact is wide and many voices are needed to get the point across to policy makers. Related to coalitions are policy networks, which are diverse groups that interact over longer periods of time and work to influence policy (Henry, Lubell, & McCoy, 2010). Oftentimes, short-term coalitions will develop out of policy networks to solve an immediate problem, such as advocating for a particular decision about Michigan's standardized testing within the next year.

Before joining a coalition, groups must first weigh the costs and benefits (Mix, 2011). Costs of joining a coalition could include loss of autonomy, loss of identity, an alteration of normal operations, and the possibility of conflict with groups inside and outside of the coalition. If an issue is too narrow and a group's allies do not have much to offer, the costs of joining a coalition may outweigh the potential benefits. These costs can be traded for the sharing of key resources and an increase in political influence, like shaping policy proposals and defining issues (Hojnacki, 1997). Coalitions are most likely

to form when there is a high probability that a shared goal will be achieved and that there will be ample sharing of collective resources (Mix, 2011). Benefits are also perceived when a high-profile organization joins a coalition and when groups represent popular interests, as well as when groups band together in strong opposition to a foe (Hojnacki, 1997). Right now in Michigan public education, a common foe could easily be the state's reliance on standardized test scores in the ratings of schools; districts that end up on the bottom of the list want a different, multi-dimensional way to categorize their schools' performances. Schools that struggle academically often provide students with positive emotional and academic support, which are things that are not necessarily reflected by assessment data.

Also, Weaver (2014) wrote about the essential pre-conditions for coalition building within a community that are critical to the implementation and sustainability of a social movement. She outlined the need for critical community leaders to define a sense of urgency related to the community issue, as well as having necessary financial resources committed to startup efforts. Timing matters in having the key champions connected to a timely and relevant issue for a community to organize for collective impact. To move the coalition from discussing the issues towards action, Weaver (2014) proposes that the group commit to collective learning, vigilance and action that requires participants to work, organize and think differently.

**Advocacy Coalition Framework**

In the 1980s, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) was developed to help explain coalition structure and behavior, as well as to describe the belief and policy changes that take place through the work of coalitions (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

Multiple studies of coalitions have indicated that homophily ("love of the same," or the tendency to form relationships with similar people or groups) is a key component of coalition building; those with similar policy beliefs are more likely to choose to work together (Henry, Lubell, & McCoy, 2010). This homophily can be seen in Michigan's education system, with pro-charter groups often huddled together in one corner and pro-union groups huddled in another. However, Henry, et al., found that shared beliefs did not have a significant effect on collaboration, but they did notice that disagreements about beliefs had strong adverse effects on collaborative ties (Henry, Lubell, & McCoy, 2010). This idea played out around a process to select a new state assessment in Michigan to align with the Common Core State Standards; there was agreement that schools should be held accountable but disagreement about how that is reflected in practice (Barnes et al., 2014). Also, motivation to collaborate often comes out of a need for help, when the risks of working together seem less dangerous than the risk of not solving the problem at hand (Shinn, 2012).

Belief systems are viewed as primary drivers of policy networks and coalitions. The ACF outlines a three-tier model of cognition that attempts to explain how beliefs affect a person or group's involvement in a coalition. The three tiers are "deep-core," "policy-core," and "secondary" (or "peripheral") (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Deep-core beliefs are ones that are long-standing and difficult to change, such as ideas about fairness. Secondary beliefs are shorter-term, and they often change when new information becomes available. Policy-core beliefs are probably the most influential on the coalition building process because they should produce the strongest belief homophily; these beliefs focus on the causes of problems and the balance between

different goals, and they remain fairly stable over time (Henry, Lubell, & McCoy, 2010). They also tend to center on specific policies, which provide points around which groups can come to consensus.

In 2011, for example, Michigan heard many people argue about whether or not to include enumeration, or a list of the protected classes of people, in anti-bullying legislation, specifically to protect sexual minority youth. The legislators eventually compromised on a generic, non-enumerated bill that required all schools to develop and adopt clear, enforceable anti-bullying policies. Matt's Safe School Law was passed with support from both major political parties, as well as from a diverse range of schools, community organizations, and businesses, because they all shared the policy-core belief that schools needed to protect children from peer aggression. In this situation it appeared that consensus emerged from coalition because the fundamental differences between the groups were about a peripheral issue (enumeration) that could be addressed without threatening the core-beliefs of each of the key players. This idea of compromises that do not threaten core beliefs appears to be a critical aspect of consensus this is illustrated here and is consistent with the findings of Henry, Lubell, and McCoy (2010).

Using this broad understanding about consensus and coalitions, it may be useful to examine two situations within which democratic dialogue relationship played a key role in finding a positive outcomes in order to illustrate the key findings from above -- specifically the importance of trust, compromise around non-core beliefs and the role of relationship-building and dialogue in mediating that process. This section will describe two such situations and their outcomes. The cases describe methods employed by the Danish government with the goal of intentionally moving toward consensus among

diverse citizens and citizen groups using dialogue. A brief description of the relationship-building process and how it was used will be presented, as well as strengths and weaknesses of the approach. These examples serve to illustrate the fact that building consensus around difficult and complex ideas, like education, is possible and worthwhile, even at the high and broad level of governmental policy. In essence, they show what can happen if and when groups agree to work together to achieve goals. These examples are not meant to be put forth as recommendations by the research team or methods to be forced upon participants. Rather, they serve to illustrate that there are ways in which willing parties can solve large-scale social problems through consensus building.

**Collective Impact Framework**

Kania and Kramer (2011) promote a framework called collective impact, arguing that large-scale change requires various community organizations to work together to achieve significant results in the social sector. This work stems from the philanthropic and non-profit sectors and argues that business, government, public, along with the non-profit sector, must work strategically to make change in the community. This framework focuses on a long-term approach to change; however, short-term processes were also explored to inform potential ideas for replication. Empirical evidence of the collective impact framework is very limited currently; however, the five key components are somewhat supported by themes in this literature review and the research study that follows. The authors do not discuss consensus-building processes explicitly; however, general case studies are described which may have processes embedded in them. For example, Kania and Kramer (2011) note that the community coalition of Strive in Cincinnati adopted the Six Sigma process after working with General Electric to adapt it

for the social sector. The authors argue that collective impact requires a highly structured process that leads to effective decision-making, but offer little discussion of potential processes.

Currently, the collective impact framework is prompting community-funding organizations to redesign their processes for working within a community, as well as awarding community funding resources. In Michigan, the Michigan Non-Profit Association and the Michigan Council for Community Foundations have adopted this framework and are encouraging local communities to move towards models of collective impact. The framework's five key components are listed below:

- Creation of a common agenda or vision for the community on a focus area by diverse stakeholders and publically signed to demonstrate high levels of commitment by top-level executives from key organizations.

- Agreed-upon shared measurement systems for all stakeholders to monitor progress and impact of the coalition's resources, programming, and efforts.

- Alignment and coordination of mutually reinforcing activities by action teams.

- Creation of continuous and transparent communication with coalition participations, as well as with the public community stakeholders.

- Sharing of financial resources to provide the essential capacity to complete the work.

**Engaging in Democratic Dialogue**

Anderson and Jaeger (1999) summarized two processes used by the Danish government to engage democratic dialogue that were inclusive and representative of their citizens. The intended outcome of both processes was to create new knowledge by the

group and to reach consensus on proposed recommendations to policy makers and key leaders. Both strategies, consensus conferences and scenario workshops, engage citizens in representative and participatory democracy, and are two related constructs of democracy. Anderson and Jaeger (1999) define representative democracy as capturing the will of the people through coalitions who speak on behalf of citizens based on interest areas, while participatory democracy captures the will of the people by participation in the local political process to influence community decision-making, such as elections, opinion polls and referenda.

**Consensus conference**.  The Danish government organized this process as a technique to obtain citizen input and perspective into expert topic areas to create dialogue to better inform politicians and expert leaders. These "expert topic areas" are similar to what the researchers are trying to identify as common ground in this study, the shared issues and interests of various groups that could be agreed and collectively acted upon. The consensus conference occurs over a series of days and includes a citizen panel, an expert panel, and an overall planning committee that is responsible for the entire process (Anderson & Jaeger, 1999). The citizen panel is comprised of approximately ten people who meet for two weekends with a professional facilitator to outline questions to be discussed at the actual conference on a given topic. This pre-work is a critical component to creating a successful consensus conference. The expert panel is comprised of diverse authorities in the chosen topic that can bring various perspectives to the conversation, as well as demonstrate good communication skills. The first day and a half is set aside for expert response to questions raised by the citizen panel and builds in time for clarifications and deeper understandings from the citizens. Another day and a half is

focused on the citizen panel creating a document on the topic, including their conclusions and recommendations. Open discussion among the citizen panel is the process used to reach consensus. On the final day, the consensus document is shared publicly with both the expert panel and public media.

This process has two key areas that require consensus among citizens. The first is the selection and writing of the main questions to be asked of the experts prior to the actual conference, and the second is the conclusions and recommendations the citizen's panel writes into the final public document. Strengths of this process are inclusion of the citizen's voice into key governmental topic areas, the by-product of self-confidence and empowerment of citizens in the democratic process, and the value of diversity of thinking into topic areas. Danish experience with this process reveals that the citizens selected to serve on the panel greatly influence the quality of the final report (Anderson & Jaeger, 1999).

**Scenario workshops**.  Like consensus conferences, these meetings are problem solving in nature and a method for generating potential solutions. Participants include policy makers, business representatives, experts, and citizens. Pre-work includes the development of potential scenarios that are presented to participants at the workshop to assess the potential viability of the solutions, as well as create a vision for future solutions. The scenarios provide a starting conversation with the hope that participants will co-construct their own solutions. Participants are asked to comment on and criticize the presented scenarios, as well as discuss the barriers to achieving these solutions. Next, they are asked to create their own scenarios and plans of action on how to achieve them.

Strengths of the scenario workshop include the diversity of the participants from various sectors engaging in thoughtful dialogue and discourse, thereby increasing citizen's engagement in the democratic process. This group experience can also break down stereotypes citizens may have of various actors through a shared experience of scenario critique and development. It is important to note that there is a tremendous amount of pre-workshop preparation in the development of the scenarios. Skilled facilitation is also very important to obtain equity of voice for all participants in the workshop. Finally, there must be a key champion who is both seeking solutions influenced by citizens and willing to move it forward in the democratic process if change is to occur from this process. That has not always been the case, according to Anderson and Jaeger (1999). People will not engage in scenario workshops if policy makers won't use the suggested solutions or organizations are unwilling to allow the results to influence their decision-making. This is a key consideration when contemplating using this process.

## Summary

This study explores consensus building, or the lack of consensus building, within Michigan's education reform arenas. The research team wanted to know if, indeed, consensus was viewed as something beneficial for the organizations involved in education reform work. Our key takeaways from the literature are:

1. Shared goals and beliefs are primary drivers of consensus building.

2. Relationships within a coalition must be built and maintained.

3. Diversity within a coalition, or inviting many different types of people and organizations to the table, can lead to improved outcomes.

4. Having intentionality -- a clear set of steps to take and a common goal -- helps

   lead a group toward consensus.

The specific characteristics of consensus building highlighted in our literature review are
summarized below in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

*Summary of the Key Findings in Literature Review*

| Consensus Building to Improve Organizational Performance | |
|---|---|
| **Researcher(s)** | **Key Findings** |
| Bourgeosis (1980)<br><br>Dess (1987) | Consensus around goals or strategies leads to increased outputs |
| Nie & Young (1997) | Consensus around goals between top, middle, and operational level managers improved organizational outputs |
| Amason (1996) | High levels of cognitive conflict (or, being confronted by information that may conflict with existing beliefs, ideas, understanding, and values) in consensus building produce better decisions, understanding, and acceptance of initiatives |
| **The Process of Consensus Building** | |
| **Researcher(s)** | **Key Findings** |
| Mix (2011) | Coordination of efforts between groups with similar norms can lead to a more efficient society<br><br>Weigh costs and benefits before joining a coalition<br><br>Coalitions form when there's a high probability that a shared goal will be achieved and collective resources will be shared |
| Innes & Booher (1999) | Establishment of new or stronger relationships build trust and allow for communication and problem solving<br><br>Relationships decrease hostility, increase knowledge sharing, and foster effective negotiation |
| Malec-McKenna (2013) | Coalition = relationships between participants + issue or problem to solve |
| Henry, Lubell & McCoy (2010) | Homophily (or, "love of the same") is a key component of coalition building<br><br>Shared beliefs did not have a significant effect on collaboration BUT disagreement |

| | about beliefs had strong adverse effects on collaborative ties |
|---|---|
| | Policy core beliefs produce strong belief homophily and remain fairly stable over time |
| | Compromises do not threaten core beliefs |
| Hojnacki (1997) | Costs of joining a coalition can be traded for sharing of key resources and an increase in political influence |
| | Benefits are perceived when a high-profile organization joins a coalition and when groups represent popular interests, as well as when groups band together against a common foe |
| Weaver (2014) | Leaders need to define a sense of urgency related to reform issue and have necessary financial resources lined up |
| | To move toward action, group needs to commit to collective learning, thinking and organizing differently, and requiring participants to work |

| The Structure of Consensus Building | |
|---|---|
| **Researcher(s)** | **Key Findings** |
| Sabatier & Weible (2007) | The **Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)** was developed to explain coalition structure and behavior, as well as to describe the belief and policy changes that take place through the work of coalitions |
| | Belief systems are primary drivers of coalitions |
| | 3-tier model of cognition to explain how beliefs affect involvement in coalitions: |
| | • "Deep-core" beliefs = long-standing, difficult to change<br>• "Policy-core" beliefs = focus on causes of problems and balance between different goals; remain fairly stable over time<br>• "Secondary" (or "peripheral") beliefs = shorter-term, often change when new information becomes available |
| Shinn (2012) | Motivation to collaborate often comes out of a need for help – the risks of not working together seem less dangerous than not solving the problem |
| Kania & Kramer (2011) | The **collective impact framework** focuses on a long-term approach to change |
| | Large-scale change requires various community organizations to work together to achieve significant results in the social sector |
| | Requires a highly structured process that leads to effective decision-making |
| | Five components of collective impact framework: |
| | • Creation of common agenda or vision by diverse stakeholders<br>• Shared measurement system to monitor progress of reform efforts<br>• Alignment and coordination of activities |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • Continuous and transparent communication at all levels<br>• Sharing of financial resources |

| **Consensus Building in Action:  Democratic Dialogue in Denmark** | |
|---|---|
| *Two case studies by Anderson & Jaeger (1999) were examined that detail the methods employed to intentionally move diverse citizens and groups toward consensus by using dialogue.* | |

| **Type of Dialogue** | **Key Findings** |
|---|---|
| Consensus Conference | Technique to obtain citizen input and perspective into "expert topic areas" (shared interests and issues) to create dialogue for the purpose of better informing politicians and expert leaders<br><br>Composed of a citizen panel, expert panel, and planning committee<br><br>Citizens write questions to ask the experts, and the citizens' recommendations are included in final documents<br><br>Citizens selected to serve on panel were found to greatly influence the quality of the final report |
| Scenario Workshop | Problem-solving in nature and a method for generating potential solutions<br><br>Includes policy-makers, business leaders, experts, and citizens<br><br>Provides a starting conversation with the hope that participants will co-construct their own solutions<br><br>Scenarios are presented and critiqued, then participants create their own scenarios and related plans of action<br><br>Skilled facilitation is critical<br><br>Need a "key champion" who is willing to seek solutions and to move the recommendations through the democratic process |

Our research questions sought to find areas of common interest, which could promote the formation of coalitions to work toward common goals and changes within the education system while integrating the findings of the literature to guide our methods and analysis. We conducted twenty-one interviews inside and outside of some of these coalitions in Michigan, and we also observed one group engage in representative and participatory democracy to craft recommendations that were amenable to all of their respective organizations. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to study the roles and perceptions of consensus within education reform in Michigan through examination of individuals' experiences and the growth of an education advocacy coalition.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

**Introduction**

We were unable to find any studies that have explored the role that consensus

building plays among Michigan's education reform stakeholders, in general, let alone, in

the area of policy development. This study investigates where consensus intersects with

education reform by addressing this basic, but critical, question: Are there any areas of

consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan? The

research centers on interviews of key players within the Michigan education system and

observations of an advocacy coalition drafting education policy recommendations to put

forth.

**Overview and Purpose of Research Questions**

Research question 1 is, "Are there any areas of consensus that can be found

among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?" Interviewees were directly asked,

"What education reform topics are the most important issues today?' They may have

answered from their own personal biases or they may have reflected the perspectives of

the organizations they represented. Publications from the organizations, as well as from

the task force's sub-committees, were examined to find issues of importance, and the

observations helped the research team quantify which issues received the most attention.

After analyzing evidence from all data sources, we were able to identify areas in which

organizations are willing to compromise and areas of inflexibility.

Another key research question is, "In what ways do educational stakeholders

approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?" Two questions in the

interview protocol (1 and 5 in Appendix B) are designed to determine people's roles and levels of influence within some of the key education organizations in Michigan. (A table in Appendix B connects research questions with the interview protocol). This helped us determine if the people being interviewed had a reliable sense of consensus building in education reform, as well as learn how different individuals and groups approach consensus building. Participant observations of the state-level professional organization's school reform task force meetings also helped us understand the relationships between key education stakeholders; interactions between the individuals and groups shed light on how effective their efforts are when collaborating on common interests. For the sake of clarity, we will call this formal coalition of educators the "Group" throughout the rest of this paper.

The third research question is, "What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?" Again, the open-ended interview questions about barriers and assumptions (see Appendix B, questions 3 and 9) allowed the researchers to identify commonalities among interviewees. The scope of the study was too small to allow for broad generalizations about consensus barriers, but we felt that the methods used to collect data were trustworthy enough to make valid, significant, and relevant insights into education reform efforts in Michigan.

Finally, we asked, "In what ways do key players believe that consensus building around education reform -- or the lack thereof -- impacts students in Michigan?" Three of the questions in the interview protocol implicitly or explicitly address this secondary question, and respondents were asked to decide whether consensus was even important.

They were also asked to reflect on situations in which intentional non-consensus was ever experienced, where the parties involved choose to not agree on an issue and to not work together toward the solution to a problem. The research team used this information to identify reform topics that may or may not be productive for groups to tackle in the consensus building process, as well as how the reformers think the impact their actions have on students.

## Methods Design

We designed the research around interviews and participant observations to develop a deeper understanding of consensus building in the development of educational policy, as well as to discover which educational issues are of significant concern at the state level. Documentation was collected from state organizations related to policy and reviewed in comparison to the more robust interview and observation data as it was triangulated with participant observations and interviews to further uncover themes and patterns.

For the participant observation component of this study, the researchers selected an explanatory case study design because the research questions focus on questions of "how" and "why," which are what case studies are designed to surface. Also, since the researchers had little control over how events unfolded, and the focus was on contemporary situations rather than historical cases the explanatory case student fit these parameters as well (Yin, 2011). This approach allowed the researchers to gather details from multiple sources and develop a clear picture around the development of consensus. We also chose to have more than one researcher gathering evidence in a variety of ways. This positioned the research team well to find converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2011).

When multiple sources of information are in agreement, these results can lead us to stronger conclusions than individual sources of data provide. The interviews provided context for the case study (as well as the direct answer to Research Question 1), while the observations provided evidence to support the theories that emerged as the researchers analyzed the interviews.

The time period during which data was collected provided a unique window into the early stages of education consensus building among diverse groups. The window of time included a lame duck legislative session at the end of 2014, with major shifts in power within the state House and Senate, university school boards, and local jurisdictions, which all increased their Republican representation after the November 4th elections. This is an ideal time for groups to offer legislative agenda and policy recommendations; new legislators should be educated about issues at the beginning of their terms. In addition, it is important to note that in general it is difficult to perform policy relevant qualitative research in a period of time that will allow it to be injected into a policy cycle. However, because of our method and the fact that we had a research team working together, we were able to interview many participants (21) as well as perform four observations and reviewed related, supportive documents. This study would have otherwise been impossible in a standard dissertation format written by an individual researcher.

**Sample**

　　　**Interview subjects**.  We conducted twenty-one interviews of vetted subjects within the education community in order to create context for the participant observations. Doing so required careful consideration of who the subjects were, who

would examine the subjects for relevance and completeness of the list, and what questions would be asked. Since the research questions center on consensus within educational organizations, and, in particular, those involved in reform, consideration had to be given to people and organizations involved in that work. As the research team is comprised of a superintendent, technology director, principal, teacher, and ISD employee, the breadth of experience and networking in the group allowed for a comprehensive preliminary list of key players in the educational realm to which the team could have access. Given the timeframe, which spanned over four months, access was an important consideration because the interviewees needed to be people who could be contacted quickly and efficiently. It is important to note that the names of the interviewees have purposefully been omitted from this paper in order to ensure that their identities are held confidential.

This process of internal selection by the research team, although convenient and diverse in perspective, also created an opportunity for researcher bias. Since the potential interviewees were individuals who the researchers themselves knew or could access, or who are well-known players in the education debate, it is likely that many people with unique perspectives may have been missed in the selection process. After all, the researchers have varying spheres of knowledge, influence, and networking, and no one's sphere includes all key players. In an attempt to combat this bias, the researchers first considered snowball sampling, but, in the end, agreed to enlist additional people not originally considered for inclusion into our interview pool to view the prospective pool and make recommendations both within the pool and for individuals outside the original pool.

The people chosen to vet the list included acting or retired educators at the school, district, state, and college levels. This use of peer informants increased the likelihood that the study included key players and created the most complete interview pool possible given the limitations of the study. The method used for list generation allowed for a comprehensive and user-friendly way of creating, in a relatively quick manner, a representative cross-section of people. In essence, interviewees were selected to maximize the variation of perspectives, as the list includes representation and variety along with visibility, access, and expertise. The list also allowed the researchers to gather information from state and local level players.

The five list vetters were asked to add three to five names to the list originally generated by the research team, as well as to comment on people already listed and on people and organizations that had been omitted. Through this process, the list became longer. Once the vetters had offered their feedback, the team created a matrix that contained all of the vetters' comments and suggestions, as well as the original list. This document allowed us to examine in a comprehensive way, the totality of information we had generated and gathered. For organizations that were represented by multiple people, final determinations were made based on accessibility, expertise, tenure in the organization, and the individual comments of the list vetters. Organizations or people were added to fill gaps in the original list, such as adding someone from the Republican party to balance out a Democrat. We prioritized leaders of organizations, when available. Then, we intentionally selected philanthropy, as well as, advocacy groups to round out the feedback. The following characteristics were considered: role inside or outside of the traditional educational arena, highest ranking officials within an organization, state level

leader, regional representation, district leader, government officials, among others. To try to diversify the interviewees, we also eliminated people whose job functions mirrored those of people already on the list. The list that was generated contained approximately thirty-five names, but was narrowed to twenty-one "first choices," with the understanding that the list would evolve as people declined to be interviewed.

After conducting eighteen interviews (three members of the original list either did not return calls or declined to be interviewed), we mapped out the different sectors represented within our interview pool: legislative, education-centric, conservative advocacy (these tend to be Republican-leaning groups with interest in issues like school choice), and progressive advocacy (these tend to be more aligned with the Democratic Party and focused on social justice issues) (Figure 3.1). We noticed that some key voices were not represented, such as from parent organizations and philanthropic groups, and we reached into our network to add people from these arenas. We chose not to pursue interviews with students or teachers because if and when their voices are heard, they are more likely to have influence at the local level; the focus of this study is on consensus around state level reforms, and their interests are represented by the state-level organizations that we encountered through observations and interviews. The team also examined the regions from which our interviewees came, and we debated whether to choose more people from areas underrepresented in our sample (e.g., Upper Peninsula, western Michigan, etc.). Adding people from different regions at the last minute seemed forced, especially after having had the list vetted by five knowledgeable, well-respected education stakeholders who could have suggested influential people from these regions if they had so chosen.

| SECTOR | NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS |
|--------|----------------------|
| Parent groups | 👤 |
| Philanthropic organizations | 👤 👤 |
| Legislators | 👤 👤 👤 |
| Education organizations | 👤 👤 👤 👤 👤 👤 👤 👤 👤 |
| Conservative advocacy groups | 👤 👤 |
| Progressive advocacy groups | 👤 👤 👤 👤 |
| **Total number of interviews** | **21** |
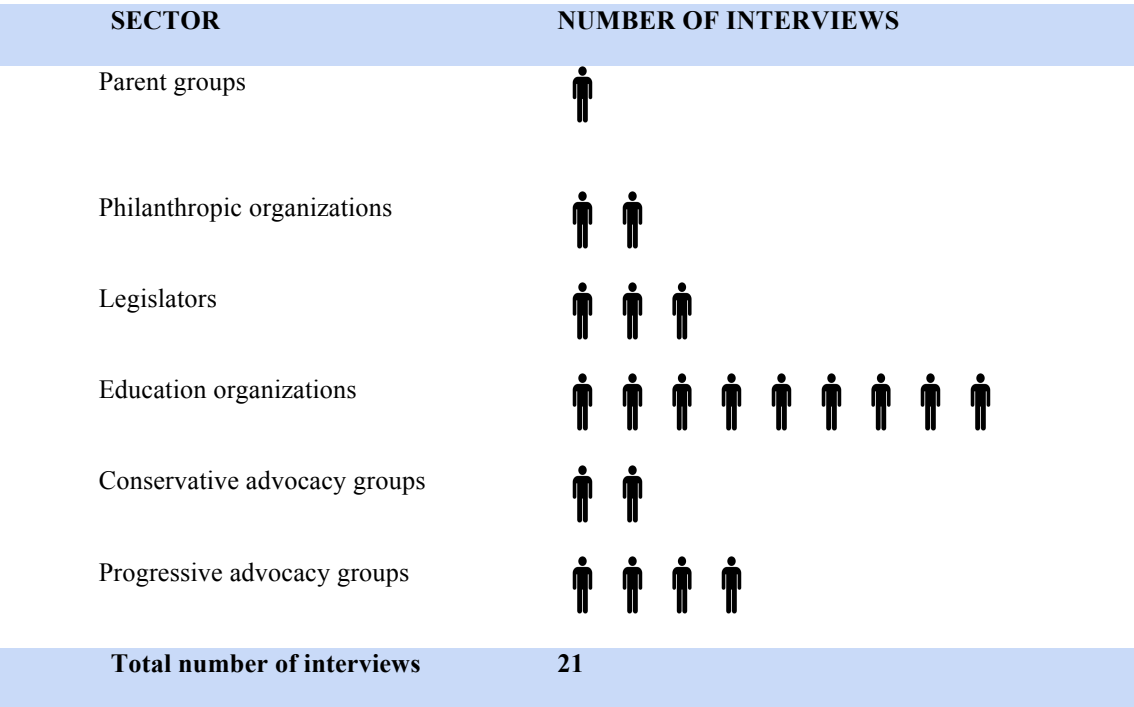
*Figure 3.1.* Sectors represented within interview pool.

Although the researchers realize that even this process, with its choice of people to review the lists, created its own set of biases, it helped to broaden the interview list and created a better opportunity for more voices to be heard in the process, thereby increasing its trustworthiness overall, and reducing the potential researcher bias.

**Participant Observations**

Participant observations were performed during committee meetings of a state-level professional educational organization's school reform task force (which we will call the Group), which is comprised of stakeholders and groups from across the educational field in Michigan. This Group was selected because of its unique efforts by key stakeholders to identify and build consensus around educational policy issues that coincided with the start of the research project. An expected outcome of the Group is the development of policy recommendations to guide legislative change that requires consensus among the Group's members. In order to find this consensus, the Group broke

into smaller subcommittees and conducted different types of meetings; some focused on gaining a better understanding of specific issues, while others involved strategic planning about how reform messages would be conveyed to decision-makers. We observed this coalition four times, which provided us a well-rounded understanding of the structure of the Group and its operation over a span of three months. The Group set out to move through three stages -- name the challenges (reforms), build consensus within the coalition, and engage in community conversations -- and the research team was able to observe the first two stages during the course of this project. The key benefit of the participant observation is that it provides us with a laboratory to see if actual consensus building opportunities match the descriptions of participants about how they reach consensus.

**Document Collection**

The researchers collected relevant publications, such as, but not limited to, handouts, brochures, meeting agendas, and mission statements, from the interviewees, participant observations, and organizations represented in the data gathering processes. Because documentary evidence is generally considered relevant in all case studies, these documents were primarily used to corroborate or triangulate other data. Documentation is considered a stable, broad, exact, and unobtrusive source of evidence, which makes it valuable for the researchers to consider (Yin, 2011). Careful study of these items can be conducted repeatedly and conveniently because they are not time-bound, and they can help contextualize ideas and activities from the meetings that were observed.

**Data Collection Protocol and Procedures**

  **Interview questions.** As the research questions deal with building consensus, we deemed it essential to actually speak with research subjects in person when possible. After all, surveys or other means do not allow for the nuances in responses that face-to-face interview questions do. Furthermore, participant observations and document analysis were also utilized in this research study, so using interviews created the opportunity for the triangulation of data and context for the case study. This data-gathering approach, involving the three methods, is the most widely used method in qualitative inquiry (Glesne, 2011).

  Using the research questions as a foundation, we generated a list of topics about which the interview subjects should be asked. The topics were then rephrased into questions with careful consideration given to the ways in which the questions are asked. Careful to avoid leading or yes-and-no questions, we attempted to again combat bias by wording the questions in such a way that assumptions were not incorporated. For example, many of the questions ask the participants to describe or speak to their own assumptions, avoiding wording that reveals the assumptions that we hold. Each question, then, was checked against the research questions to ensure its relevance and ability to provide adequate and effective information for answering the study's research questions. The questions were initially generated in a group setting, and then individual members of the group spent time revising and improving them. After that process, we then reviewed the questions again to ensure that they were unbiased, trustworthy, and clearly connected to the main research question. This process again proved the benefit of a research team

setting in which we could all act as each other's research community, checking for bias with the additional benefit of intimate knowledge of the subject matter.

Writing these questions was made easier by the experiences that we had in conducting an earlier, smaller pilot study on the role of consensus in state-level reform around student assessment (Barnes et al., 2014), and, in fact, some of the questions used in that study were simply reworked to fit this broader study. Those questions, which were used in a previous interview with a state-level education employee, allowed us to have a firm foundation on which to build its new set of questions. The interview protocol was informed by this prior experience as well as the potential constructs identified in the literature review. The final interview questions, broken down by research question, can be found in Appendix C.

**Interview process**. To ensure consistency across interviews, we developed a script, exhibited in Appendix B, to be used to discuss the vetting processes with the participants. This served to help reduce biases by standardizing the solicitation of participants. Once the lists were vetted, the group divided the interviews based on areas of interest and access. Interview participants were asked to sign a letter of consent that outlined the purpose of the interview and the research project in detail (see Appendix B). In order to ensure the integrity of the data collection process in this stage, two members of the team sat in on interviews whenever possible, and, the interviews were audio recorded, with the interviewees' permission, so that all members of the group could listen to the questions and responses. A neutral third party then transcribed the audio files, with no affiliation to any education organizations in Michigan or to Michigan State University. This procedure, minus the outside transcription, was developed for and used in the

researchers' aforementioned pilot study (Barnes, et al., 2014) with successful results. Like the vetting process, initiation of the interviews was scripted (see Appendix B) to avoid bias and to increase trustworthiness, and all interviewers worked from the set of questions developed by the group.

**Participant observations**. The Group and its subcommittees were observed on four occasions, and its members attending the observed meetings were asked to sign a letter of consent that outlined the purpose of the participant observation and explained the purpose of the research project in detail (see Appendix B). Because of the nature of the politically charged work being completed by this Group and the multiple stakeholders represented, these consent forms were signed prior to beginning the observations of the meetings. Because of the size of the committee, it was difficult to guarantee confidentiality, but specific speakers will not be identified in this analysis and the group will remain unnamed. Consent forms were collected before the meetings, and additional forms were brought to the meetings to ensure that any new members, or presenters, were included in the process.

A minimum of two researchers was present during the observations, and they used an observation protocol to structure their written observations during the meeting (see Appendix C). During this process, researchers adopted both descriptive and analytic approaches (Glesne, 2011). Focus was placed on the emergence of themes as participant observations and interviews were completed. The researchers also examined relationships between stakeholders, language used, non-linguistic communication observed, and roles of various agents within the structure of the meeting.

We examined pages, meeting agendas, publications, and other publicly available literature provide glimpses into what organizations believe are the most pressing education reform issues. By examining this evidence, we worked to understand whether or not what the interviewees said in the interviews or what the participants did in the observation matched what they publicly acknowledge as their reform agendas. Documents can, however, contain the biases of the parties, who produce them, and access may be blocked to some publications (Yin, 2011); the research team took note of these barriers and weaknesses if they occurred.

The gathering of these documents was done simply through a collection of materials that were readily available to us and include the aforementioned items and resources, among others. We attempted to gather as many items reasonably possible from every organization represented in the other aspects of data collection in order to fully round out the data set and paint a clear picture of consensus building around education reform.

**Data Analysis and Procedures**

Once the data were gathered, the next step was to code the data and allow patterns to emerge through the analysis. Again, modeled after the previous pilot study (Barnes, et al., 2014), we worked together to code the data, with more than one researcher analyzing each interview. We started by looking at the general processes involved in consensus building, as well as at the beliefs and reforms that motivated individuals and groups as a way of grounding the initial coding. We felt that laying the groundwork of predetermined codes would help expedite the iterative analysis process. These initial codes were established in relationship to patterns that emerged from the first set of interviews. Then

they were used on subsequent interviews and modified to fit all the interviews we analyzed. The researchers then compared the interview data to the participant observations and documents.

All of the data sets were uploaded into Dedoose, an online qualitative research tool that allowed us to collaboratively code, analyze, and organize the information we had gathered. Dedoose enabled us to easily cross-reference excerpts and applications of codes.

**Building a coding system for the interview transcripts**. The first step the team took to create a system of codes for data analysis was to examine our research and interview questions for broad, initial codes (these are the "anticipatory codes" that included major reform issues and general ideas around consensus). Based on the data we gathered at the start of this project, each group member independently suggested codes. Together, we created big, broad headings and then categorized the items on the list under those headings.

The team's subsequent discussion centered on the need to narrow our focus. The list we first generated contained too many overlapping codes and not all of them matched our research goals, although their use would have resulted in interesting conversations. The practice round of coding with the initial list of codes was imprecise and revealed a flawed approach, with people coding the same passages with vastly different codes. This problem led to much discussion about how well the codes matched up with the original research questions. Those that aligned well, such as "consensus process," were kept, while others, like "consensus policy," were deemed either too broad or not connected well enough to the research questions. Codes were added, too, as needed. This second

iteration of codes included a longer list of specific education reforms, with the understanding that reforms would be added as they emerged in the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents.

After coding eight interviews and discovering areas in which we lacked specificity and agreement, the team reconvened to discuss coding structures. We clarified what each code meant and when and how we would apply them to our data sets. We also created a more robust student impact code (high versus low) that would better reflect the level of importance that student voice has for different individuals and organizations. At this point in the process, the team was able to settle on a system of broad, primary codes combined with more specific secondary codes, which enabled us to better pinpoint areas of convergence within the data. We also decided to use the codes from the interviews to apply to the observations to see how the two types of data sources relate to one another. For a detailed list of codes used, see Table 3.1. (For a detailed explanation of the code creation process, see Appendix C).

Table 3.1

*Codes Used for Data Analysis*

| Factors that may influence consensus building as... | Supports | Barriers |
|---|---|---|
| **Money** | Cost of reform or distribution of financial power than aids consensus building | Cost of reform or unequal distribution of financial power between stakeholders that hinders consensus building |
| **Intentionality** | Attempts are made to include multiple stakeholders in consensus building and to move toward compromise | People, groups, etc. intentionally slow or stop consensus building from occurring. |
| **Leadership** | Leadership skills and/or position aid in the development of consensus building | Lack of leadership skills or position of influence acts as a barrier toward consensus building |
| **Goals** | Goals of the organizations, political groups, or personal agendas are aligned | Goals of the organizations, political groups, or personal agendas are in |

| | with a common goal | conflict with moving toward consensus; Sometimes goal priorities are an issue |
|---|---|---|
| **Process** | Steps, procedures, timelines and intentionality that lead to consensus building | Lack of focus on consensus building or steps, procedures, and timelines that act as roadblocks to consensus building, including intentionally or unintentionally leaving people out of the process |
| **Relationships** | Personal contacts, perceptions, and history between people and groups that support consensus building | History, perceptions and personal contacts that slow or stop consensus building (example: conflicting political stances) |

| Education policy reform issues | Policies that relate to... |
|---|---|
| **Accountability** | Increased accountability standards, including transparency reporting around academic achievement and expenditures |
| **Anti-bullying** | Reducing peer-to-peer aggression, both in person or in online environments |
| **Assessments** | Standardized student assessments, required by law |
| **Common Core** | Shared and higher standard setting in education |
| **CTE** | Career and technical education (CTE) policy reform efforts, which could include changes in credits given for CTE classes |
| **EAA** | School takeover policy, including the Education Achievement Authority (EAA) |
| **Early Childhood** | Pre-school programming options |
| **Early College** | Early college access for students prior to graduation from high school |
| **Funding** | Changes in school funding systems, up to and including P-20 models (pre-school up to age 20) |
| **Poverty** | Issues caused by poverty, including its impact on educational achievement, access, and opportunity |
| **Priority/Focus Schools** | Mandated labels on perceived under-performing schools, including priority and focus school status |
| **Privatization or Charters** | Educational choice, including privatization and charter school options |
| **Race** | Issues caused by racial inequities, including policy focused on reducing gaps between ethnicity subgroups |
| **Retirement System** | Retirement options in education |
| **Skill Acquisition** | Efforts to improve the skills of either students or staff |

| Student Achievement | Improved student achievement |
|---|---|
| **Teacher Preparation** | Teacher preparation and requirements prior to receiving certification |
| **Teacher Quality** | Teacher (or educator) evaluation and professional development opportunities for current instructional staff |
| **Tenure** | Labor relations and protections under the law, including tenure and union issues |

| Students | Definition |
|---|---|
| High Focus | Students are a primary focus of decision making, there is evidence of strong positive impact |
| Low Focus | There is little evidence of students in decision making, weak correlation between benefit to students and initiative, admission of lacking thought of students first |

**Coding the data**. The same codes, as described in Table 3.1, were used for all of our data sets. Two researchers were assigned to each piece of data, with one primary coder and one secondary coder. To minimize bias, the people coding the data were not the people who collected the data. As a coder, each researcher matched up excerpts as closely as possible with the codes that were developed. Excerpts could receive multiple codes, such as "consensus," "money," and "teacher quality," if all applied. The secondary coder's main purpose was to verify the primary coder's work, making sure that the excerpts and codes were closely aligned. When questions or disagreements about excerpts emerged, the whole group worked through the coding process on the contentious excerpts to ensure validity of the process.

When examining data from the meeting observations and documents, the only codes used were the ones related to specific reforms. The purpose of the meetings we observed was to move a group toward consensus, so it did not seem necessary to determine what factors help or hinder the consensus process. The discussions centered on specific reform issues, so that is where we focused our attention as well. This approach

helped us find connections between what interviewees' perceived as issues of importance and what recommendations the group we observed made.

**Analyzing the codes**. Once all of the data sets were coded, teams of two researchers were assigned to cover each of the four research questions. Each team cross-referenced the research questions with our interview questions, using the analytic tools in Dedoose to help identify trends and patterns in what we had heard in the interviews and had seen in the observations.

The first research question - Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan? - was the most straightforward to answer, given that it could be answered by simply recording the issues mentioned by interviewees. The second and third research questions, which deal with approaches to consensus building and factors that support or constrain consensus building, required more in-depth analysis of the excerpts. The tools in Dedoose allowed us to quantify how many people talked about factors like leadership or money, for example, which then led us to more closely examine their words and actions for patterns or shared themes. The fourth research question dealt with how much impact education reforms have on students. To analyze the data around this question, we noted how many people were able to answer the question about students and how much evidence they were able to provide regarding how their reform efforts affect students.

After sifting through the data for several weeks, the whole research team reconvened to discuss their findings. The researchers discussed each research question in turn and decided if further investigation was necessary, which it was for each of the research questions. We found different ways to investigate patterns using the tools in

Dedoose, and we spent more time digging deeper by narrowing down the interview questions and codes associated with each topic. The following sections describe, in greater detail, the processes utilized to pull out the themes that emerged under each question.

**Research Question Analysis**

　　**Research Question 1:　Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?** Multiple analysis processes were used to answer this question. First, the researchers reviewed the responses for two of the interview questions:

- "Where do you see possible consensus in education? Why?" (Question 2), and
- "What education reform topics are the most important issues today? Which topic might have the greatest opportunity for cross-sector consensus?" (Question 10).

This generated a list of topic areas discussed by interviewees, and we tallied the number of times a topic area was mentioned to determine key areas. This process was completed for each question separately and then combined the results together.

　　***Brief follow-up interview questions.*** Based on overwhelming feedback received from our participants during the interview data collection, a second, clarifying data collection initiative was organized, in large part because our participants wanted to know what the others were talking about. Examining the resulting interview data for questions 2 and 10, which both asked the interviewees to indicate the most important issues in education today, in Dedoose and applying quantitative methods to the analysis; the research group drafted eleven statements of consensus representing the most popular themes that were revealed using respondents' original language as a foundation. Based on

these areas of common ground determined in independent interviews, we developed follow-up questions that would allow the respondents to see the entire set of important issues that were collectively determined. We chose to use a Likert scale for the questions in order to gauge how strongly people felt about each reform issue, which gave us better indications about the issues people believed that consensus could be and could not be built around. All researchers worked to refine the eleven statements in two different categories, policy statement or agenda item based largely on the specificity of the item. A policy statement referred to a specific action item, while an agenda statement referred more broadly to an area that requires more study. The follow-up questions are listed below in Table 3.2. The additional information more clearly exposed where people had potential areas of agreement even when these areas might have been outside their organization's core interest and would not have necessarily surfaced in individual interviews.

This brief follow up was emailed individually to each interviewee by the initial researcher contact, and two subsequent requests for participation were conducted to increase response rates and ensure a thorough representation of participant input. Overall, seventeen out of the possible twenty-one interviewees responded for a response rate of 81%. Information from the brief follow-up interview helped us more concretely determine the areas around which education stakeholders feel consensus could be built or is likely to be built.

Table 3.2

*Statements of Consensus Created from Individual Interviews Used in Brief Follow-Up*

| |
|---|
| 1.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on increasing access to early childhood education programming and wrap-around supports. |
| 2.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on amending the charter school statute to increase charter accountability for performance. |
| 3.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on reforming the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System to decrease the financial impact on local district budgets (approximately 25-30 percent currently). |
| 4.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on how we fund public education. |
| 5.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on adopting and implementing the educator evaluation recommendations of the Michigan Commission on Educator Evaluation. |
| 6.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on creating statewide priorities for professional learning and supports for teachers and administrators to increase quality of educators. |
| 7.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on policies that strike a balance between initially developing teachers' skills before identifying and removing ineffective teachers. |
| 8.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on providing incentives to leverage dual enrollment policies to build and expand career pathway programming, in partnerships with community colleges/universities and business and industry. |
| 9.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on creating an aligned state assessment system based on the current Michigan State Standards. |
| 10.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on adopting a single policy to ensure that all children meet reading proficiency targets by third grade. |
| 11.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on policies that encourage models for personalized learning experiences by incorporating: |
| ○ Blended learning. |
| ○ Individualized instruction by teachers. |
| ○ A la Carte choices for students. |

**Research Question 2:  In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?**  To study this question within the interview data, we focused its analysis on three of the interview questions:

- "What role, if any, have professional organizations you're associated with played in the development of policy?" (Question 5)

- "Describe a time when you saw consensus built around policy reform. What were your thoughts and reflections on this process?" (Question 6)

- "What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process?" (Question 7)

Interview question 5, with its emphasis on the development of policy, allowed us to examine the "how" of working toward consensus, while question 6 allowed us to examine the process in more depth as interviewees described a concrete example of an attempt to build consensus. The latter question had the interviewees think through the process of consensus building, and the responses were mostly examples of a process that was considered successful, even if the policy itself was not successful. Question 7 recognized that non-consensus could be as valid an approach to consensus building as anything else. First we focused on the frequency of responses within each interview questions that connected to each code, and then we carefully read through all of the excerpts to look for commonalities, repeated ideas, specific examples, and so forth.

We also used the observation notes and documents from the Group's meetings to determine its approach to consensus. We compared the Group's approach to the examples given by the interviewees to see how closely the favorable descriptions of consensus building lined up with a working coalition's actions.

**Research Question 3:** *What factors constrain or support educational organizations from reaching consensus on strategies or outcomes?* We designed two individual interview questions to understand the factors that support or constrain efforts

to reach consensus. Interviewees were asked about their assumptions around the effectiveness of consensus processes (Question 9), and they were asked to describe any barriers they have encountered or anticipate to encounter in building consensus around these decisions. The focus was on what might get in the way during consensus building efforts (Question 3). Additionally, throughout the interviews, categories emerged that could be seen as either supports or constraints towards consensus building. They included goals, intentionality, leadership, money, process and relationships. Excerpts from interviews were then coded to reflect factors that were identified within these categories that either aided or prohibited consensus-building efforts.

These areas were reviewed through the remaining interview questions to paint a broader picture of the beliefs related to consensus building by the interviewees, then summarized by category. By using code application and code co-occurrence charts to analyze the excerpts, commonalities began to emerge related to these factors within the categories.

**Research Question 4: What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan?** This question was tied to the following interview questions:

- "Is getting all education stakeholders to come to consensus important? If it is, why, and if not, why not?" (Question 4)
- "What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process?" (Question 7)

- "How have your policy actions impacted the educational experiences of students? What evidence do you have to support your claim(s)?" (Question 8)

Questions 4 and 7 answered the question indirectly and could link students to consensus building processes, while question 8 made a direct tie to student achievement.

To analyze the data generated by these questions to answer the research question, we chose to focus on frequency of responses. After all, we were looking for impact on and connection to students, not reforms or consensus like in the first three research questions. Therefore, we looked for the number of times students were mentioned in response to these questions, as well as overall in the interviews in their entirety. Using the number of total excerpts in each interview as a baseline, we then found a percentage of coded excerpts for students, high impact, and low impact across the three questions and the interviews in total. We did not comment on the responses in terms of consensus in and of itself, only as it related to students, because the research question is asking about student impact.

In addition to this process, we also looked at how the interviewees responded when asked to provide data that shows the impact of policy reforms on students. We pulled out all of the answers to question 8, and looked at whether or not data was provided. If it was not, we looked at how the respondents answered the question, and whether they chose to focus on students, consensus, reforms, or some combination of them. We then went a step further to look at what type of data was provided by the respondents that produced it. The final step was to pull in information from the participant observations. Again, in reference to the research question, we examined the

instances in which students were mentioned in the meetings, how they were mentioned (directly or through the context of a reform or process), and whether or not data was provided to support the group's impact on students. We looked at notes from all four meetings, and used the findings to provide additional, real world, in practice contexts for the statements made by the interview respondents.

The processes described here that were used to answer research question 4 painted an intriguing picture about the role of students in the work of state level reformers. This picture will be described fully in Chapter 4, and will be analyzed through the lens of the research question. The analysis was thorough, and garnered useful emergent patterns that speak to student impact.

**Data Reduction**

Because the researchers conducted multiple interviews and observations, it was necessary to practice "data reduction," where they selected and simplified the raw data in order to identify and investigate themes and patterns (Huberman & Miles, 1984). In addition to taking narrative notes during data collection, the team completed summary sheets that helped contextualize the information. For example, an observation summary sheet contained information such as who was involved in the Group's meetings, what main themes or issues were discussed, which research questions were relevant to the event, what new ideas were suggested by the event, and so forth (Huberman & Miles, 1984).

**Summary**

The methods referenced above were comprehensive in nature and purposefully developed in order to maximize learning and minimize bias. Based on our complex

process and intentional step-by-step approach, we were able take a tremendous amount of data and narrow it down to some key themes and discoveries. Through deliberate collaboration by our group, grounded in sound methodology, we took a vast collection of interviews, observations, and artifacts and iteratively made collective sense of this important information. Chapter 4 contains a thorough discussion of these key findings and analyses.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

**Introduction**

In our search for areas of common ground within Michigan's education reform landscape, we conducted twenty-one interviews of key stakeholders who influence decision-making both within and outside of the traditional education establishment. Additionally, we were also provided the opportunity to observe a coalition of organizations within Michigan's educational system as this committee worked its way toward consensus on a wide range of education reform topics. We were able to gain insight about reform issues that have the potential for broad-based support, as well as about those that are less likely to be embraced by diverse educational organizations, all with the knowledge that this type of information can help groups decide how to focus their time and resources in the pursuit of education reform initiatives. We also learned about how organizations approach the consensus building process, what factors support and hinder consensus building, and particularly, how much impact the consensus building process has on Michigan's students.

This chapter is organized by our four main research questions, with our findings and discussion included with each question. Our research questions are:

- Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?

- In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?

- What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?

- What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan?

We decided that this format will help readers more easily connect what we found in our data with what we felt was important about consensus building in Michigan education reform. When appropriate, we compared and contrasted the "global" landscape found in the interview transcripts, which included conversations with people from inside and outside of the education establishment, and the more "local" terrain of the meeting observations, with their focus on a single group that represents the interests of professional educators.

## Findings by Research Question

**Research Question 1: In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?**

**Interview findings**. The initial interview questions that answered Research Question 1 were "Where do you see possible consensus in education? Why?" (Question 2), and "What education reform topics are the most important issues today? Which topic might have the greatest opportunity for cross-sector consensus?" (Question 10) The researchers sorted the qualitative responses, using Dedoose, for questions 2 and 10 to summarize them into 11 possible topics for consensus, which are presented in Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1 displayed below. The term "response" is used to describe the number of interviewees who talked about the specified topic at least once during her or his interview.

Table 4.1

*Possible Topics Generated from Individual Interviews*

| Topics Generated | Number of Responses (Interview Question 2) | Number of Responses (Interview Question 10) | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Finance reform: school funding | 5 | 11 | 16 |
| Implement educator evaluation system | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| Redesign professional learning | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| Aligned state assessment system | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| Increase early childhood access | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Policies for personalizing learning | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Charter school accountability and reform | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Finance reform: retirement system | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Policies that balance teacher development prior to removal | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Incentivize dual enrollment related to career paths | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Policies for third grade reading proficiency | 3 | 0 | 3 |

Most interviewees had limited backgrounds in traditional education (based on their answers to our first interview question, which asked them to describe their role in education) and did not discuss specific solutions to current problems; however, they saw these eleven areas as critical topics where consensus had an opportunity to be built. Responses from the individual interviews revealed support for the urgency and need to revisit how we fund public education in the state of Michigan, including our retirement system for public school employees. Many interviewees also expressed the sentiment that school funding should be more equitable. An administrator for an education advocacy

group summed up this common feeling: "We believe that every child deserves a quality education regardless of what zip code they live in" (Interview 16). Continuing with that theme, many of the interviewees referenced the significant disparities between high and low wealth communities in terms of the quality of facilities and educators, as well as regarding the diversity of educational offerings, such as career and technical education. The focus was distinctly related to issues of equity and access within variable funding for public education.

The eleven broad areas generated by the interviewees' responses were categorized into three broad themes per the discretion of the research team, listed in order of highest number of responses: change how we fund schools and use current financial resources, increase teacher quality and effectiveness, and increase student learning outcomes. Per the recommendations and curiosity of many interviewees, a brief secondary data collection effort was created based on the data analysis of the eleven broad areas generated from the initial interviews. This data inquiry was sent out as an electronic communication in order to further refine the responses to achieve two purposes. First, it summarized the major themes developed through the twenty-one interviews. Second, it sought to further narrow the list of possible areas to seek the top themes that have the greatest opportunity for consensus. The three major consensus themes that emerged in the interviews are discussed below.

*Changing school funding.* According to responses given to questions 2 and 10 in the 21 interviews, the way we fund public education in Michigan appears to be the most likely area in which to build consensus. From Table 4.1, we can see that finance reform school funding (sixteen responses), finance reform-retirement system (six responses), and

increased access for early childhood (seven responses) are all mentioned by many of our informants as areas that garner support for potential consensus. Increasing early childhood programming is included in this category because it requires that K-12 funding be significantly restructured to create publically funded opportunities that are universally accessible.

One of the interviewees from an education organization summarized the themes of school funding and finance reform that spanned many of the interviews, which were often focused on providing equitable or adequate educations for all children. This person talked about the using a "litmus test" to determine the worth of a school or district. If she felt comfortable dropping her child off at a school, its facilities and faculty were deemed acceptable; if the "schools are terrible," with old buildings and no technology, she would not allow her child to attend. She also talked about school funding as it relates to providing equitable educational opportunities for all students: "I think that maybe if we could get consensus on this funding issue, and this idea of an adequacy study because I travel all over the state…working in buildings everywhere, I am horrified by the disparity" (Interview 2).

Changing the ways schools are funded throughout the state is not going to be easy, as described by the same interviewee:

> So, do I think this is going to be a gunfight? Absolutely, I don't care what anybody says. Those districts who are protected with their per-pupil are going to fight it, I don't care if they're at the table saying they're not. Yes they are. They will, and I think that's unfortunate because I really do believe that there should be

a certain standard level of education for every kid. Every kid should have a

certain level of experience. (Interview 2)

A member of an advocacy organization further elaborated on the topic of funding,

taking the focus off of students and placing it on adults through a discussion of

Michigan's retirement system issues. The Michigan Public School Employees Retirement

System (MPSERS) was reformed recently, placing some financial risk on the state's

School Aid Fund in addition to risk on individual school districts. Even though changes

were just made, debate continues about how to refine the system so more money ends up

supporting classrooms instead of pensions. This person stated: "The districts are all

paying about two billion, the state is paying one billion. So it's three billion…I think

there will be a renewed effort on it, and [reforms were] just done two years ago. We are

going to keep trying to do that, and it's not just us who cares. It's actually on the list; I

mean the House Republicans are working on their policies for 2015-16" (Interview 17).

Both of these interviews reveal the complexity of reforming school finance in the

state of Michigan, whether it's about providing adequate educational opportunities for all

students or funding retirement for school employees in ways that don't take money away

from classrooms.  While both prioritize funding reform as a top issue, both are

approaching the solution from very different perspectives and core beliefs about potential

reform strategies.

Another key topic in the funding discussion is early childhood programming.

One interviewee captured the essence of this dialogue: "I really feel like the early

childhood topic or issue has the greatest opportunity for consensus cross-sector, and I say

that because we've seen that" (Interview 20). It is a topic that many people are interested

in and feel compelled to support, including advocates from the business community, education system, local governments, and families. Early childhood programming is viewed as a cost-saving initiative as well as a way to support vulnerable populations; there is a significant front-end financial contribution, especially in less affluent communities, but it is believed to be a strategy that leads to long-term savings. The discussion around return on investment for early childhood program expansion was referenced by other interviewees as a key component for educating influential leaders who are in positions to bring about expansion of early childhood programming.

*Increasing teacher quality and effectiveness*. Other categories frequently mentioned by respondents as having potential for finding common ground were redesigning professional learning for educators and implementing the recent recommendations about teacher evaluation processes from the Michigan Educator Evaluation Committee (MCEE) (nine responses each). Two other areas surfaced that are both related to these areas: policies that balance teacher development with removal (five responses) and building an aligned state assessment system (eight responses). Comments from Interviewee 8 pulled together many of the key discussion points from multiple interviews. This person stated,

> I think that anything having to do with the quality of teaching is the most urgent
> problem we face because we keep trying to work our way around the fact that,
> actually, what happens in the classroom is where the action is. Trying to develop
> strategies…like building new curriculum or having different assessments, those
> are all pretty far from supporting the work of teaching. So, I think teaching
> quality, meaning supporting the adults who are willing to teach in this country, to

really do the best possible work, I think that's the most important policy strategy

we face. (Interview 8)

There are many facets to the development, support, and assessment of educators' skills

and performance that education reformers must consider, especially if they believe that

"sometimes you have to address the adult issues so that you can make it easier to create

an environment that's more conducive to learning" (Interview 15).

*Increasing student-learning outcomes*. Finally, there were three areas that

emerged related to student learning: policies for personalized learning (seven responses),

incentives for dual enrollment related to career pathways (five responses), and policies

related to third grade reading proficiency (three responses).



**Interview Questions 2 & 10: Overall Number of Responses for 11 Consensus Themes**

- Finance reform-school funding
- Redesign professional learning
- Implement educator evaluation system
- Aligned state assessment system
- Policies for personalizing learning
- Increase early childhood access
- Policies that balance teacher development prior to removal
- Finance reform-retirement system
- Charter school accountability and reform
- Incentivize dual enrollment related to career paths
- Policies for third grade reading proficiency

*Figure 4.1*. Bar graph showing individual interview responses, which indicate possible areas of consensus among key education stakeholders.

Interviewee 8 commented, "…I think you have to craft an argument that helps people understand why until we work on supporting better teaching by the people who are willing to do it, we're not going to get better learning for kids anytime until we work on that. And we have a long history of avoiding trying to work on that." Many respondents discussed different aspects of improving teacher quality, such as redesigning teacher preparation and ongoing teacher professional learning systems to better support teachers in meeting individual student needs. Another interviewee stated that "Third grade reading is the most important because you know ….it is now the Governor's priority" (Interview 17), which is a response to the fact that 35 other states have some degree of a statewide, systemic approach to early literacy. This interviewee believes that consensus would have been built around the issue of early literacy if Michigan had tried to adopt a two-pronged approach of screening and intervention for struggling elementary readers (without adding retention into the mix).

**Brief follow-up findings**. An examination of the follow-up interview data identified the areas of education reform that have the potential to build consensus by seventeen of the twenty-one educational stakeholders who responded (which was an 81% response rate). They were asked to respond to sentence stems that started with "I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on…," using a five-point Likert scale to express their opinions from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Each of the eleven statements is summarized below. The findings and discussion will be presented using the

three themes generated from the individual interviews: changing school funding, increasing teacher quality and effectiveness, and increasing student-learning outcomes.

*Changing school funding*. While data from the individual interviews indicated that how we fund public education in Michigan was a top area for consensus building efforts, the area of reforming the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System was not an area where our seventeen interviewees felt consensus could be reached. Nine people indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement, and only three reported that they agreed or strongly agreed. This is an important finding because 25 to 30% of local district school budgets are set aside for this retirement system. Additionally, nine interviewees disagreed or strongly disagreed that we could find consensus for reforming how we fund our public schools; only three agreed or strongly agreed, and five remained neutral. Given that school finance was mentioned repeatedly during the interviews as a possible area for consensus building, as well as observed during the Group's coalition building sessions, this is an important finding and indicates the complexity of building consensus for this important issue.



Reform Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System

| Response | Number of Responses |
|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 |
| Agree | 2 |
| Neutral | 5 |
| Disagree | 8 |
| Strongly Disagree | 1 |
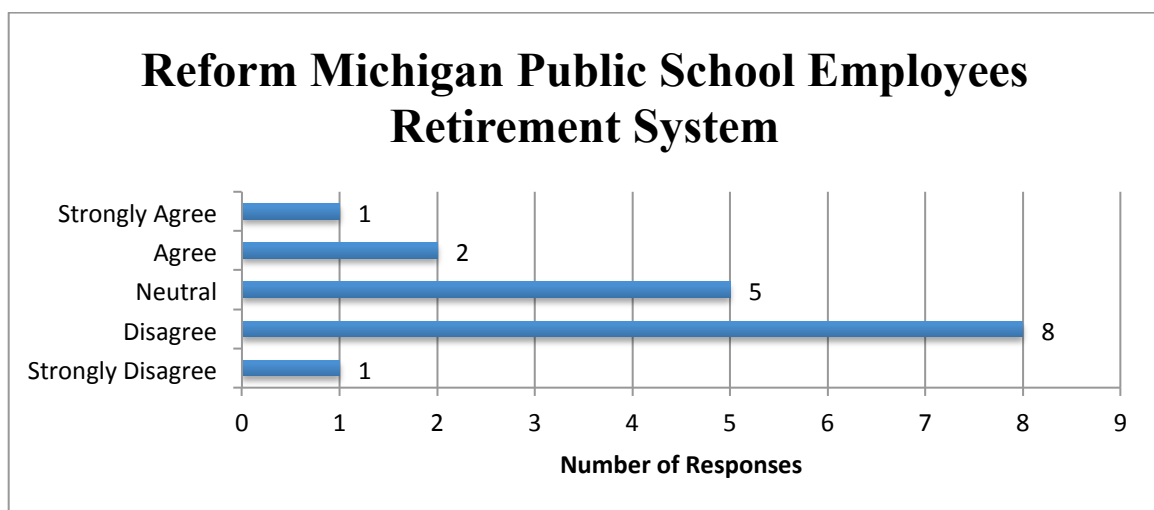
*Figure 4.2*. Results for reforming the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System to decrease the financial impact on local district budgets (approximately 25-30% currently).

**Reform Michigan Public School Funding Model**

| Response | Number of Responses |
|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 |
| Agree | 2 |
| Neutral | 5 |
| Disagree | 7 |
| Strongly Disagree | 2 |

Number of Responses
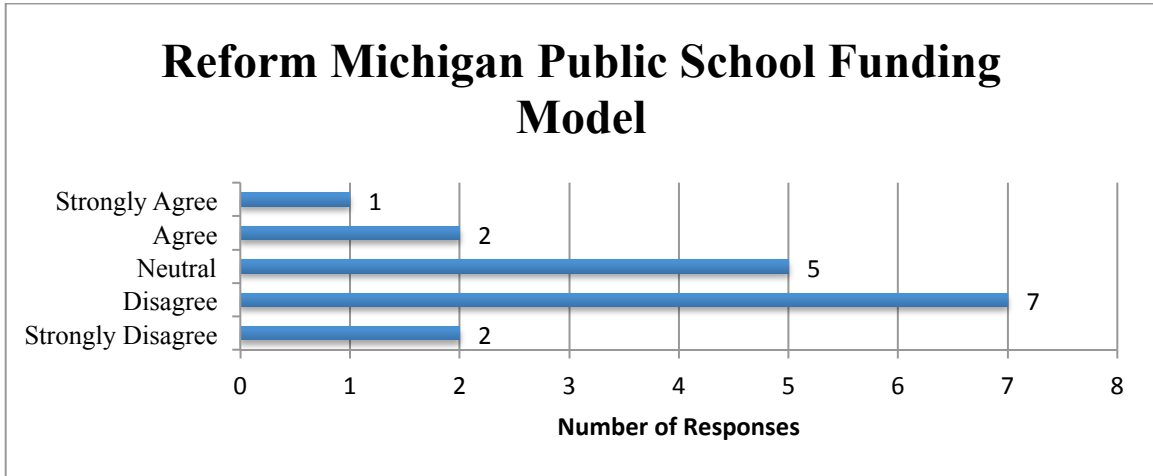
*Figure 4.3*. Results for reforming the Michigan public school funding model.

Contrary to the prior two statements, there was wide agreement that consensus could be built on increasing access to early childhood education programming and wrap-around supports. This topic is included in the school-funding theme because to increase the number of children accessing a high quality early learning program, an increased funding allocation from the Michigan School Aid Fund will be required. Fourteen interviewees strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, none disagreed or strongly disagreed, and three respondents remained neutral on the topic. This was a top area of consensus among all of the eleven reform issues presented in the follow-up interview. Given the current cross-sector coalition work in this area, early childhood programming serves as an example of intentional consensus building to reform education. This reform area, and its collaborative approach, was also frequently discussed in the individual interviews.
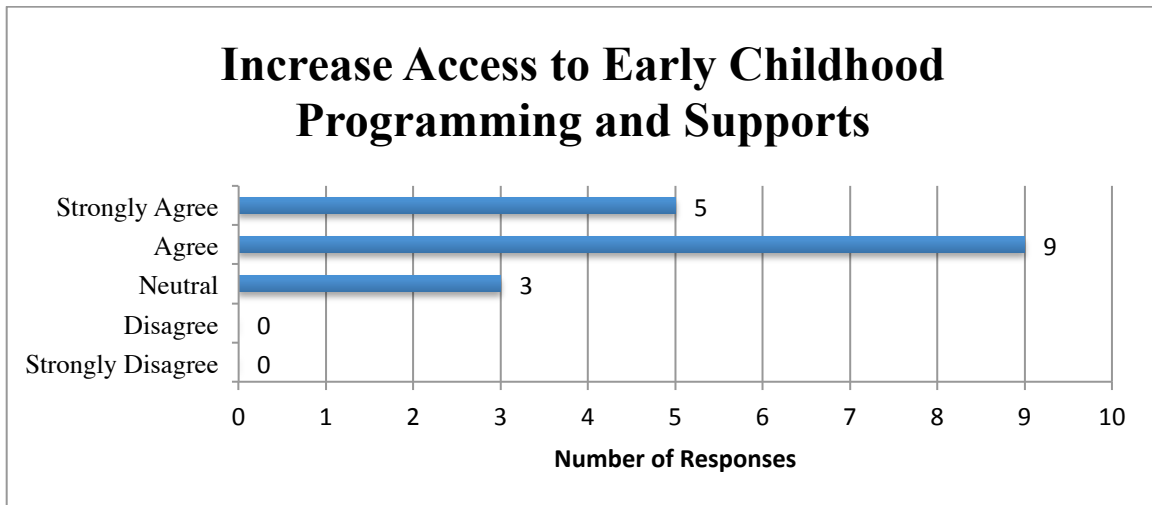
*Figure 4.4*. Results for increasing access to early childhood programming and wrap around supports.

***Increasing teacher quality and effectiveness***. Much like the area of early childhood programming, the process used by MCEE was often described as a model of intentional consensus building by individual interviewees. Recommendations about educator evaluation from this commission have not been formally adopted by the legislature; however, there was strong agreement for adoption and implementation, both from the individual interviews and brief follow-up. Eight people indicated that they agree or strongly agree that consensus can be reached and many anticipate our legislature will take action this next term. Interviewee 17 stated, "We had a vigorous discussion in Lansing about teacher evaluation that didn't make it at the very end [referencing the lame duck legislative session at the end of 2014]; it didn't make it over the finish line, but it probably will this time." Only two people indicated strong disagreement to the likelihood of finding consensus around educator evaluation, while another seven remained neutral on the topic.

## Adopt and Implement the Recommendations of MCEE

| Response | Number of Responses |
|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 |
| Agree | 7 |
| Neutral | 7 |
| Disagree | 0 |
| Strongly Disagree | 2 |

Number of Responses
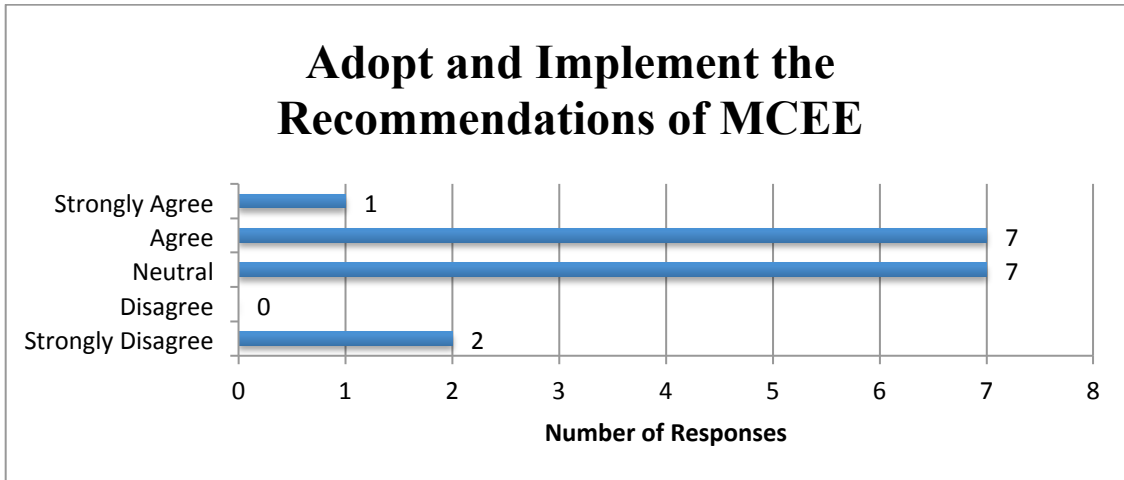
*Figure 4.5*. Results for adopting and implementing the recommendations of the MCEE.

Creating statewide priorities for professional learning and supports for teachers also gathered moderate agreement. This area focused on increasing the quality of educators by investing in their growth and development. Ten interviewees either agreed or strongly agreed that we could seek consensus in this area, and five disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of creating statewide priorities for improving the quality of teachers. This is an important finding as many individual interviewees discussed the need for a strong teacher development model throughout the length of teachers' careers. Interviewee 8 stated, "I'm saying the people who are teaching -- either people who are entering the workforce or people who are already out there -- deserve far more support to do that work well because the evidence shows that quality teaching makes an enormous impact on kids, and right now we've kind of combined either leaving it to chance that people will figure that out how to do it well, or punish people who don't do it well."

**Create Statewide Priorities for Professional Learning to Increase Teacher Quality**
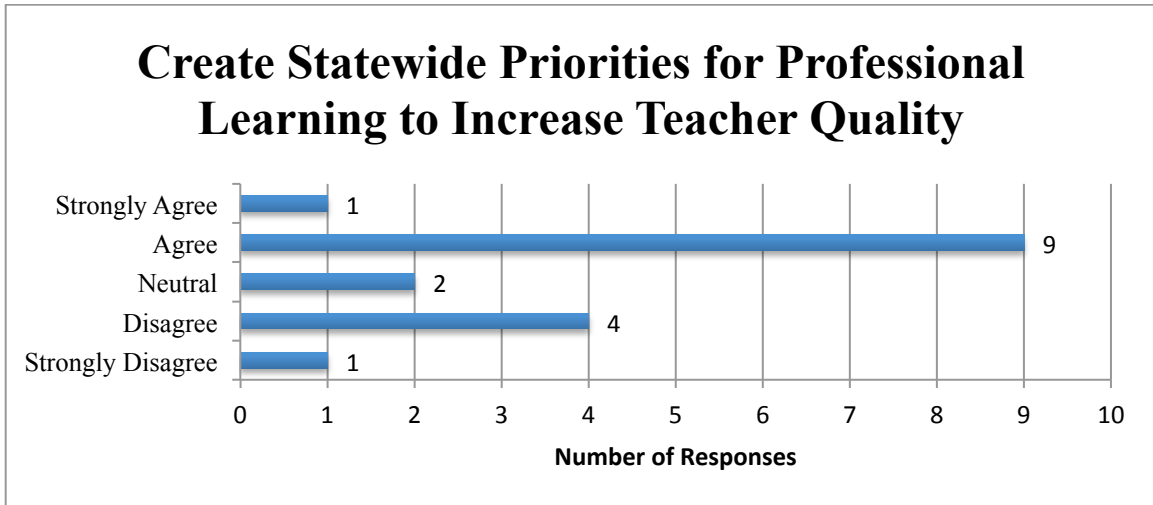
*Figure 4.6.* Results for creating statewide priorities for professional learning and supports for teachers and administrators to increase quality of educators.

Related to improving teacher quality, there was moderate support for adopting policies that strikes a balance between developing teachers' skills before identifying and removing ineffective teachers. Eight of the seventeen interviewees agreed or strongly agreed with this statement and six remained neutral. Interestingly, only one strongly disagreed and two disagreed with this statement. In sum, the greatest consensus for increasing teacher quality and effectiveness was for creating statewide priority for professional learning; however, the results for adoption and implementation of the MCEE and policies that support developing teachers prior to removal were fairly similar.

**Adopt Policies between Developing Teachers' Skills and Removal of Ineffective Teachers**
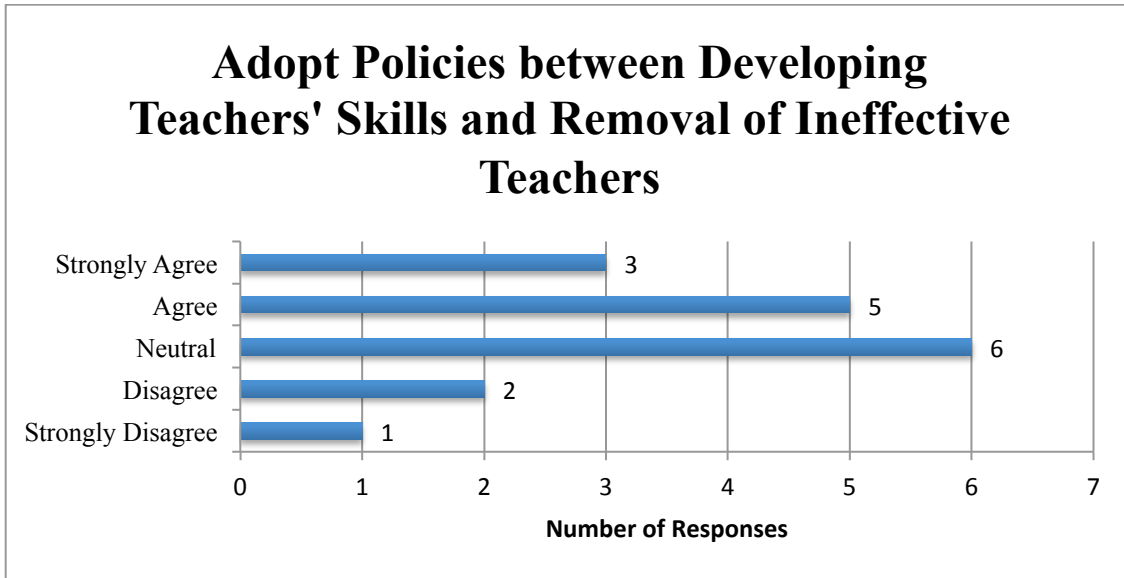
*Figure 4.7.* Results for adopting policies that strikes a balance between developing teachers' skills before identifying and removing ineffective teachers.

***Increasing student-learning outcomes***. There were five questions devoted to further explore if consensus could be sought in the area of student achievement. The first area explored the recent debate on student learning outcomes in charter schools as compared to traditional public schools. Michigan has the greatest number of charter schools in the nation. The seventeen interviewees were split in their belief that consensus can be built for amending the charter school statute to increase accountability for student performance (seven people strongly agree or agree, six disagree or strongly disagree, and four remained neutral). This is not surprising given the highly political tension that revolves around charter schools in Michigan.

## Increase Charter Accountability for Performance

| | |
|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 2 |
| Agree | 5 |
| Neutral | 4 |
| Disagree | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | 1 |

Number of Responses
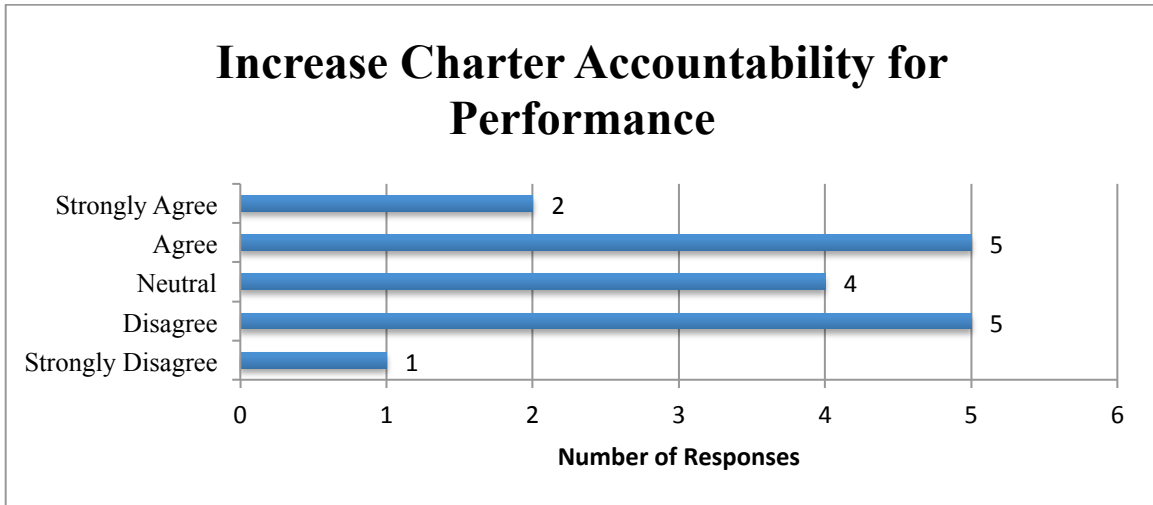
*Figure 4.8.* Results for amending the charter school statute to increase charter accountability for performance.

A second area, providing incentives to leverage dual enrollment policies to build and expand career pathway programming, was the top area to demonstrate consensus. Fifteen interviewees agreed or strongly agreed that dual enrollment and expanded career pathways are areas that could gain widespread support. Only two people remained neutral and no one reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is an important finding because a philanthropy leader indicated that this was the next area of coalition building their organization was considering investing resources; they were an instrumental convener with the early childhood coalition in prior years (Interview 20). This area also aligns with the current governor's practice of bringing together economic development-business and industry sectors along with the education sector to stimulate reform agendas.

## Incentivizing Dual Enrollment Policies
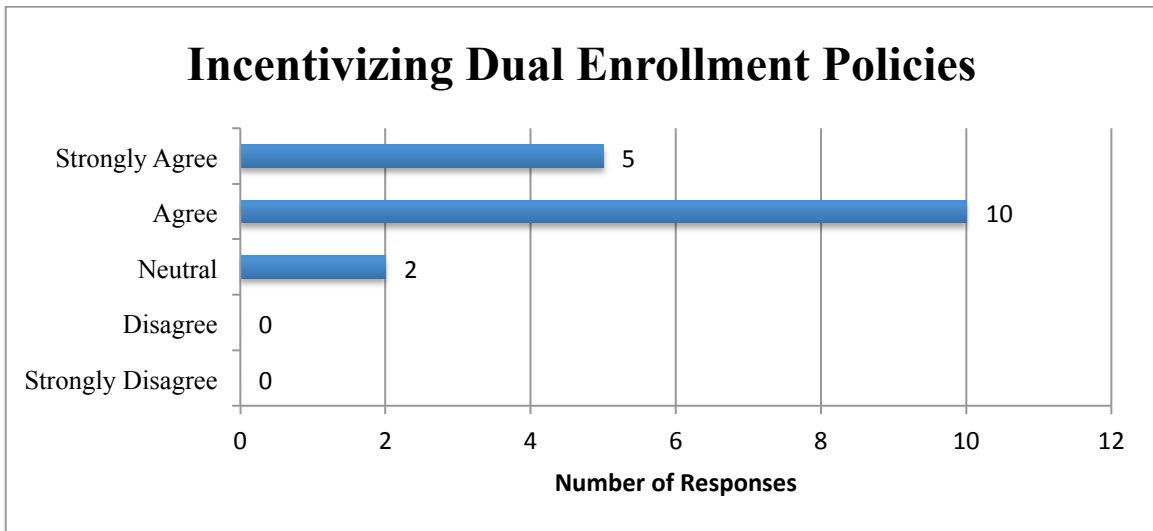
*Figure 4.9.* Results for incentivizing dual enrollment policies to build and expand career pathway programs in partnership with colleges/universities and business/industry.

Thirdly, interviewees indicated moderately low potential to build consensus in the area of creating an aligned state assessment system based on the current Michigan State Standards. Eight responses were neutral, which was the most of any of the eleven statements. Only seven indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed while one person disagreed and another strongly disagreed. Much debate related to the state assessment system has occurred during the last several years in Michigan so this result is not surprising. Michigan students will be taking a new state assessment this April 2015 called the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP), which replaces the forty-four-year-old Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). The high school assessment was also recently switched from the ACT tool to the SAT test for spring 2016.

## Create an Aligned State Assessment System

| | |
|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 |
| Agree | 6 |
| Neutral | 8 |
| Disagree | 1 |
| Strongly Disagree | 1 |

Number of Responses (0–9)
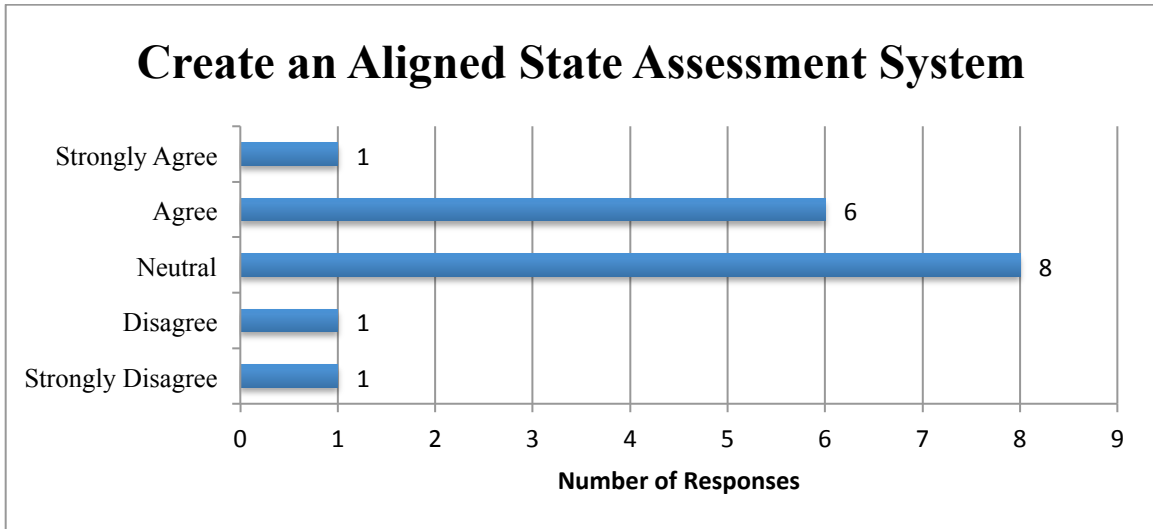
*Figure 4.10.* Results for creating an aligned state assessment system based on the Michigan State Standards.

A fourth area that began to emerge from the individual interviewees during the end of data collection was adoption of a single policy to ensure that all children meet reading proficiency targets by third grade. Only a small number of interviewees discussed this topic; however, it was included in many state-level discussions so it was included in the eleven statements as a potential area to directly increase student-learning outcomes. Interestingly, six interviewees disagreed with this statement and one strongly disagreed; eight people either agreed or strongly agreed while two remained neutral. This area appears to be equally divided as to whether consensus may be built.

**Adopt a Single Policy to Ensure all Children meet 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency Targets**

| Response | Number |
|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 |
| Agree | 6 |
| Neutral | 2 |
| Disagree | 7 |
| Strongly Disagree | 1 |

Number of Responses (0–8)
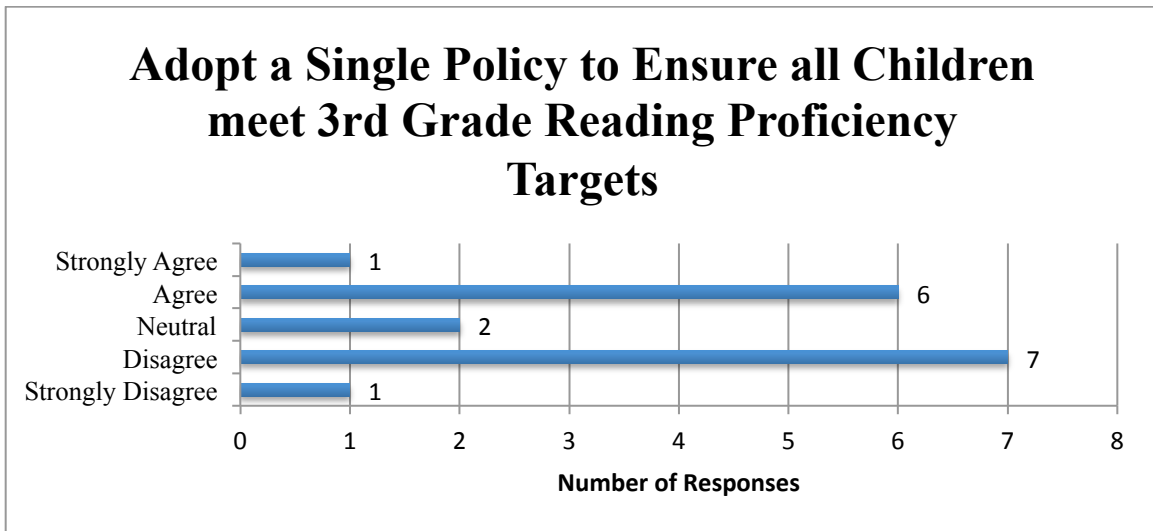
*Figure 4.11.* Results for adopting a single policy to ensure that all children meet reading proficiency targets by third grade.

Finally, the last statement explored if consensus could be built for policies that encouraged personalized learning models. Three different personalized learning methods were explored but revealed very different results. The top personalized learning method that has the potential to build consensus was blended learning, which uses technology-based instructional practices combined with a qualified teacher. Twelve interviewees agreed or strongly agreed that this was an important initiative, three remained neutral, and only two disagreed. Personalized learning methods that involve individual instruction by a teacher were the second area in which consensus might be built, with nine people agreeing or strongly agreeing. Personalized learning that incorporates a la carte choices for students had the most disagreement, with nine interviewees who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Taking an "a la carte" approach means choosing multiple, diverse, and small-scale methods to impact specific groups of students, or allowing students and their parents to choose their own vendors for parts of their education. Only six people agreed or strongly agreed with an a la carte approach to personalized learning.
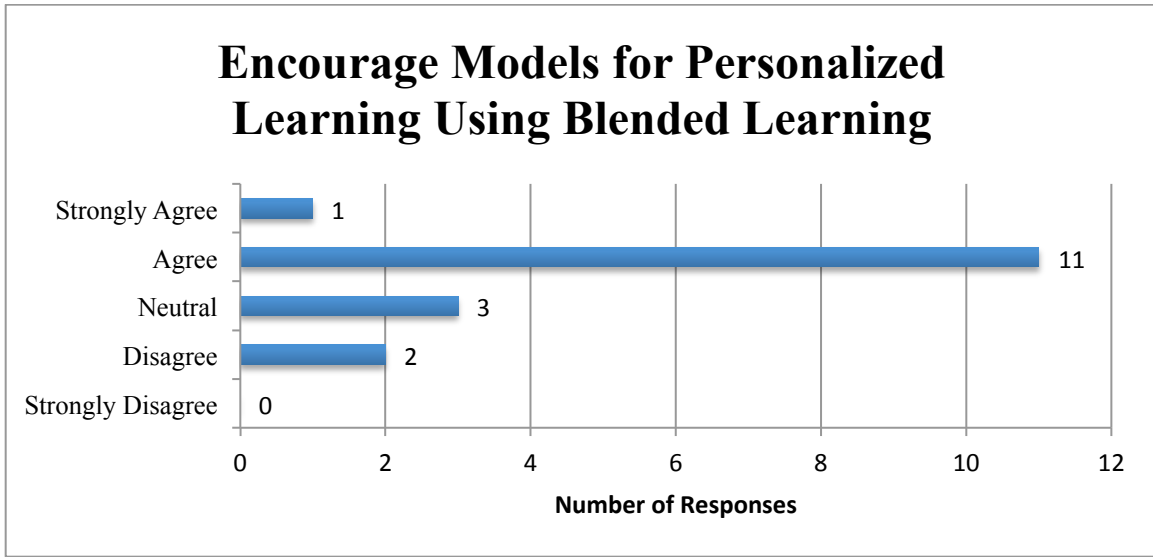
*Figure 4.12*. Results for adopting policies that encourage models for personalized

learning experiences by incorporating blended learning.
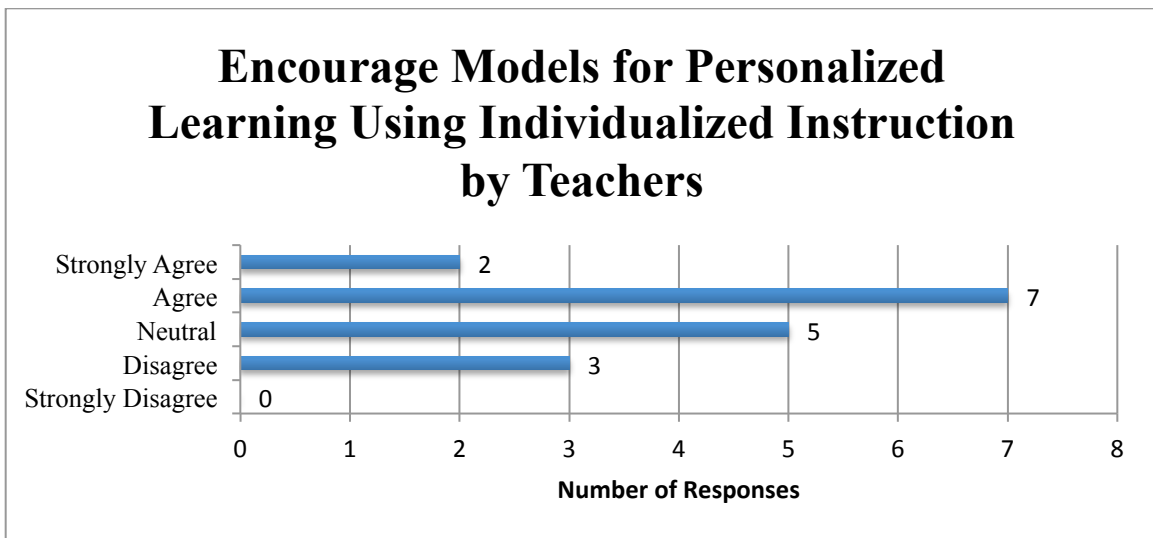


*Figure 4.13*. Results for adopting policies that encourage models for personalized

learning experiences by incorporating individualized instruction by a teacher.

**Encourage Models for Personalized Learning Using A La Carte Choices for Students**

| Response | Number |
|----------|--------|
| Strongly Agree | 1 |
| Agree | 5 |
| Neutral | 2 |
| Disagree | 7 |
| Strongly Disagree | 2 |

Number of Responses
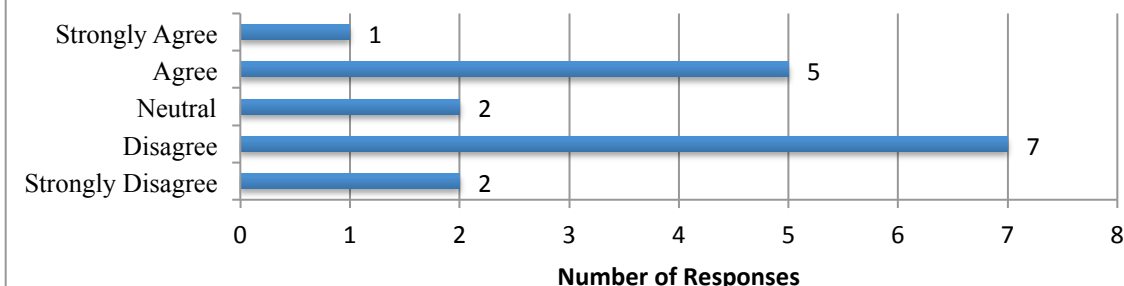
*Figure 4.14.* Results for adopting policies that encourage models for personalized learning experiences by incorporating a la carte choices for students.

A likely area to build a coalition to increase student-learning outcomes appears to be in the area of incentivizing dual enrollment policies to build and expand career pathway programming. This also matches the current political agenda related to economic and workforce development in the state of Michigan, as well as philanthropy interest areas.

**Observation findings**. The researchers also observed a coalition of stakeholders in Michigan who were working through the consensus building process to identify key areas of education reform, which we call the Group. This coalition's intention was to identify potential areas for reform and to build a cross-sector coalition to affect change to public education in Michigan. Key recommendations include: equitable access to high quality four-year-old preschool, early access to college credit, reduced redundancy in state reporting, and incentive funding for consolidation. In addition, three important issues warranted further exploration and study: access to high quality education; design

of a revised revenue and expense model upon completion of an adequacy study of public education funding; and establishment of a broad-based coalition to study, learn, mobilize and fund the recommendations. When comparing the data from the individual interviews with the participant observations, we see numerous areas of overlap, including the expansion of early childhood programming, early access to college credit, and the development of new models for school funding in Michigan.

**Discussion**.  Michigan legislators consider consensus to be what they call an "absolute majority threshold," which equates to capturing more than 50% of the votes. We realize that gaining universal agreement on any one issue is unlikely, so our study focused on finding the issues that have the highest chance of becoming common ground, based on the number of key education stakeholders in our study who agree they are important. We believe their diverse perspectives are representative of stakeholders throughout the state.

Brief Follow Up Summary: Total Agreement (Strongly Agree +
Agree) for 11 Statements

- Incentivize dual enrollment related to career paths — 88%
- Increase early childhood access — 82%
- 71%
- 59%
- Personalized learning-blended learning — 53%
- 47%
- Redesign professional learning — 47%
- 41%
- 41%
- Personalized learning-individualized teacher instruction — 41%
- 35%
- Policies that balance teacher development prior to removal — 18%
- 18%
- Implement educator evaluation system

*Figure 4.15*. Bar graph of brief follow up results displaying rank order of agreement on education reform issues.

Interestingly, early access to college credit, which is also known as "dual enrollment," was mentioned in both data sets and prioritized as an area of action with unanimous consensus within the Group's formal policy committee. One of the philanthropic organizations also expressed that this may be its next area, after early childhood programming, in which to begin building a state coalition for change. This foundation was instrumental in convening key cross-sector stakeholders together around early childhood, as well as funding the support needed to write a successful Race To The

Top -- Early Childhood grant for expansion of programming in Michigan. This area may be very ripe for coalition building at this time as demonstrated by this interviewee:

> I think, maybe I'm just hyped about the dual enrollment piece that the government just announced (referencing President Obama's free community college for all program). I think that one, it puts attention back on achieving a diploma which somehow we've lost perspective around; the other piece is that I think it does mean that you graduate prepared for a career. So whatever that next step is, it could be additional education; it could be a training situation. I think eventually that dual enrollment perspective, because I don't really think the money is that different and it would actually be a cost savings. But I think there's a lot of work that has to be done around bringing that to the public's attention. (Interview 20)

It would be difficult for people to argue against wanting students to graduate with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in life after school, so it is no surprise that all of the data we reviewed shows dual enrollment as a priority.

Finally, funding of public schools in Michigan was consistently discussed as an area that warrants consensus building; however, many of our interviewees indicated that this would be a difficult area to find common ground as reflected in the brief follow-up results. Observations from the Group's discussions with key stakeholders also indicated that this area would be particularly divisive. We observed the Group support an adequacy study for public school funding; however, any discussions about specifics, such as a state teacher salary system adjusted for cost of living adjustments, stirred great debate and organizational posturing. Given the complexity and enormous impact on existing organizations, it is recommended that an intentional, cross-sector, facilitated process be

created to work through this extremely important key reform area for public education in Michigan. It will require all sectors -- business, education, philanthropy, and government -- coming together to work through the details and potential solutions, as well as transition planning to reform the Michigan school finance model currently in place. It is clear that changing school funding will not be easy, but is a critical reform area that will significantly impact all students in Michigan.

**Summary of Research Question 1.** Our question centered on finding education reform issues that people could rally around and push for changes to make Michigan's public education system better for its students. In the individual interviews, the respondents indicated that finance reform and educator evaluation were two of the top issues that needed to be addressed in education reform. In a follow-up interview, in which people were asked to rate how likely it was that each issue was something that people could build consensus around, the two issues that surfaced as having high potential for common ground were dual enrollment and early childhood programs. The two lists of reform issues -- those that are deemed important, and those that are considered likely candidates for consensus -- are not identical, but they are similar enough to identify areas in which people might be willing to compromise.

**Research Question 2: In What Ways do Educational Stakeholders Approach Consensus Building around Policy Reform Efforts?**

**Interview findings**. To study this question within the interview data, we focused our analysis on three of the interview questions: "What role, if any, have professional organizations you're associated with played in the development of policy?" (Interview question 5), "Describe a time when you saw consensus built around policy reform. What

were your thoughts and reflections on this process?" (Interview question 6), and "What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process?" (Interview question 7). We also used the observation notes and documents from the Group's meetings to determine a local, focused approach to consensus.

   ***Building consensus: process and intentionality.*** Fourteen of the interviewees, or 66%, discussed things related to the process of coming to consensus, such as steps taken, procedures followed, timelines met, and intentional choices made that lead to agreements. The second-most coded concept was "intentionality," which we defined as people making conscious choices to communicate with others and sharing ideas, actively seeking endorsements, and bringing a diverse group of people to the table. These two ideas (identified in our coding process as "process" and "intentionality") are inextricably linked; a process code more broadly indicates what kind of actions unfold within reform efforts, while intentionality points out deliberate steps taken to create a pro-consensus environment.

   One step in consensus building that was mentioned multiple times were having research findings available and communicated to those involved in the process. One of the leaders of the reform group we observed talked about how important it is to "…study what is working and then make positive suggestions about improvement based on what's working" (Interview 14). Another interviewee, from the philanthropic sector, said that "...having quality research that's been done ahead of time that people can use in their conversations so people are aware of what the current context is…" was a critical foundation for creating a common understanding of what the problems are that need to be solved (Interview 20).

***Building consensus: relationships and leadership.*** "Relationships" and "leadership" were the next most frequently coded items for question 6 in the interviews (see Table 4.1). The interviewees recognized that having positive relationships between diverse groups of individuals and organizations could help move their policy efforts forward. For example, an interviewee asserted that the educator evaluation process was successful because "everybody was included and that's what made it work" (Interview 2). Another participant reflected that this process was "…the only one in years that I've seen that unfolded in a highly engaging, lots of people at the table kind of way" (Interview 7). However, several people noted that some of these relationships helped build solid reform proposals, whereas some relationships were tenuous at best and produced mixed results, especially when political partisanship is invoked. One person remarked that the political parties have superficial positive relationships, in which they are basically just tolerating one another until they don't need the votes (Interview 4).

Shared opinions and goals among a diverse group of stakeholders set the stage for proactive conversations. As the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness, or MCEE (which is described in more detail later in this section), for example, developed its recommendations, the leaders made conscious efforts to build alliances across unlikely organizations, such as unions and school administrator groups. Each organization had its own unique goals, but their desire to collectively come up with a solution to the problem of monitoring educator quality sustained their involvement in the process. Also, the relationships within the group were healthy enough to survive disagreements; people were still welcomed back to the table after voicing dissenting opinions. "There is something about being on a team that when you're pulling together for a common good

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and so there are disagreements within that team, but because people are united in trying to do something, it helps momentum to arrive at some point of solution" (Interview 21). In the case of teacher evaluation reform, everyone was mostly on the same page, and the relationships within the coalition held everyone together. However, one of the interviewees voiced concern that "…everybody's really nice so everybody plays well with each other…but they don't have any sort of the glue that keeps them together" (Interview 20).

Sometimes, though, creating meaningful relationships is perceived as difficult in the world of education reform, especially since there are so many different opinions about tough topics like privatization of schools and school funding. Education organizations depend on their relationships with legislators to lobby for their interests and goals. However, term limits, which were voted into Michigan's state constitution in 1992, make it difficult to develop meaningful relationships even though they are crucial for compromise and consensus; "…arguably one of the things that's lost with term limits is the ability of those legislators to build relationships with each other that matter" (Interview 18). Interest groups are becoming more significant because they offer legislators easy and quick access to information about policy issues, but the relationships between lobbyists and legislators are often limited to a superficial level. As soon as their relationship deepens, the legislator's term is over and the lobbyist has to start from scratch with a new politician. One interviewee likened this dynamic to a famous movie in which the protagonist relives the same day over and over again: "Because of term limits and high turnover and constant churn of legislators coming through that have to be re-educated, it's like perpetual Groundhog Day" (Interview 10).

Seven of the interviewees talked about the importance of having a good leader on board to facilitate the consensus building process. The leader should be someone who listens, reflects, and steers the work of the group based on their input (Interview 3). It was also noted multiple times that the leader needs to invite the right people to the table, and she or he should pay attention both to who is included and who is not. The reform group we observed for this study was referenced by two interviewees as having strong leadership. At its start, the group was led by a facilitator who not only brought the participants through a thought process around the changes that are needed in Michigan, but also "galvanized" the group, exciting them enough to take action for the benefit of Michigan's 1.6 million students. A person who was a part of the group remarked, "If you lead it in a thoughtful way and plan it extremely thoughtfully, you can bring a group along" (Interview 14).

***Reform issues.*** In the interviews, teacher evaluation (also referred to as educator evaluation or teacher quality) was the most frequently cited example of a reform issue around which consensus was built in recent memory. It was mentioned by one-third of the respondents in response to interview question 6, while Proposal A was the second most frequently referenced example of successful consensus building. In fact, teacher quality was the most frequently mentioned reform in response to this question, was the second-most cited reform discussed throughout all questions in twenty-one interviews, and all of the interviewees talked about teacher evaluation at some point during our conversations.

*Teacher evaluation.* The educator evaluation process that our study's participants discussed officially began in 2011, when Public Act 102 established the Michigan

Council for Educator Effectiveness (MCEE). The MCEE was a temporary group of six main council members, appointed by the state legislature, that was charged with identifying and recommending state evaluation tools for teachers and school administrators, a student growth and assessment tool, and changes to the teaching certificate requirements. The council did a thorough job of searching for answers; it commissioned a pilot study of evaluation tools, consulted with experts, examined research, talked to practicing educators, and opened their meetings to the public. The MCEE invited people from all walks of life, including legislators from opposite sides of the aisle, to weigh in on the topic of educator evaluation (MCEE, 2013).

The council's efforts to cover every base, so to speak, resulted in recommendations in 2013 that were universally accepted by diverse groups such as unions, administrator organization, teachers, and legislators. The MCEE's recommendations, as written, stalled out in the legislature because one person opposed them after receiving political pressure from his supporters. One interviewee remarked, "I think all of us did believe that these bills were going to fly, especially when the budget made appropriation…and the governor stated on numerous occasions -- including his State of the State address -- that this is a priority. So to see one person be able to roadblock, it's mind boggling" (Interview 2). However, the process itself and the resulting recommendations are widely heralded as a shining moment in Michigan education reform history, as a broad range of very different people and organizations built consensus around a contentious issue.

*Proposal A.* Another example of an education reform issue that gained broad-based, cross-sector support was Proposal A in 1994, which was an attempt to eliminate

funding inequities among Michigan's districts (Mason & Arsen, 2010). With this plan, "one of the key elements was that the per pupil allowance money would follow the student" (Interview 9). Both houses of the Michigan legislature agreed upon a plan that reduced property taxes and increased sales taxes in order to fund schools, and Proposal A was overwhelmingly approved by voters in a March 1994 special election. As a result, school funding depends greatly on local property values and student enrollment. Three of our interviewees, or 14.2%, referenced Proposal A as a success when asked about an example of consensus building among a diverse group of stakeholders.

*Intentional non-consensus*. For this study, we define intentional non-consensus as the purposeful avoidance of consensus or compromise as a tactical strategy. With interview question 7, we directly asked our participants about the impact of intentional non-consensus on the education reform process. Out of the twenty-one interviews, three people (or 14.2%) said that this approach is a positive strategy and that they (or their organizations) use it frequently. The majority of interviewees (eleven out of twenty-one, or 52.4%), however, believed it was a negative way to create change. The rest of the group remained neutral or unclear on the topic.

Although the focus of this study is consensus building, we recognize that actively working against compromise and consensus is a strategy that can, and often does, lead to policy changes at all levels. Since this is the case, we will discuss the significance of our findings around interview question 7 later in this chapter.

Table 4.2

*How Interviewees Responded to Interview Question 6, "In What Ways do Educational*

*Stakeholders Approach Consensus Building around Policy Reform Efforts?"*

| Factor that Influences Consensus Building | Definition of Factor (As defined by the researchers for the purposes of coding) | Percent of Interviewees Who Discussed Factor |
|---|---|---|
| **Process** | Steps, procedures, timelines and intentionality that lead to consensus building | 66.7 percent |
| **Intentionality** | Attempts are made to include multiple stakeholders in consensus building and to move toward compromise | 52.4 percent |
| **Relationships** | Personal contacts, perceptions, and history between people and groups that support consensus building | 47.6 percent |
| **Leadership** | Leadership skills and/or position aid in the development of consensus building | 33.3 percent |
| **Goals** | Goals of the organizations, political groups, or personal agendas are aligned with a common goal | 23.8 percent |
| **Money** | Cost of reform or distribution of financial power than aids consensus building | 9.5 percent |

**Emergent themes in interviews**. Consensus building is linked to all of the

factors previously mentioned: the consensus building process itself, the choices attached

to moving the process forward (intentionality), the relationships that must exist in order

for common ground to be discovered, and the leadership needed to orchestrate

everything. In addition to these specific factors that we coded in the transcripts, the

following three themes emerged as important to the organizations' approaches to

consensus building: *politics* (discussed by eleven of the interviewees, or 52.4%),

*communication* (seven interviewees, or 33.3%), and *time* (five interviewees, or 23.8%).

This patient, deliberate, and often time-consuming approach to changing policies is something that multiple stakeholders recognize and believe to be an approach that is valuable. A member of an advocacy organization discussed how important the negotiation process is before a bill even hits the legislature for a vote, while a philanthropist stated how critical time factors into building productive relationships (Interviews 17 & 18).

**Observation findings**.  The state-level professional educational organization's school reform task force, or "the Group," allowed the research team to observe four meetings, which represented two stages of their three-tiered approach to building consensus and pushing for reform. This gave us a glimpse into a local, limited example of consensus building among people within the education establishment.

***Building consensus: process and intentionality.***  The first stage of the Group's process involved naming the challenges that public education currently faces, and it split into "study" sub-groups and a "strategy" sub-committee, based on invitations from the Group's leadership team. The study groups spent time researching issues that were going to require long-term reform efforts, while the strategy group centered its discussions on immediate and short-term policies and system changes. The second stage of the Group's approach was the development of widely supported recommendations from a coalition of established and respected educational organizations to be given to the state legislature. The final stage of the Group's plan was to become more "global" by engaging a larger coalition of stakeholders, including business leaders, politicians, families, social service providers, and health providers, among others.

We observed the first two consensus-building stages in two study meetings and two strategy meetings, and the participants discussed moving into the third stage at the end of their final strategy session. The Group unanimously felt that they would need to find an appropriate liaison from outside of their organizations that could help move the recommendations through the legislature. A strategy session participant said, "We hope we have the credibility if we end up in the room. We may not be invited" (Observation notes). This statement was followed by a quick discussion about which "education outsider" would have the required credibility to be invited into conversations with legislators. A few prominent business leaders were considered as possible allies, but they did not decide upon one person at any of the meetings we observed.

*Building consensus: relationships and leadership.* At each meeting, it was clear that there were three or four people who were steering the Group, and these people dominated most of the conversations. All voices were welcomed and heard, but these leaders, in conjunction with the session facilitators, controlled the flow of the conversations. It was recognized several times, however, that relationships within the Group and within the participants' respective organizations were important to maintain "so we don't go backwards" (Observation notes). Several participants also wondered aloud how their own organizations would receive the recommendations agreed upon by the Group, and others offered suggestions about how to "sell" the reform ideas and develop buy-in at an organizational level.

During a strategy session, for each recommendation, the facilitator-moderated discussion around decision-making, with comments and questions like "Is there support from the group?" and "Do we stick with this statement, or does it raise red flags?"

(Observation notes). The facilitator, who was intentionally chosen and positioned for her skillset, asked the group if it agreed with each recommendation put forth, opened the floor for discussion, and redirected the conversation back to whether or not the recommendation was what the group wanted.

 ***Reform issues.*** The reform topics explored and debated at the Group's meetings overlapped quite a bit with our interview findings (see Table 4.2), although some issues were discussed at the meetings that were not emphasized in the interviews, such as teacher compensation, adequacy studies, and early warning systems. Even though the two lists only explicitly share two items -- funding and teacher quality -- it can be argued that the rest of the topics are intertwined with one another. For example, when people talk about privatization of schools, which was a prominent topic in the interviews, they also often talk about the need for the accountability of those schools in order to provide an adequate or equitable education. Similarly, talk of assessments often leads into discussions of accountability, and test scores can affect school funding. In essence, then, the interviewees and the Group's participants were all concerned about the same reform issues, but from different perspectives, in varying degrees, and with different priorities.

Table 4.3

*Top Reform Topics Addressed in Interviews and Observations*

| Rank of Reform | **Interviews** - based on how many interviewees talked about the reform | **Observations** - based on number of times reform was discussed in both study and strategy meetings |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Funding | Funding |
| 2 | Teacher quality | Accountability |
| 3 | Privatization/charters/choice | Adequacy/equity |
| 4 | Assessments | Teacher quality |

**Emergent themes in observations**: **politics**, **communication, and time**. In the four Group meetings that we observed, there was urgency to the work as the participants aimed to build consensus around education reform issues and craft recommendations to put forth before the end of 2014, which was the end of many legislators' terms. The group felt hopeful that some of their ideas could be acted upon in December 2014, and they also knew that many of their agenda items would have to wait until the new House and Senate members settled into their roles. They also knew that the legislators' reception of their ideas was dependent on the credibility and communication skills of their messenger, so he or she had to be chosen with intent.

On many occasions, the Group discussed how they should convey their messages and recommendations to external audiences. Participants not only had to worry about crafting recommendations for the legislature, but they also had to "sell" the ideas to their

own constituents. While they were discussing reform issues at their meetings, there were multiple re-directions by the facilitator as well as by some of the more politically-savvy participants to ensure that every recommendation that was going forward was accompanied by a clear rationale that all audiences -- legislative and education organization alike -- could understand. Communication of their recommendations needed to be clear, timely, and persuasive for their multiple audiences.

The Group recognized that putting forth recommendations during a lame duck legislative session was a delicate matter that required the right messages, the right messenger, and the right timing. If they didn't pay attention to these three elements -- and the political arena in which they were engaging -- their ideas and solutions would fail to be heard and acted upon.

**Discussion.** *Educator evaluation process = successful consensus building.* The recent efforts to build a coherent and effective evaluation system for Michigan's educators were mentioned time and again by our interviewees as a process to emulate. In fact, all of the people we interviewed named teacher quality and evaluation as important reform issues. Their perspectives were diverse -- from professional organizations, higher education, the legislature, and advocacy groups both conservative and liberal -- but they all respected the process, the leadership, and the recommendations put forth by the MCEE.

One of our interviewees described the evolution of the MCEE's policy recommendations as an "example of what can happen if organizations…develop the capacity to have ambassadors for their perspective, their agenda, and their points of view" (Interview 7). She pointed out that they were ambassadors in the true sense of the

word because they were empowered not only to be "mouthpieces for the organization, but to be listeners and absorbers of what others have to say." Their function was to bring ideas back to their home organizations and make the case for the larger group; this advocacy enabled them to be seen as viable contributors to the consensus building process by the others around the table. This concept of ambassadors matters because it indicates that perhaps the consensus building process worked because people felt that they were listened and heard, that their voices and their affiliations were valued.

Nowhere in the interviews was it mentioned that money was a key issue in the creation of the educator evaluation recommendations. Participants in the process were not asked to relinquish funds or spend money; rather, their focus was on finding the correct tools and processes for the job at hand. It is possible, we believe, that this de-emphasis of money made evaluation a low-stakes issue, and perhaps created a space in which consensus could be built. Proposal A was all about school funding, but it did not ask wealthy districts to give up money; rather, it leveled the playing field while maintaining the status quo.

It is important to note that all of our interviewees referred to past examples of consensus building and not to their current approaches to consensus building. This leads us to wonder if organizations are not currently involved in building consensus with other organizations on education reform issues, or if their current efforts are getting stuck somewhere in the middle of the process.

***"What" and "how" of consensus building.*** The two most frequently used codes for interview question 6, which asked about approaches to consensus, were "process" and "intentionality." Process is more about the broad strokes that unfold as people try to find

common ground, while intentionality refers to the specific actions taken to create an environment that is ready for consensus. For example, one interviewee discussed the importance of having the right facts and data to convince people to act upon certain reforms; this was coded as "process" because it is a basic procedure followed that lays a foundation for understanding and compromise. She also said, "One of the things that's vitally important is to have the counterpunch to these things, and that's really what we tried to do with our task force report" (Interview 10). This comment was coded as "intentionality" because it signifies a deeper digging into what's going to help establish an atmosphere where ideas are shared and debated before reform decisions are made.

Having these two codes is important because they offer different, nuanced ways to label the act of consensus building as it happens. It is a complex process, and having two codes that explicitly point out the "what" and "how" of consensus building helps us reveal that complexity. The two codes help us dig deeper into the myriad decisions that are made throughout attempts to find common ground. Building consensus is much more than sitting down and finding a quick solution; it requires time, communication, and commitment by a group of people carrying very diverse perspectives, knowledge, and goals.

As described in the interviews, informal and formal coalitions developed where the relationships between organizations intersected with their interests. One interviewee stated that an organization should identify its areas of need and hope that its list matches that of equally or more powerful organizations. We have found, however, that finding common ground with others takes more than hope. There must be a "convening" of sorts, a deliberate bringing-together of people and groups to influence or build relationships

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(Interview 7), and this convening should be diverse enough to build a powerful, cross-sector team able to move initiatives forward with broad support. This first act of "coming to the table" enables the rest of consensus building to occur; it is where issues, information, and opinions are brought forth and made clear. Communication -- both sharing information and listening -- is integral during this stage of consensus building. It allows participants to learn about the costs and benefits of working together, and their belief systems become evident when they align themselves with like-minded colleagues in what we would consider to be advocacy coalitions, as described by Sabatier and Weible (2007).

*People matter.* During the course of this study, we learned that the MCEE successfully achieved its objectives through a combination of good leadership, relationships among a diverse group of participants, and shared beliefs about education in Michigan. As a first step toward creating a coalition, leaders must initially decide to link with other groups, and "relationships are built so proactive conversations can take place" (Interview 2). One interviewee discussed the concept of strength in numbers as coalitions develop; "We find common ground with those associations and we help advocate for their issues when they need it" (Interview 19). Once the connection is made between individuals and groups -- and they have common interests to hold them together -- then they can start doing the deeper work of building consensus and pushing for reform.

State-level education reform requires that coalitions convince legislators about the need for changes and how they should be implemented. Much of this dynamic depends on the relationships the coalitions -- and lobbyists -- build with the legislators. Without the ear of the legislator, and without her or his understanding of the issues at hand, it is

nearly impossible to advance a reform agenda. Term limits have changed the development of relationships between legislators and their would-be suitors, and, in this new political landscape, time really makes a difference. There is a loss of knowledge about the history and context of reform issues because the legislators simply have not been around long enough. This dynamic results in a loss of time for everyone involved; lobbyists and coalitions have to build trust and knowledge base in each new senator or representative, re-starting from the beginning every few years. One interviewee remarked about the fact that MCEE's process took two years to put forth recommendations. "I don't think that's unusual at all that something would take that long because you actually have to build relationships with the folks that you're working with" (Interview 18).

One of the interviewees mentioned that she had some experience with using the Alinsky model (Goldblatt, 2005) of community organizing, and her example revealed an interesting case of successful consensus building. There are four questions that form the foundation of the model: "why" (drivers, objectives, principles, scope), "what" (requirements), "how" (ideal solution to support requirements), and "with what" (physical components). Future studies of this model and its relationship to consensus building, as well as to other models like the ACF (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) may shed some additional light on how consensus building works.

***What's missing in the data?*** When examining the data, there were two things missing in what interviewees deemed as important to the consensus building process: the goals of the individual organizations, and the money needed to bring about changes in education. Only five interviewees (or 23.8% of the total interview pool) mentioned goals specific to individual organizations in their responses to interview question 6. In most

responses, consensus building was not about selfish, niche goals; it was about a greater good in all consensus-building examples that were described. Conflicting goals can certainly be a barrier to consensus building, but they were not obvious factors in the examples that we learned about in the interviews.

Another omission from the examples was the issue of money, with only two people mentioning funding of any sort (or 9.5% of interview pool). Again, money can block consensus building (or progress toward a goal in general), but it wasn't something significant enough to stall progress in the examples. This may indicate that money doesn't have to be the main focus of the consensus building process. There is a common perception among especially legislators that all reformers want is money, but it is essentially absent from the consensus building success stories. One interviewee stated, even before we asked our first question, "…I generally have a deep aversion to [the term education reform] because it means you're trying to take money from somebody and give it to yourselves" (Interview 9).

*Successful processes are replicated.* The Group's process mimics the teacher evaluation process, which has been considered a successful attempt of consensus building. Its members engaged in democratic dialogue, in which they represented the interests of their organizations and participated in a democratic process to decide upon education policy recommendations. Their approach to consensus building was similar to that of the MCEE in that its leadership made a concerted effort to bring a diverse group of people to the table. In this case, however, the group was limited to, for the most part, similarly minded educational professional organizations. Ultra-conservative groups or legislative representatives, for example, were not invited to participate. The Group did

recognize, however, that it would need to expand its reach in order to create alliances and build consensus with people from all sectors (e.g. business, families, politicians) who can influence policy decisions at the highest levels.

Like the MCEE, the group we observed spent many months studying and debating the issues before putting forth any recommendations. The strategy team, then, was able to decide upon the best way to deliver the recommendations to the legislature. They recognized that communication of their positions was critical, so they developed clear messages and chose someone to deliver their recommendations that had a good chance of positively influencing the legislators.

If successful, perhaps the Group will share its methods with other coalitions that are trying to find ways to move education reform forward. Their approach could be replicated through explicit instruction of facilitation methods, a move that would be appreciated by at least three of our interviewees who specifically talked about the importance of the person who leads the work. One of the Group's leaders suggested that "…if you got observations about things that help the process go through, things that you've seen work and certain things that made things fall apart, that's helpful for people who do group facilitation." Organizations need to learn from good facilitators, and it would behoove them to train some of their own staff members to move people through the steps it takes to reach common ground.

***Avoiding consensus as a strategy.*** The lack of effort to build consensus, or the lack of belief that it can get done, has major consequences on reform efforts. When work toward common ground stalls out, there is often finger pointing about whose fault it is that things are not moving forward. One interviewee stated, "There's some tendency in

policy making to be blaming somebody, and the minute you're blaming some actor, then you're bound to get a lack of consensus" (Interview 8). This person went on to describe the deliberate steps taken in the MCEE's work to not allow one person or organization to be blamed for anything or to end up as the "villain." Because the MCEE's leaders created a safe space in which people from all sides of the issue felt respected, its policy reform efforts were deemed successful. "I think a big part of it was just people wanted to be heard, they wanted to have some acknowledgement that their concerns were valid and even though they didn't get everything they wanted, I think that was the key to really getting [a traditionally uncooperative organization] on board. Everybody was pretty shocked [the organization] had stayed supportive of this legislation throughout" (Interview 6).

A lack of consensus building also may not be intentional, and in a complex political system, groups and legislators find themselves focused on things other than what they need to do to build consensus. In fact, as several of the interviewees reminded us, the goals in the Michigan legislature are fifty-six House votes, twenty Senate votes, and the blessing of the governor. Legislators tend to prefer consensus over just securing the bare minimum numbers of votes -- "We prefer the all happy, not the partially happy" (Interview 12) -- but it is not the ultimate goal.

According to one of our interviewees, when the strategy of not building consensus becomes intentional, however, "…it can be a successful strategy. I think that if you make that your only strategy, or a significant part of your strategy as an association, I think you immediately render yourself less effective. But, in the same light, it can be an effective strategy. If you abuse it, I think your relevancy in the education world gets called into

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question" (Interview 15). Another interviewee had a more candid statement about how things work: "I'm sure we will publicly say how great consensus is, as opposed to just brass knuckles politics and beating into submission the people who don't share your opinion" (Interview 17).

Another approach to consensus has to do with the perception by some stakeholders that policy work is a political game, one that has clear winners and losers, even if the outcome costs too much. This person explained:

> I'm not happy sometimes with bills that pass, that we may not endorse, but we agree not to oppose them even though they've made some sentence changes. We know they're going to pass anyway whether we oppose it or not. That's all part of this game, the idea that certain groups no matter what are going to keep opposing because they feel if they make any concession, it's just going to make things worse. (Interview 2)

Another interviewee, considered an outsider by the educational establishment, echoed this idea that blocking consensus is a valid move within a game: "…I notice it so much on the right-hand side where they are so determined to, at all costs, sacrifice everything good to make a political point" (Interview 19). Even though there is a shared perception by several of our participants that there is much more agreement than disagreement around major education reform issues, sometimes the need to assert one's political stance gets in the way of moving toward possible solutions.

Keeping an advocacy coalition small and intimate can be an approach to intentional non-consensus in which people and organizations are carefully selected for the how well they can push an agenda forward. As someone on the outside of one of

these small coalitions stated, "Intentional non-consensus is really what the corporate reformers are practicing, because for them to go out to the broader community and sort of sell their snake oil, I think the vast majority of people would realize that it's just snake oil" (Interview 10). Coalitions that want to work the legislature instead of cooperating with a broader group of people often will keep their numbers small, pull legislators aside for "elevator pitches" about their interests, offer money for votes, and settle for only having to find fifty-six Republicans or Democrats to agree with them.

Sometimes, people are left out of the education reform conversations altogether, even if they share the policy beliefs of other reformers. This can lead to a major disconnect between unions, advocacy groups, educational organizations, and the people working on the ground. In fact, "…folks who are actually doing the work of educating are not brought into the reform and they are also left feeling like they're not respected and that their opinions don't matter. We end up losing really good people from the profession because they just don't want to have to deal with it anymore" (Interview 6). An exclusionary approach to consensus can alienate many of the people who will be needed to implement policy changes; in the world of education, it would be impossible to make significant changes without the involvement and buy-in of teachers.

**Summary of research question 2**.  Our second research question -- "In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?" -- was answered in ways both expected and surprising. We found that some people and groups approach consensus deliberately and inclusively, taking the time and effort to bring the right people to the table and to develop solutions that have good chances of success. On the flip side, we found that others engage in intentional non-

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consensus, sometimes blocking initiatives that have broad support by people who don't share their beliefs. Building consensus or purposely avoiding it is considered strategies that must be planned and carefully implemented. Generally, consensus doesn't happen by accident; rather, it is something that is approached with deliberation, shared goals, strong leadership, and even stronger relationships among groups and between individuals.

**Research Question 3: What Factors Constrain Educational Organizations from Reaching Consensus or, Conversely, Support Them to Reach Consensus on Reform Strategies or Outcomes?**

**Interview findings.** We designed two individual interview questions to understand the factors that support or constrain efforts to reach consensus. Interviewees were asked to describe any barriers they have encountered or anticipate to encounter in building consensus around these decisions, with a focus on what might get in the way during consensus building efforts (Question 3), and they were also asked about their assumptions around the effectiveness of consensus processes (Question 9). During the interviews, categories emerged that could be seen as either supporting or constraining efforts to build consensus. They include goals, intentionality, leadership, money, process and relationships. These questions together, when cross-referenced with our anticipatory codes, reveal the various dimensions of consensus building.

Table 4.4

*Factors acting as both supports and barriers to consensus building*

| Factors that SUPPORT consensus building | BARRIERS to consensus building |
|---|---|
| Shared goals | Conflicting goals |
| Intentionality of consensus building | Intentional non consensus or lack of intentionality |
| Effective leadership | Ineffective leadership or lack of leadership |
| Money | Money |
| Process | Lack of process |
| Relationships within a coalition | Lack of or polarized relationships |

Although interview question 3 was designed to identify barriers, interviewees discussed some factors not as barriers but as supports (see Table 4.4). Similarly, interview question 9 provides information on both supportive factors and barriers within the process of consensus building; information related to barriers to consensus building is summarized in Table 4.5. To gain a broader understanding of what was being said, codes were analyzed for both questions to determine which factors were considered supports and which were considered barriers. The frequency of codes in these categories became our gauges of importance, indicating which factors should be brought to the attention of stakeholders who seek consensus.

   ***Supports for building consensus.*** Though interview question 3 was designed to provide information related to barriers in consensus building, it ended up giving us substantial information related to the supports needed for consensus building. Process was discussed mostly as a factor needed to support consensus building in the highest percentage of interviews, while money showed up the least frequently. There was some

variation related to the rank order of the other factors across questions and the completed interviews, although the percentage differences between them is small so it would be difficult to make many assumptions regarding these results. Perhaps more important, though, than the percentages listed is how these factors have the potential to bring coalitions together.

When looking at the responses to interview question 9 related to assumptions concerning the effectiveness of consensus building, 62%, or more than three out of five, of the interviewees referenced "process" as an effective area for building consensus. That is, they valued the basic, broad steps taken to lay a foundation for understanding and compromise around an issue. Interviewees also frequently spoke about the intentionality of building consensus -- the specific actions taken to create common ground -- as well as shared goals, effective leadership, and relationships. Less important in the conversation about assumptions was the issue of money, which was only mentioned 5% of the time.

When analyzing these areas across all of the interview questions, process and intentionality continued to be found in the highest percentage of interviews as factors contributing toward consensus, and money was mentioned in the lowest percentage of interviews as a factor supporting consensus-building efforts.

Table 4.5

*Supports for Building Consensus*

| Percentage of interviewees who mentioned SUPPORTS to consensus building in interview question 3 | Percentage of interviewees who mentioned ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SUPPORTS to consensus building in interview question 9 | Percentage of interviewees who mentioned SUPPORTS within any of the ten interview questions |
|---|---|---|
| Process – 33% | Process – 62% | Process – 95% |
| Goals (shared) – 29% | Intentionality – 48% | Intentionality – 95% |
| Intentionality – 24% | Goals – 43% | Relationships – 90% |

| Leadership – 19% | Leadership – 43% | Leadership – 81% |
| Relationships – 14% | Relationships – 43% | Goals – 71% |
| **Money – 14%** | **Money – 5%** | **Money – 48%** |

*Barriers to consensus building*.  When analyzing interview question 3, which specifically asked about obstacles, 72% of the interviewees talked about goals -- or the objectives of individual organizations -- as a barrier in the consensus building process. Thirty-eight percent of the interviews included process as a barrier, and 33% included money as a barrier. Leadership, intentionality and relationships were each coded in 24% of the interviews as barriers to building consensus. Similar to the work around the supportive factors, the six categories related to consensus were also cross-referenced through question 9 and the remaining interview questions to paint a broader picture of the beliefs around what gets in the way of building consensus (Table 4.5).

Table 4.6

*Barriers to Consensus Building*

| Percentage of interviewees who mentioned BARRIERS to consensus building in interview question 3 | Percentage of interviewees who mentioned ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT BARRIERS to consensus building in interview question 9 | Percentage of interviewees who mentioned BARRIERS within <u>any</u> of the ten interview questions |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Goals** (conflicting) – 72% | Relationships – 29% | **Goals** – 100 % |
| Process – 38% | Intentionality – 24% | Intentionality – 90% |
| Money – 33% | Leadership – 24% | Process – 90% |
| Intentionality – 24% | Process – 24% | Relationships – 81% |
| Leadership – 24% | Goals – 19% | Leadership – 67% |
| Relationships – 24% | **Money** – 0% | **Money** – 57% |

**Observation findings.** Observations around the Group work show an earnest attempt to develop a diverse coalition of people around education reform. A lead facilitator, in conjunction with a core leadership team, set the foundation for need and developed a shared mission by using stories and examples to elicit a call to action. Representatives from various organizations were included. Intentional plans for communication were part of the conversation in order to build capacity and a common understanding.

When considering the research question -- "What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?" -- There was evidence of effective leadership, a clearly articulated goal, and a process than included involving a diverse group of stakeholders in the process, with multiple opportunities to meet. It was also clear that individual organizations had their own agendas, and many might have to set their own goals aside for the good of the whole if the Group was going to appear united in its policy recommendations. At one of the strategy sessions, for example, there was a discussion about how representatives should talk about specific issues like the Common Core State Standards with other leaders within their associations; arguments would have to be carefully crafted in order to convince an organization's leadership to modify its goals.

Within the four meetings that were observed, it was unclear whether there was an authentic relationship established among the participants that supported consensus building, or whether money would be a barrier toward consensus building as the Group moved forward toward its goals of education reform. The Group planned to spend time finding an appropriate spokesperson for their recommendations that could effectively

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communicate and build relationships with legislators. The question was raised, "Who can be the champion in Michigan?" (Observation notes), the person who can effectively work with legislators to make sure educators' voices are heard and considered. Without a strong and credible liaison, the Group believed that their reform recommendations would fall on deaf ears; the relationships between government officials and educational organizations have not had the trust necessary in recent years to make significant and positive changes in the public education system.

**How factors can be supports, barriers, or both.** The interviews and observations provided valuable insight into what it will take for organizations to decide to work together to affect change in education, and the data indicates that many supports are needed in order for coalitions to find common ground. It is important to note that factors can at times be supportive of the consensus building process, and, at other times, they can become barriers.

*Goals.* Common goals have the capacity to bring people together. By staying focused on a mission, minimizing differences and avoiding polarizing others, some interviewees believe it's easier to get to consensus. Awareness of an urgent problem can create discomfort and also be a catalyst for change. One example mentioned repeatedly was the political turmoil surrounding around the passing of Proposal A in 1993 (Interviews 9, 14, 16). When there is a desire to come to consensus, there are better opportunities to get people on board. One interviewee stated, "I think if we began with the assumption that something good is going to come of it, that will both expedite the process and more likely lead to a positive outcome" (Interview 4).

There are, however, times when goals between self-interests, association interests, political parties, and the houses of government are too conflicting to lead to compromise. Local control issues can conflict with political agendas and equity issues as well, as people are forced to choose between their own needs and those of the "greater good." An interviewee commented, "One of the things that I think that would help develop more consensus around education policy... is ways to break down the walls around politics, figure out ways in which both administrators and teachers could come together" (Interview 15).

Sometimes misinformation is a factor that contributes to the conflicting goals of education organizations. Media, both mainstream and social, can add to the confusion by telling only parts of stories (Interview 19). Term limits impact the goals on the table because they impact how politicians operate; there is less time to really learn about the issues. This shortened time-table has the capacity to create conflict for legislators, forcing them to split their energy between focusing on what they want to do with key issues based on their constituents' desires, on learning about unfamiliar issues, and on understanding the impact of their actions on education reform issues.

Some people are insulated from the front-line problems seen at the district level of K-12 education and their goals are often far different (Interview 14). Because they are farther away from the challenges found in real schools and districts, it's more difficult to understand them. Financial challenges can aid to the struggle in reaching consensus on goals. When there's a finite amount of money, the concern is that someone has to give something up in order for someone else to get something, which leads to conflicting goals.

Even though commonality is ideal, and we can bring diverse people together with a common goal, differences are going to surface. One interview explained, "We also have to assume that people are going to come to the table with vastly different opinions, and that to reach consensus we're not going to get to convince everyone in the group that our position or opinion is right and the only way" (Interview 4).

*Intentionality*.  Throughout most of the interviews, there was widespread agreement from various stakeholders that everything in Lansing gets done through collaboration of organizations; "Nothing gets done in Lansing by a single organization trying to get something done. It's all done through coalitions" (Interview 17). It was a shared belief by many that significant policy reform efforts cannot be done without broad-based coalitions. It was frequently noted how influential bipartisan coalitions can be, as well as coalitions that are made up of business, philanthropy, advocacy and educational leadership groups, partnered with government entities. Sometimes unlikely alliances can form when leaders purposefully pull diverse and influential groups together in order to affect change. A story was shared of a superintendent who reached out to a newly appointed legislator across party lines. She told him she didn't vote for him, but she knew he cared about kids in their district as much as she did. She offered to review any educational bill that crossed his desk and give her take on how it impacts kids (Interview 15).

Another interesting point that emerged was the importance of coalition building not just within and between political parties, but also across the two houses of government. One interviewer explained, "People think that donkeys and elephants are arguing and they do. But we have Senate and House Republican issues, Senate and House

Democratic issues… and this is within the same party but in the end they are people" (Interview 17). Intentional consensus building is important within and across party lines. People need to be brought along in the process. This is true for government committees and subcommittees as well, which sometimes have very diverse goals. One belief became clear during the interviews: Intentional efforts to bring diverse groups together into one coalition with a common goal were believed to produce better outcomes overall. Clear articulation of challenges and articulation of potential solutions can be used to provoke these conversations (Interview 18).

Sometimes intentional efforts hurt the consensus building process. Intentional non-consensus is a term used to describe purposeful efforts to block consensus building. Interviews revealed that sometimes these efforts are aimed at discounting and discrediting facts that are counter to a particular policy position (Interviews 9 & 17). Sometimes it's a willingness to sacrifice what is on the table to make a point and other times it's viewed as a bully mentality where one side says, "I'm going to get what I want one way or the other" (Interview 4).

When it comes to intentional non-consensus, responses in three out of twenty-one interviews indicated that it is a positive strategy, and all three pointed to themselves or organizations that they support as using it effectively. Eleven people said that it is a negative strategy, and they all pointed to others as using it, three said it could be both, and one of those, too, pointed to his own use of the strategy as the positive example. Four people were unclear in their opinions about intentional non-consensus. One respondent stated, "We find disruption to be a positive. We wake up every day and say, how can we make sure their side does not get an advantage?" (Interview 17) Another respondent

cautioned, "Intentional non-consensus renders an organization less effective over time" (Interview 15), perhaps because it reveals an entity that is inflexible and never able to compromise.

Lack of time and intentional planning for consensus building are barriers toward finding common ground and can result in misjudging the situation. Sometimes people are believed to be on board, yet they are not supportive and may even feel they have been marginalized in the process (Interview 22). An example was mentioned that when there was an uneven distribution of perceived power or inclusion at the table, distrust and resentment resulted and process toward consensus building halted. Also, a lack of people in the process of consensus building is sometimes viewed as a barrier (Interview 3). This can be due to apathy related to the policy agenda, but it also can be because day-to-day operations infringe upon the time people have to commit to a particular reform effort or coalition initiative.

*Leadership*. Leadership was recognized as an important factor in successful consensus building because it takes strategic and intentional leaders to work through barriers. Examples of intentional storytelling by leaders were highlighted as a way to bring people together (Interview 5). One interviewer made the point that, "Getting into real stories, carefully chosen, tends (to lead) towards much more consensus than staking out sides" (Interview 8). Another interviewee explained that one needs to "utilize media to share 'virtuous' stories from coalition to communicate. We have to be willing to actively promote it and advocate for it…" (Interview 5)

Communication skills of leaders, as well as positional power and resource availability, were also all recognized as impacting leadership success. A respondent

shared, "One assumption that I have, and this is based on where I've seen it be successful before, is it's typically driven by a strong leader or an entity that's… taking the lead on driving the conversation forward, following up after the meetings" (Interview 20). Effective leaders also harness the media to share the story and set the purpose (Interview 5). Interviewee 10 suggested that it helps to "utilize social media to connect people for advocacy work and to connect advocacy groups: continued outreach to like minded groups. You don't need to spend a lot of time talking to people that are already on your side. You need to focus your efforts on those that you can convince."

When there is a lack of effort from leaders to bring people together, coalition efforts typically fail to thrive. Leaders without credibility or poor communication skills often fail to progress in their efforts as well, although an over-inflated belief in one's authority or charisma may give the leader a false sense of security and an unreal perception of a group's ability to come to consensus (Interview 4).

Sometimes coalitions have a facilitator with strong skills capable of moving toward consensus. Several interviewees revealed that consensus-building successes were attributed to specific people and their attributes were highlighted. It was also noted that when the facilitator leaves, the coalition might lack the organizational structure to sustain the momentum of the initiative (Interview 14). Leaders with power and influence may also be stonewalling progress if their self interests fail to align with that of the coalition. It was noted that, "Leaders sometimes lack the ability to represent or understand the stance of the organization they represent" (Interview 16), depending on how far the person is removed from the roles of those in the organization.

*Money*.  When cost is not a barrier, it can become a support to build consensus around policy reform. One person even said, "Public education is money. If there's no money, nobody cares" (Interview 9). Opportunities for increased funding can encourage coalitions to form and encourage attempts for collaboration. Because money is viewed as power, money can also be used to leverage support in consensus building (Interviews 9, 17).

There is a repeated belief that money drives politics, and both wealth and political views are becoming more polarized. One interviewee believes, "There are unelected officials pulling the strings of elected officials. Super PACS and private stakeholders are making money off public education" (Interview 10). There is discourse over the role of a market-based system in education, as well as how funds are used in education. Some feel there is an abundance of money invested in the educational system and the problem is not about financial resources, but return of investment on the dollars spent or quality of services. Others argue that many schools are not funded at a level that could meet adequacy or equity needs of educating diverse individuals. Ultimately, these are battles over the same funds in a strained economy (Interview 4).

*Relationships and process*.  References to relationship building and the processes associated with consensus building, along with leadership skills, were woven together in responses as important to consensus building. Consistent themes emerging during the interviews were the importance of facilitation skills, time, and effective communication throughout the process. Time was repeatedly referenced as important to building a strong foundation. It was understood that investing time to build relationships and bring people on board reduced problems later on (Interview 3).

For instance, convening a coalition meeting is about leaders recognizing who should be included and invited to the table, and it's about starting conversations around common interests and goals to lay the foundations for mutually beneficial relationships. The consensus building process that follows this convening was described as a continuous cycle of listening, seeking input, making adjustments, and repeating as often as needed (Interview 3).

When convening a coalition, there were mixed responses on whether to include everyone or whether to avoid groups with polarized opinions and goals when attempting to build consensus (Interviews 1, 7, 13). Many agreed that the focus should be on creating conditions to bring coalitions together; the conversations should be positive interactions in which each other's ideas and perspectives are considered in an attempt to find common ground. Diversity of thought at the table has the capacity to result in a better product in the end when the stakeholders involved are all vested in building consensus on an issue. This approach could be counter-productive, however, when policy core beliefs don't align.

Building long term relationships and trust can be critical to building consensus. One respondent described the importance of authentically connecting with allies in ways that lead to shared goals and collective action: "I think it doesn't come as easy as bringing people together six times, it's about building long-term relationships and trust. Relationships are built over coffee in personal conversations" (Interview 4). However, some of the legislators who were interviewed expressed distrust of educational organizations, recognizing that they might have advocates and good relationships at times with these groups but "know that they are friend one day and foe the next" (Interview

11). This distrust, then, can cause people to stray from consensus, possibly leading to last-minute legislative changes that are not ideal for school reform or even the blockage of favorable bills.

It was pointed out repeatedly that there is a lack of ability to acknowledge truths that are counter to political agendas because parties don't want anything to get in the way of their plans. Additionally, concerns were expressed over lack of using data and best practice in policy reform; instead, people choose to be guided in decision making by their philosophies and values, and this can cause friction between organizations (Interview 7). As one respondent stated, "The research that supports good practice seems to be incidental right now" (Interview 16).

Political lines and organizational goals are perceived to obstruct policy reform because issues around reform agendas often become secondary to historical conflict between groups, inhibiting coalition formation even when common ground can be found (Interview 18). It was mentioned during interviews that term limits impact relationship building across and between these political lines. Relationships are lost with term limits, and interest groups are becoming more significant. Someone who has worked as a reform advocate for many years remarked that "the power, the influence, the juice has transferred more to those who have institutional knowledge, those who know the process, and increasingly those are lobbyists and staff in the departments and legislature" (Interview 17).

Several interviewees from with the education establishment expressed concern about having lost credibility in the eyes of legislative decision makers, causing the legislators to become disillusioned with educators and purposefully leaving them out of

the important conversations about reform (Interview 13). If people feel like they are not part of the process or an equal partner in a group, resentments and distrust of the process can and often do occur (Interview 7). Lack of trust, anger, finger pointing and name-calling between leaders makes it difficult to move forward (Interview 1). These actions also indicate that relationships have not been formed, they do not exist as the foundation from which to build consensus.

**Discussion.** When analyzing factors that impact consensus-building efforts, the goals of organizations and the process of working toward agreement consistently came through as important factors in education reform. Goals center on an organization's beliefs, and their policy beliefs are founded on the causes of and solutions to problems within Michigan's education system. Conflicting goals related to political parties, committee coalitions, and even local versus state control play significant roles in the complexity of finding common ground among a diverse group of educational stakeholders.

Our interviewees discussed coalitions that have formed around policy reform issues and demonstrated passionate commitment from key stakeholders to see their coalitions move to action. The emotions that support this drive sometimes causes stakeholders to villainize those with opposing views, whether the views are real or perceived. Additionally, media sources may dramatize or incorrectly report facts, further polarizing stakeholders around policy issues (Interview 19).

A challenge noted during interviews was how to bring people into a coalition or joint coalitions with publicly diverse political, social, and/or philosophical differences. A common theme that emerged in the interviews and observations was the importance of

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bringing people together from diverse roles into a coalition, including people from the business world, multiple associations, across party lines, various government committees, and government houses. Communication becomes key in this process, where trust issues need to be overcome. As one interviewee stated, "You have to be really deliberate in order to build consensus, and you have to think educationally about it. To me, it's like a process of learning, like who needs to learn what" (Interview 8). It takes time to develop effective communication, which includes efforts to listen and develop authentic relationships and to find a common understanding of the needs that drive different organizations.

Even though many of the consensus building factors we examined are prevalent in the groups we heard about or observed, there is still no guaranteed recipe for reform. After all, intent from the stakeholders is an important factor on whether consensus can be found; they have to want agreement on an issue. This idea was clearly articulated by a respondent when she said, "Well, we start with an assumption that the time spent on consensus building is valuable, that there is a likely positive outcome. I think many times we don't have a positive attitude about it and believe that it's just a task, and so I think if we began with the assumption that something good is going to come of it that will both expedite the process and most likely lead to a positive outcome" (Interview 4).

When stakeholders come together around a policy recommendation, building consensus on a broad plane, the policy still has the potential to become stalled as a bill before becoming law, especially if key people are not a part of the coalition or find their policy-core beliefs diverge from the coalition efforts. This can impact the future efforts of stakeholders regarding investing time and resources in the consensus building process.

An example of this type of consensus building was described regarding teacher evaluation recommendations put forth by the MCEE and House Bill 5223, which had broad support from a variety of stakeholders, yet has failed to become law to date because some key people who were not a part of the coalition have blocked legislation from moving forward.

**Summary of research question 3.** Our third research question - "What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?**"** - revealed that factors like an organization's goals or the money spent on initiatives can be supportive of the consensus process, can be barriers of the process, or they can be both supportive and prohibitive, depending on the situation. As in our second research question, which dealt with how people approach consensus building, we found that process and intentionality were viewed as important for consensus building, whereas money was not as significant an area on which to focus for our participants.

Interestingly, goals were less emphasized in response to questions linked to our second research question than they were in the examination of this research question. Perhaps this is because in interview questions other than numbers 3 and 9, respondents were asked to describe times when consensus was successful; these examples contained people who already shared goals and had found common ground. When specifically asked about barriers, however, the conflicting goals of individuals and organizations became the primary topic of conversation as factors that slowed down the process of consensus building.

**Research Question 4: What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform - or the lack of consensus - have for students in Michigan?**

In any conversation that centers on education reform, it is essential to look at the effects of the work on the students. After all, they are the ones whose lives are impacted by the operation of the systems. To those ends, we included the following as a research question: What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan? In an effort to answer this question, we included the following three questions in the individual interview protocol: "Is getting all education stakeholders to come to consensus important? If it is, why, and if not, why not?" (Question 4); "What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process?" (Question 7); and "How have your policy actions impacted the educational experiences of students? What evidence do you have to support your claim(s)?" (Question 8) The ways in which interviewees answered these questions revealed some trends that speak to the attention to which reformers pay to students, as well as the ways in which they consider the impacts of their actions. These trends, then, seem to play out in actual practice, as education organizations meet to discuss reforms in Michigan.

**Interview findings.** *Disconnect between consensus and students.* To begin, most respondents showed that consensus building is important, but few talked specifically of its impact on students. In fifteen of the twenty-one interviews, respondents said that consensus building is important, but only four of them gave student focused answers (see Figures 4.16 and 4.17). That is, only four of the reformers gave answers that described the impact of consensus building on students. Of those four, three spoke about doing

what is best for kids in one way or another, and the fourth talked about the impact of teachers on students, and caring more about students than teacher work environments. The other seventeen interviewees talked about various reforms or consensus models, but did not specifically focus on students.



Is Getting Educational Stakeholders to Come to Consensus Important?
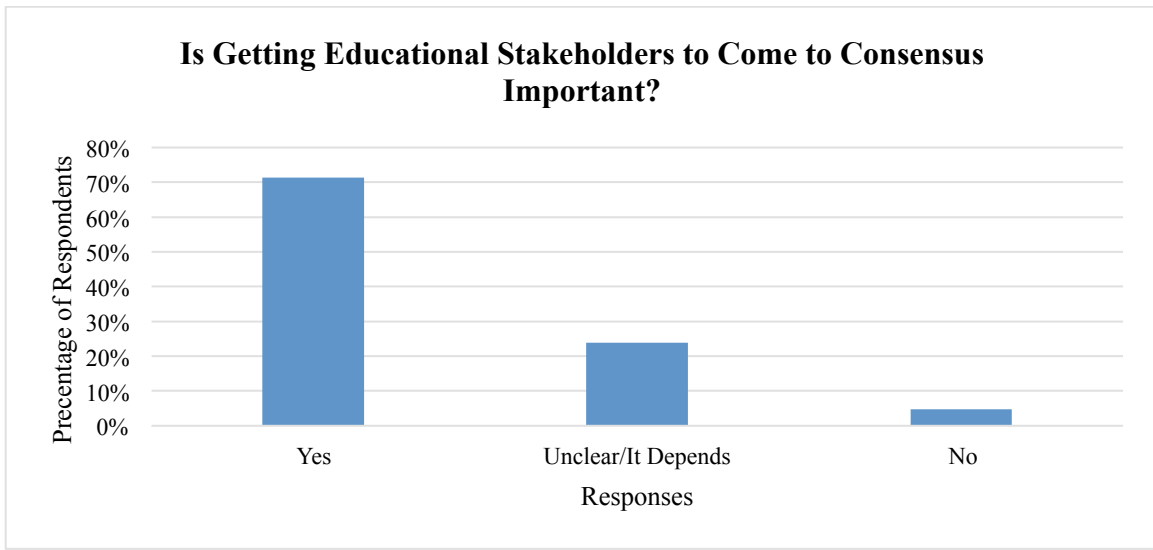
*Figure 4.16.* Bar Graph Showing Percentage of Individual Interview Responses, Indicating Importance of Consensus Among Key Education Stakeholders.



Percentage of Respondents Who Discussed the Impact of Building Consensus on Students
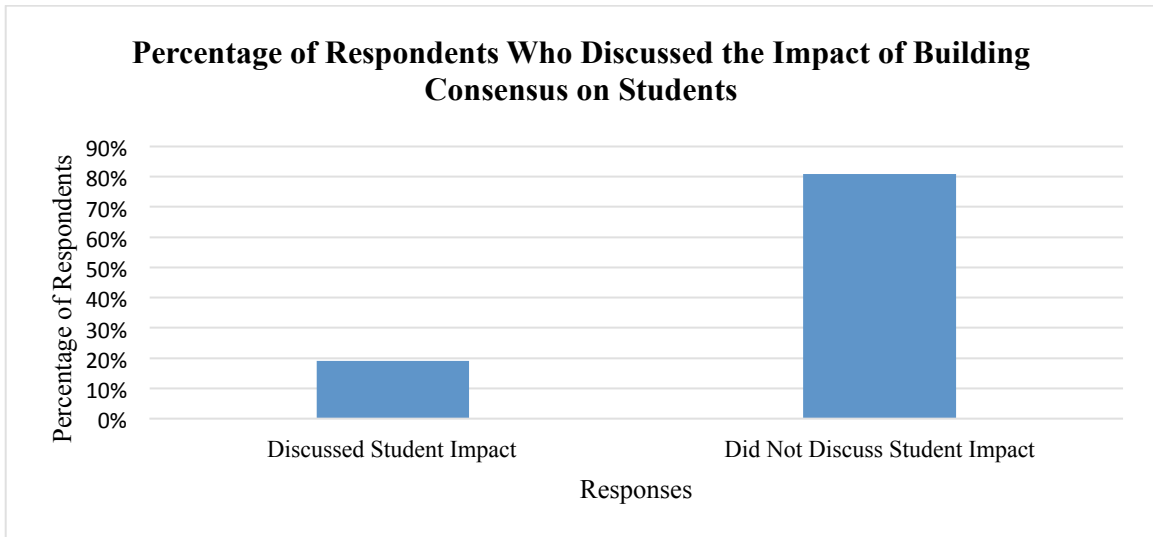
*Figure 4.17.* Bar Graph Showing Percentage of Individual Interview Responses that Discussed the Impact of Consensus Building on Students.

   ***Disconnect between intentional non-consensus and students.*** When looking at intentional non-consensus, the results are similarly divorced from specific references to students. In three of the twenty-one interviews, respondents gave answers that focused on students, and of those three, one said intentional non-consensus was a negative and caused a lack of coherence for students, and the other two said it was a positive because it allowed things to happen that they thought were good for students (see Figure 4.18). In fact, one of those two cited his own organization as using the tactic to make change, and the other used the organization he was touting as the example. The other eighteen respondents answered the intentional non-consensus question by discussing reforms or processes.
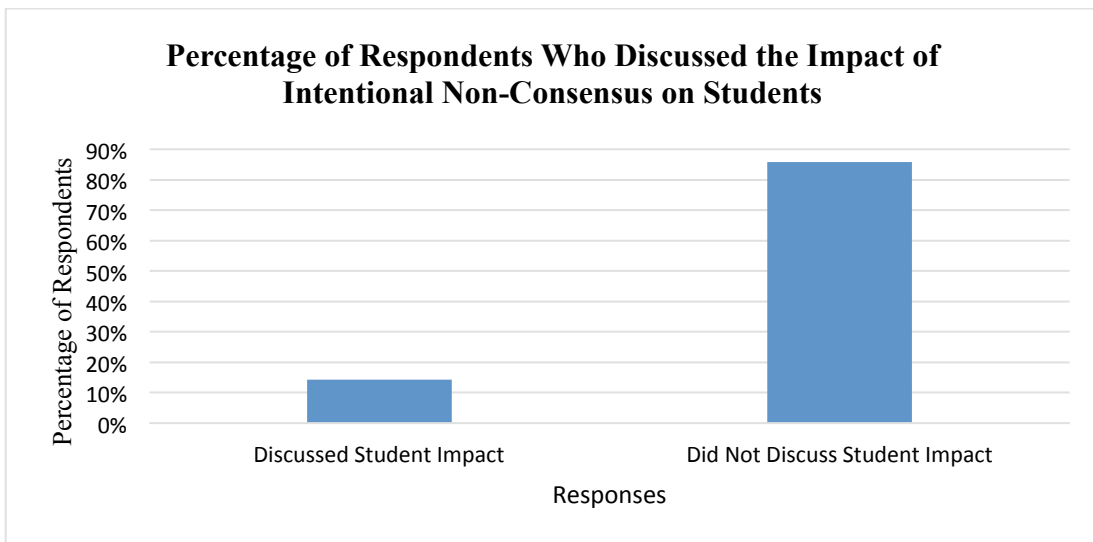


*Figure 4.18.* Bar Graph Showing Percentage of Individual Interview Responses that Discussed the Impact of Intentional Non-Consensus on Students.

*Lack of data to support reforms.* The final question aligned to the student research question, number 8, provided the clearest results, though, as it came right out and asked the interviewees how their policy actions have impacted students, and what evidence they had to support their claims. Of the respondents, only five, or approximately 24%, were able to provide an example and evidence (see Figure 4.19). One cited instances of bullying prevention based on a program his organization championed, one discussed increases in career and technical education enrollment and student achievement when he was in a former position, one discussed money his own child saved on college because of policies he supported, one discussed an increase in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates because of his organization's initiatives, and one touted the success of students continuously enrolled in charter schools, which his organization heavily supports. Other respondents mentioned students, but did not have any evidence to support their claims for success. The rest of the interviewees discussed various combinations of consensus building, reforms, or barriers. In fact, five of them, or 24 percent, did not have an excerpt coded as *Student Impact* at all in their answers.
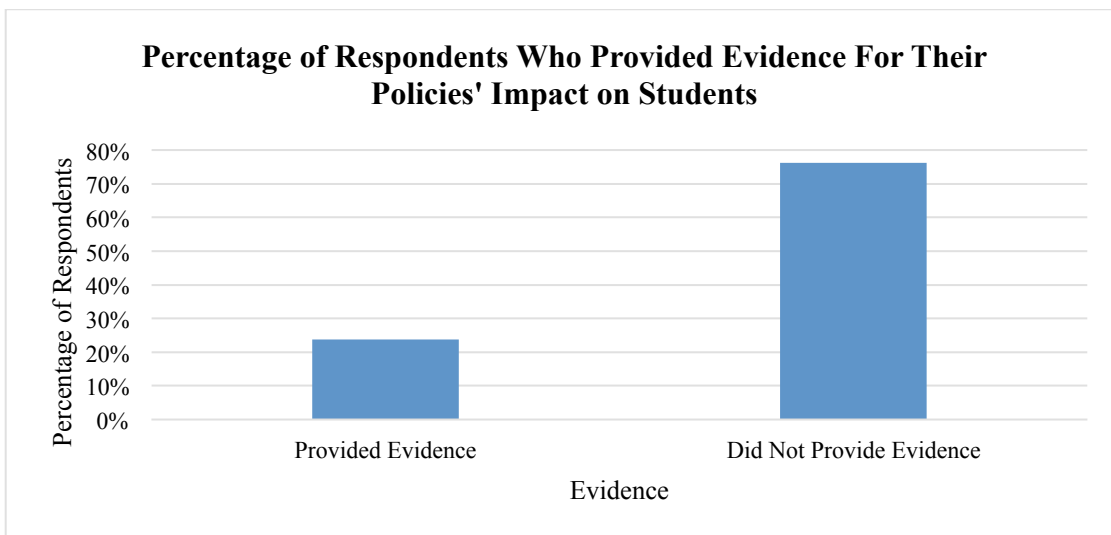
*Figure 4.19.* Bar Graph Showing Percentage of Individual Interview Responses that Provided Evidence for their Organization's Policies Impact on Students.

***Minimal specific references to students.*** Perhaps the most telling bit of data, though, across all of the interviews, is the noticeably few mentions of students at all (see Figures 4.20 and 4.21). Looking across all of the interviews, the research team's coding scheme showed that on average, 6.08% of the excerpts in a given interview referenced students, and 3.78% referenced a high impact on students (recall that student focused means that there is a specific reference to students, and high impact means students are a primary focus of decision making). The highest percentage of any interview was 17.07% student focused and 17.07% high impact student focus, and it came from a foundation, not from an educator. The mode of the data set was 6.67% for student focused, and 0.00% for student focused high impact. Six interviewees did not even mention anything at all about high impact student focus, and only six had more than 5% of their excerpts dealing with the topic. As an interesting aside, the interviewees did not specifically talk about low student impact either, as on average, 2.47% of each interviewee's excerpts were coded as such.

The statistics garnered in these interviews clearly show that the respondents were much more likely to talk about reforms or the consensus building process than students; after all, six of them never mentioned anything about high impact student focuses to answer any question. And, even when asked directly, five did not even talk about students at all, saying things like, "Yeah, so I'm more frustrated personally by having to sort of play defense and counter-attack on some of the right agenda" (Interview 5) and

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discussing initiatives like the Common Core. For all but a handful of interviewees, direct

mention of students did not take center stage in their responses.

**Percent of Excerpts with Student Focus (High or Low)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Interview: Interview 1 | |
| Interview: Interview 2 | |
| Interview: Interview 3 | |
| Interview: Interview 4 | |
| Interview: Interview 5 | |
| Interview: Interview 6 | |
| Interview: Interview 7 | |
| Interview: Interview 8 | |
| Interview: Interview 9 | |
| Interview: Interview 10 | |
| Interview: Interview 11 | |
| Interview: Interview 12 | |
| Interview: Interview 13 | |
| Interview: Interview 14 | |
| Interview: Interview 15 | |
| Interview: Interview 16 | |
| Interview: Interview 17 | |
| Interview: Interview 18 | |
| Interview: Interview 19 | |
| Interview: Interview 20 | |
| Interview: Interview 21 | |
| Mean | |
| Median | |
| Mode | |

*Figure 4.20.* Bar Graph Showing Percentage of Individual Interview Excerpts

Discussing the High or Low Focus on Students.
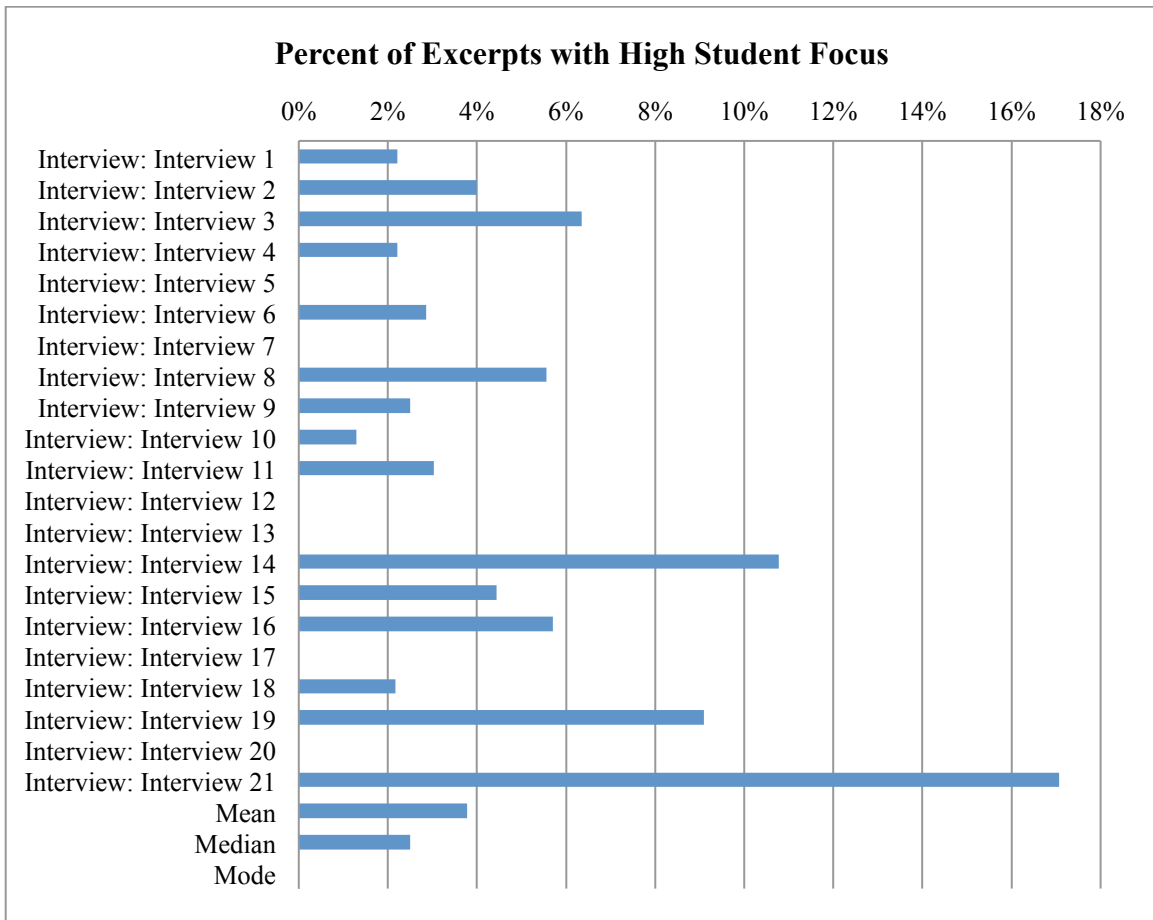
*Figure 4.21.* Bar Graph Showing Percentage of Individual Interview Excerpts

Discussing the High Focus on Students.

**Observation findings.** Through observations of local coalition building efforts, it

is clear that the patterns that emerged from the interviews held true in a more localized

context. The conversation in four of the observed meetings centered on some of the very

same reforms that the interviewees discussed, from early childhood to college

opportunities and educator effectiveness to college and career readiness. The

participating groups also spent a great deal of time working through how to bring people

to the table and keep people at the table, as well as how to engage outside groups, like the

business community. Yet, throughout these discussions, there was very little, if any,

discussion of data around the initiatives. Student data was shared by outside groups that came in to present, but the conversations throughout the four meetings were much more heavily aligned to the reforms themselves and the coalition building process than on the evidence of the work's impacts. In fact, members of the coalition recognized this fact, as in one of the meetings, an organization's representative stated that the group makes decisions based on emotional decision making without clear data (Observation Notes). In another meeting, getting the kids' voice at the table to set the tone was raised (Observation Notes). So, it is clear that in at least some members' estimation, the lack of data to accompany the reform agenda is a real and present issue. Kids were a part of the discussion, but through the lens of reforms and processes, not through evidence of impact.

**Discussion.** The most obvious finding for this research question comes from the inability of the interviewees to provide evidence to support their reform agendas. Of the sixteen people who did reference students when asked directly, only five of them were able to provide data to back up their claims. It is important to note, however, that of the five, one's claim lacked credibility as he made the statement, "There's truth and then there's our perspective. But our perspective is backed up by data" (Interview 17), calling into question the validity of the provided data. Eleven other people talked about students, but could not provide data at all. Some of these interviewees talked about things like pushing for shorter tests, or made statements about their inability to provide data. One interviewee said, "Quite frankly, I've spent a lot of time on policy initiatives that didn't appear to have any direct benefit to students. I mean, the day after, you wouldn't see any difference. But they did something to either stabilize the environment or create a context

for future change and so the direct benefit isn't really noticeable" (Interview 7). Another

said, "I think [there are] probably some little pieces that I can kind of pull out and think

back to on [...], but lots of it's [been in] a little bit of a defensive mode, try to do no

harm" (Interview 12). A quote from a third -- "I mean, we do go out and take a stand on

what we think children should have in order to be successful in life" (Interview 20) --

sums up the reality for most of the reformers; they have strong beliefs about the reforms

for which they are advocating, but they acknowledge a lack of data to prove the

effectiveness of the work that they are doing. That is not to say that the work is not good

or beneficial, it is just a realization that there is not a significant emphasis put on

gathering data to prove how the reforms impact Michigan's students.

Aside from the missing data, the lack of student-focused excerpts also stands out.

After all, these reforms and consensus building processes impact real kids; yet, a high

volume of respondents specifically mentioned students very few times, if at all. Stepping

back and examining this data collectively, one could point to the ten questions asked in

the interview and argue that since only one asked directly about student impact, then

there should be a much heavier emphasis in the answers around reforms and consensus

building. However, nearly a third of the interviewees made no mention of high student

impact, and most spent less than five percent of the time talking specifically about kids. It

seems that since the reforms and consensus around them have such an impact on

students, that there would be more direct references to student outcomes. To be fair, our

bias shows in our interpretation of these data; we all have a strong background in

working directly with students and share a passion for working with and for

disenfranchised kids.

A point to consider, then, based on this data, is that perhaps it was through the discussion of reforms and processes that the interviewees considered students in their responses. Although the interviewees did not specifically mention students very often, if at all, they spoke at great lengths about reforms and actions that impact kids. From their level, as players operating several levels above the school building, their connection to students comes through the implementation of reforms and the ability to advocate for policies and practices that move those reforms into place. Therefore, they did not mention students directly, they mentioned them indirectly through conversation around reform topics. In other words, reforms or processes occupy their daily work, and that came out in their answers. This idea is supported by the fact that they spent such little time talking about low student impact; they were not purposefully talking about things that don't impact kids. They just were not talking about students in a specific way.

However, it is important to note that regardless of an interviewee's position and focus, an inability to provide proof that the reforms for which they advocate are making an impact is an issue that needs to be examined further. Enormous amounts of time and resources are being expended by these organizations to implement reforms that they feel are right for the students of Michigan, but the fact that so many cannot speak to the impact points to a need for less emotional decision making, as it was stated by a member of the reform group, and more data driven decision making.

Research question 4 asked "What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan?" in an effort to determine how all of the consensus and reform efforts impact students in classroom. From the interview questions, and corroborated by the observations, we were

able to parse out two key learnings in response to this question. The first is that reformers are unlikely to be able to provide data to support their policy/reform efforts, even when directly asked to do so. The second is that reformers operate at a level on which they discuss students indirectly through their reform initiatives; in other words, they do not spend much time talking about students directly, but instead dedicate their efforts to reform ideas that ultimately have an impact on the classroom.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

**Introduction**

At the outset of this research project, we set out to determine whether there are areas within education reform in Michigan around which key reformers and groups could reach consensus. Expanding that thought to look at how consensus is built and how the whole process impacts students, we hoped to create a study that would impact the political and educational reality in Michigan. From that interest, we generated the four research questions that guided our work. These are:

- Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?

- In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?

- What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?

- What type of impact does consensus building around educational reform -- or the lack of consensus -- have for students in Michigan?

Careful and purposeful consideration of current literature and appropriate research methods and methodology led us, over the past year, to seek answers to these questions. We have arrived at conclusions and determined the significance of our work, positioned ourselves to make some recommendations based on those conclusions and their significance, and reflected upon the strengths and limitations of the process by which we arrived at these findings. In the end, we have accomplished what we set out to do; we

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answered the research questions and developed knowledge that has implications for education reform in Michigan.

**Conclusions**

Some of the general conclusions that emerged as a result of the study revealed that while consensus, as defined as a group decision-making process that seeks agreement by most of those parties involved, is an elusive concept, common ground on education reform issues could be reached. The meeting observations and stakeholder interviews demonstrated that there exists education reform issues upon which people agree are important and necessary -- broad reform ideas like incentivizing dual high school and college enrollment, devoting additional resources to expand universal early childhood education, increasing blended learning opportunities, and redesigning an entire system for teacher learning and growth of the course of their career -- indicating that the majority of participants could reach consensus.

In our findings, we saw education reform initiatives that raised the interest of our interviewees, but these same reform topics are not necessarily ones in which they believe unity can be found; most notably, these areas of discord related to education funding. The business of funding education in Michigan is politically charged, newsworthy in terms of differences in support from district to district, and important for reasons of equity, but we found that issues involving money are not always the impetus for education reform discussions and actions. Exploring the themes of our research questions that resulted from the interview stage, we found that the most popular outcomes were mentions of reform on education funding. But, despite that oft-mentioned subject from our initial interviews, and the prominence that school funding issues exhibit on all sides of

education reform discussions, our stakeholder interviews disclosed a decided lack of belief that consensus could be reached on the topic. Thus, as legislators, educators, and education advocacy groups agree that school funding is an important reform issue, less than one out of every five of those surveyed believes we can reach consensus on education reform as it relates to school funding.

Aside from the reform areas, the interviews and observations revealed that there are important pieces that need to be in place if consensus is going to be built. Process, intentionality, leadership, and relationships are essential. Mirrored in literature like Kania and Kramer's (2011) collective impact framework and Sabatier and Weible's (2007) Advocacy Coalition Framework, these ideas were key learnings from the work. It is important to note, though, that the same factors that can contribute to consensus building have the capacity to become barriers, depending on how they are used. While we saw evidence of some of these components being intentionally built through our observations of the Group, it is clear that intentional processes, facilitation, and leadership will be required to position Michigan leaders to initiate reforms ranging from dual enrollment to school funding.

Finally, through the study, the impact to students was discussed through reforms, not outcomes, and the impact to students is implied as opposed to directly tracked. Because of their roles in the education system in Michigan, the reformers that we interviewed and observed in The Group were more likely to focus on the broad notion of reform as opposed to the details of student level data.

**Significance of Findings**

From the outset, this study was concerned with determining whether or not there are reform areas around which consensus can be built in Michigan. From that primary question, we set out to look at the consensus building process and its impact on kids, but at its heart, this study is fundamentally about reaching consensus around education reform. The primary significance of the work, then, lies in the fact that we determined that there are areas that exist, and beyond that, there are guidelines that can be used to create consensus around other issues in the future. However, it is also important to note that data needs to play a role in decision-making about reform issues.

First and foremost, it is significant that we are able to report back to the education community that early childhood and dual enrollment are areas ripe for consensus right now; eighty percent of our sample of reformers felt this was the case. The significance here lies in the fact that despite partisanship and disparate views on many, many areas of education, reformers feel that they can reach consensus here. So, these are areas that can result in quick policy wins, and political wins, for groups that may or may not have been successful working together in the past.

The educator evaluation recommendation process, as facilitated by the MCEE, offers an example of the power behind shared beliefs. One interviewee reflected that it is a "great example of the Democrat and Republican working together on something" they believed in and eventually "making it better" (Interview 1). There were people from multiple sides of the issue working toward agreement, people who were usually at odds with one another, such as representatives from unions, administrator organizations, and teacher groups. Policy reform is about making changes to solve problems, and the sharing

of beliefs has an impact on how consensus around reforms gets built; our findings on early childhood and dual enrollment indicate that these changes have the potential to quickly and easily become realities.

The second area of significance lies in the model that emerged, both in the literature and the data we collected. We found that with purposeful leadership, intentionality, goals, relationships, and process, consensus can be reached around difficult issues. In the current political environment of partisanship and term limits, relationships are lost and interest groups are becoming more influential. Someone who has worked as a reform advocate for many years remarked that "the power, the influence, the juice has transferred more to those who have institutional knowledge, those who know the process, and increasingly those are lobbyists and staff in the departments and legislature" (Interview 17). So, now more than ever, it is essential for diverse groups to come to the table to build relationships and educate others about their needs and goals. Within this reality, however, it is important to remember that some reformers actively use intentional non-consensus as a strategy to move or prohibit the movement of policies. Thus, those involved in consensus building activities need to recognize that even if consensus is built with most parties, there may be those who stymie the efforts.

The power of the simple fact that consensus can be reached is supported in the literature as well. Sabatier and Weible's (2007) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) can be used as a lens to understand the education policy change process, which we argue is related to, and in some ways dependent upon, consensus building. The ACF has typically been used to examine case studies, and it is not specific to ideas or issues but to organizations and how they operate. However, the ACF has given us a tool in which to

frame just one small part of our thinking around the interactions between key stakeholders in education reform and the issues they seek to influence. Specifically, we see organizations sharing what Sabatier labeled "policy-core" beliefs, which are beliefs, that center on the causes and possible solutions of problems (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). When coalitions share these policy-core beliefs, they realize they are in a common space and their relationships can build upon a solid foundation of goals and principles. Through the building of relationships, strong leadership, sound processes, clear goals, and purposeful intentionality, these coalitions can be built and larger issues can be solved.

It is important to note that there are clear guidelines providing a framework for how consensus can be built in the business and medical arenas. For example, Bourgeosis (1980) and Dess (1987) both showed that consensus around goals or strategies leads to improved results, and Amason (1996) showed that high levels of cognitive conflict produced better decisions, understanding, and acceptance of initiatives. It's important to note, however, that even when factors for consensus building align and the majority of stakeholders agree, consensus is not guaranteed. Underlying factors within the remaining minority of stakeholders can provide a barrier to consensus, but with the model provided by our research and the literature, the chances of creating consensus around worthwhile reforms are greatly enhanced.

The final element of significance comes from the lack of data available to show the impact of the reforms on Michigan's students. This element is different than the other two, because it does not deal directly with reforms or consensus. Instead, it focuses on the other side of the implementation. We feel good when we reach consensus and get something accomplished, but the question that needs to be answered is whether or not the

reform actually had the intended impact. One step in consensus building that was mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews was having research findings available and communicated to those involved in the process. One of the leaders of the reform group we observed talked about how important it is to "…study what is working and then make positive suggestions about improvement based on what's working" (Interview 14). Another interviewee, from the philanthropic sector, said that "...having quality research that's been done ahead of time that people can use in their conversations so people are aware of what the current context is…" was a critical foundation for creating a common understanding of what the problems are that need to be solved (Interview 20). However, we found that only five people, or about one-fourth of our interview pool, mentioned specific data or evidence to back up their statements about reforms in the interviews. Data based decision-making is just not currently the norm within the education system in Michigan.

The literature is clear on the need for measurement of success. Kania and Kramer (2011) mentioned shared measurement systems that can monitor progress and Weaver (2014) advocated for collective learning, so it is clear that some researchers in the consensus field recognize the need to critically examine data. The reformers we talked to ought to take those ideas and weave them into their daily work in order to add validity and direction to their consensus building processes.

**Recommendations**

Based on the data that we have gathered and the conclusions that we have reached, we are making a set of recommendations. These represent the translation of our work into actionable items that we believe can alter the landscape of Michigan's

education system. We chose to categorize them into four distinct types, primarily in an effort to parse out the nuances of the recommendations in order to make them useful to as many people as possible. The four types are defined by their intended audiences, and we define them as recommendations for education stakeholders, recommendations for philanthropic and business stakeholders, recommendations for future researchers, and future actions that we will take as a research team.

**Recommendations for education stakeholders.** The first set of recommendations is aimed at education stakeholders. Specifically geared toward the organizations with which and people with whom we interacted, but applicable to a broader education audience as well, these recommendations are divided into short, medium, and long term action items. By dividing them in this manner, we are hoping to provide opportunities for quick wins that build the groundwork for subsequent and sometimes difficult changes to be made.

*Short-term action.* Our recommendation for short-term action is derived from the responses we received from our secondary data collection on Research Question 1. Since more than 80 percent of the respondents felt that dual enrollment and early childhood education were both areas where consensus could be reached, education reformers should immediately pursue, or continue to pursue, reforms in those areas. Assuming that the respondents are accurate in their assertions, consensus could be quickly reached, or expanded, and policies could be enacted that would put these reforms in place. After all, as Bourgeosis (1980) and Dess (1987) both showed, consensus around specific goals or strategies leads to increased outputs, and the consensus seems to be present in these areas. This could then lay the groundwork for future discussions around more difficult issues

and be looked to as examples of success, much like the teacher evaluation recommendation process until it required legislative action and the passage of Proposal A are considered as successes now by reformers who lived through those events.

*Mid-term action.* This idea of consensus around teacher evaluation forms the basis for our mid-term recommendation. Over and over again we heard that there was broad consensus around teacher evaluation systems, but that it fell apart at the end. The reasons people gave for this phenomenon varied, but many felt like there was room to move on this important area. So, our recommendation here is to rebuild the coalition and see it through to the end. The literature is clear in the support of this recommendation, as a coalition is formed around the relationships between stakeholders (leaders and participants) plus "glue" (an issue or problem) (Malec-McKenna, 2013). When groups rally around a common cause and come to consensus about how to solve a problem, they cooperate with others who have overlapping interests without losing sight of their own. Coalitions emerge when an alliance of like-minded people need to address a large-scale issue that is more likely to be solved when many voices are needed to get the point across to policy makers. The relationships and the problem still exist, as our interviews showed. Leadership needs to emerge, though, and participants need to get back on board, which will take time.

*Long-term action.* Like the midterm recommendation builds upon a past success, so too does our long term recommendation. Proposal A was identified as an area around which consensus was built, but the time has come to re-examine school funding and make substantive changes to the system. Further, Proposal A did not address the significant disparities on local operating costs, which are still tied to property wealth and

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becoming increasingly evident as school facilities and infrastructure vary significantly across the state. Proposal A did move the metric to equalize per pupil funding between low and high wealth communities, however. After all, finance was mentioned more often than any other reform issue; however, it was also identified as the least likely to be at the root of a consensus building process. So, reformers need to use their knowledge of consensus and their desire to change school finance to build a coalition around a new funding system. There needs to be intentionality, a clear process, leadership, and relationships. It may seem impossible, given term limits, partisanship, and the lack of confidence in the ability to build consensus around it, but the reformers themselves spoke to the necessity of these elements.

Furthermore, Anderson and Jaeger (1999) have shown in their research that consensus building can be done on a large scale, as it was through the Danish government's consensus conferences, and Sabatier and Weible (2007) have described advocacy coalitions that formed and created policy changes. Although it may be tough for an organization to join a coalition, given the disparate views on finance by education stakeholders, Shinn (2012) did show that motivation to collaborate often comes out of a need for help, when the risks of working together seem less dangerous than the risk of not overcoming the problem. Also, Kania and Kramer's (2011) collective impact framework may serve as a guide to top leaders as to how to proceed within Michigan. This idea, coupled with Amason's (1996) assertion that the effects of high levels of cognitive conflict in the consensus building process produce better decisions, understanding, and acceptance of initiatives, points to the fact the work will be tough, but could be very meaningful if facilitated properly.

It is important to point out that an umbrella recommendation for the short, mid and long term recommendations is that in conjunction with the policy work, there is a systematic and fair way to gather data on the impact of the reforms. For example, if early childhood programs are changed, then there needs to be a way to show that they are impacting students in positive ways. The same holds true for dual enrollment/early college, teacher evaluations, school funding, and any other reforms put forth. If these recommendations are followed, and reformers are asked about the impacts of the policies on Michigan students, each and every one should have a ready and consistent response based on facts.

In the education realm, having clear systems of data collection will not only maintain a focus on students, but could lead to the creation of future coalitions. After all, before joining a coalition, groups must first weigh the costs and benefits (Mix, 2011). Costs such as loss of autonomy, loss of identity, an alteration of normal operations, and the possibility of conflict are much easier to swallow if there is a strong potential to see real, data-driven and supported benefits. Bringing groups together with beliefs is not enough, because even groups with shared beliefs are not guaranteed to collaborate (Henry et al., 2010). Shared beliefs plus data to support them, however, could be enough to bring together powerful coalitions that want to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed.

**Recommendations for philanthropy and business stakeholders.** While our interviews and observations lacked voices from the business sector, we did talk with several key philanthropy leaders in our state. These two important groups were referenced by many interviewees and intentionally discussed during observations with the

Group. Our recommendation is that the results of this study be shared with these two important sectors to discuss outcomes, their expertise, and their potential roles in working with the educational stakeholders to address the top potential areas of consensus. This will be especially critical for the long-term school funding reform work. Several key leaders were discussed as having expertise in coalition building through their work with an early childhood coalition; their organizations' influence and knowledge could be very valuable resources to leverage for education reform in Michigan.

**Recommendations for future research teams.** The size and scope of this research project certainly did not allow us to examine our study from every angle. Our hope is that another research team (and we would recommend it is a team, based on our own experiences) will pick up where we are leaving off. Regardless of whether that happens or not, we have a series of recommendations for future researchers. These recommendations are all based on gaps that we perceive in our knowledge after completing this work, and they are designed to build on the data that we have collected and analyzed. They are:

1. Expand the sample size, refine the questions, and repeat the follow-up interview in order to pinpoint which issues will have the broadest support across varying sectors.

2. Study the process by which education organizations, philanthropic groups, and others work with the legislature on reform issues. Are there ways to improve this process - especially with term limits in place - in order to build consensus around common ground issues?

3. Develop training modules for people who facilitate groups in consensus building situations, based on the current literature and our findings.

4. Write case studies for use by groups who wish to build consensus. Using our research as a foundation, and conducting additional participant observations of groups trying to build consensus, determine what works and what doesn't when it comes to building consensus.

5. Develop curriculum, based on our research and additional interviews and observations, to teach facilitation skills needed to guide a group through the consensus building process. This might require partnering with our state philanthropy leaders who have some expertise in this area.

6. Delve deeper into how to analyze and share data for the purposes of creating common ground; our study showed that it is not being done, but we do not have adequate data to discuss methods for doing it.

These recommendations create opportunities for future researchers to build on the work that we have done, but in a way that leads to change within the system. A key advantage of our work is its timeliness, giving it the ability to impact real change in the current education environment. By picking up where we left off, others have the opportunity to use our foundation to continue to offer solutions to real-time issues around reform and consensus in Michigan's educational environment.

**Future Actions for our Research Team**

Although our research team has offered recommendations to pass the consensus torch on to others, we are committed to taking action on our findings ourselves. We entered into this project with a desire to learn and affect change within the system based

on that learning, and that is what we intend to do. To those ends, we have multiple products that we will be sharing with the education community in order to maximize our collective impact. Our key purpose for all of the products will be to highlight the areas of potential consensus in the state, as well as to provide information about the consensus building process so that education reform leaders can use our work as a guidepost as they do theirs.

The first of these products is an executive summary that we will provide for the Group. Working with their leadership team, we will report back on what we saw in our observations and what areas we feel that they should pursue as they try to build consensus. This product is intended to be brief and powerful, easy to distribute, and a useable product for the Group as it continues its work.

Our second product will be a policy brief, which we plan to write for and distribute through Michigan State University's Education Policy Center. This product will sum up our research and provide highlights to academics and practitioners alike. Our hope is that the brief interests people to explore the ideas further, and then allows them to pursue consensus-building processes around key reform issues.

Our third work product is an article that will be geared more toward a general population of readers, as opposed to the more specialized audience that will read the policy brief. The article will be written in such a way that it is easily understandable for people concerned with education across the state, and we hope it will generate a conversation about reforms, the current state of consensus building in Michigan, and the potential for future reform opportunities.

Our fourth work product is a flexible, traveling presentation that can be used for a multitude of audiences, such as those from higher education, K-12 organizations, or philanthropy groups, and to any other arena in which people have a stake in education reforms and the consensus building processes around them. Highlighting our findings, discussion, and implications, this presentation will be ready to modify and use by any group member whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Our final product is actually a place to aggregate the sum of our research products, along with any future work that is done around this topic. We have created a website (http://www.k12consensus.org/), complete with a Twitter feed, that can be updated by group members in real time. This website will be used to continue to provide valuable information to educational stakeholders; to maintain up-to-date information about the reforms, consensus building, and our work at the forefront of the educational conversation; and to house resources such as policy briefs, presentations, and other current publications.

As these actions show, we are dedicated to this work far beyond the requirements set forth by the doctoral program in which we are working. We intend to carry on the learning that we have done and the conclusions that we have reached for the betterment of Michigan's education system. We have the unique opportunity to do so, and we look forward to creating meaningful change through consensus building process for the state's students.

**Strengths and Limitations of This Study**

With the results and recommendations in mind, it is important to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of this study. After all, acknowledging these both legitimizes

our ability to make the assertions that we made throughout the process. A project of this magnitude has many nuances, pieces, and parts, but we feel that there are five main strengths and five main limitations of our work.

The first strength lies in the timeliness of our work. This study centered on key reform issues and relying on the knowledge and expertise of reformers in key positions, holds weight because it was completed in less than a year. This allowed us to deal in the present, current reform environment, and it allowed us to share results in that same environment. If this study had taken two or three years, multiple windows would have open and closed, and we would have been reporting out on what could have happened or did happen, as opposed to what can happen and what is happening. Coinciding with an election cycle, which included a lame duck session, a re-elected governor, and a new state superintendent for public education, and the emergence of system-altering ideas in the areas of third grade reading proficiency, accountability assessments, teacher evaluation, charter caps, and the controversy surrounding how Detroit will educate its children, our study captured what was happening in real time, and our timeline for completion allowed us to report back what we found very quickly. This timeliness equates to relevance, as we have gone from data collection to product completion within a very short, and relevant, time frame.

A second strength comes from the process itself, particularly with the sample of interviewees. We were very purposeful about our representation of education reformers, as we spoke to a parent group, philanthropic organizations, legislators, education organizations, conservative advocacy groups, and progressive advocacy groups. Our process for choosing who to interview, from the vetting piece to the careful consideration

of the key areas that needed to be represented, allowed us to have access to multiple viewpoints within the education community.

A third strength that needs to be highlighted is the fact that our work fills a communication gap between organizations, and builds a bridge for those groups with whom we interacted. We were surprised at the number of interviewees who asked what other people said, primarily because all of these groups are working in the same arena, often around the same issues. Obviously, we could not give specifics because of the confidentiality requirements of the study, but our overall results will give these reformers information about what others are discussing. If these reformers are serious in their desire to know what is important to everyone else, our collection of data will provide the links and information that they are seeking.

The fourth major strength of our study comes from our very overt attempts to combat our own biases at every turn. We are all educators, and are members of some of the same organizations that we interviewed. We work with some of the people who we observed, and have professionally interacted with many of the interviewees. In the field, we are the recipients of the reforms that were discussed, often in positions where we have to navigate them, regardless of whether we think they are best for our schools and kids or not. The potential for bias was real every step of the way. We recognized the potential from the outset, though, and although we could not completely eliminate it, we worked extremely hard to mitigate it. We constantly checked one another to protect against individual biases sneaking into the process by having multiple interviewers for each interview, multiple observers for each observation, multiple coders for each transcript, and multiple analyzers for each data analysis. We do not claim to be perfect, and we

understand that some biases are inevitably present, but the structures we built were essential in significantly reducing our prejudices.

The fifth and final major strength actually led to the productivity of the first four; it is the operation of the research group throughout this process. Our group of five people worked extremely well together, contributing in areas of strengths, picking up each others areas of weakness, and holding one another accountable through our expertise and professionalism. We are an extremely high functioning group, and the strength of this study lies in the group structure. One person in the same time frame could not have reasonably done this project in the same period of time. Our connections and expertise in the field, collectively, allowed us to access the broad range of reformers, and this will allow us to easily distribute the work in an effort to bridge the communication gap. Finally, without a high functioning and accountable group, it would have been impossible to create teams to interview, observe, code, and analyze the data, thereby severely increasing the likelihood of biases impacting the results. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the group structure in which we worked, and more importantly, the skill sets of the individuals within it and the team as a whole, are a major strength of this study and the work. It would be nowhere near the quality, with a tremendously diminished capacity for impact, if it were completed within a different structure.

Despite these strengths, though, there are limitations to our study. The first of these is actually the flip side of identified strength; although we covered education and philanthropy groups well in our interview set, we did not branch out and talk to other key stakeholders. We did not speak to the business community or representatives from the Upper Peninsula, as two key examples of omissions. Many, many more people in the

state of Michigan have a stake in its education system and could benefit from and add to consensus building processes, but their voices are absent from our data set. We interviewed twenty-one people, who are a sizeable sample, but the possibilities of other interviews are endless.

Another limitation that stems from our sample is the fact that we used organizations to represent groups of people. Particularly within the education organizations we interviewed, we used the interviewee as a representative for that group of people. In reality, though, there is no guarantee that the person we interviewed speaks for all of the people that his or her organization represents. Thus, although our sample of education minded groups was strong, the sample of people within those groups was limited to one representative each.

A third limitation, and a very important one to us, is the fact that student voice is not represented at all in our study. The interview questions, and the research question they seek to answer, are viewed through the lens of the adults, not the students that they are impacting. To truly understand the impact of these reforms and consensus building processes around them on students, we suggest talking to a wide range of actual kids in actual schools.

A fourth limitation, again stemming from the sample, is the fact that it is very regionally based. Centered around mid to southeast Michigan, there is little opportunity for voices from the west side of the state, northern Michigan, or the Upper Peninsula. We utilized statewide organizations as our sample, which attempts to address this limitation, but a truly broad data set would include these regional voices as well.

The final major limitation that our study has is actually the catalyst for one of our strengths; it is our biases. Working in education while attempting to study the system and draw conclusions about it meant that biases were a very real consideration. As we mentioned previously, we worked very hard to combat them, and built in a myriad of systemic processes to combat them. However, they still exist and we have to acknowledge them.

It is important to note, here, that despite these limitations, we are confident in our results. Although the sample could have been bigger, the twenty-one interviews and multiple observations yielded clear patterns, allowing us to develop sound conclusions. Furthermore, the interviews represented a wide range of powerful people and organizations within the education debate; we interviewed and observed people who have real power to impact change and the educational experiences of students across the state. If we were to adequately address all of the limitations, the sample set could quickly become unwieldy, as there really is no limit to the effects of an education system on a state and its people.

The five major strengths and five major weaknesses of our study are recognized and acknowledged, and they allow us to critically reflect on the work that we have done. Strengths and weaknesses are a part of any research, and we are confident in the way in which we embrace ours within the context of our study. As a whole, the study clearly yielded strong results, and we are excited to move them out into the educational and political arena to impact the experience of students, educators, and reformers from across Michigan.

## Summary

This study revealed that building consensus in education reform is a difficult task, especially when so many people have divergent views of what's best for students and the education system in general. Through interviews of key education stakeholders and observations of a working advocacy coalition, we were able to demonstrate that there are education reform issues that people believe are important and necessary to change things for the better in Michigan. Some of these areas of common ground, such as school funding, are contentious and will require much time and intentionality to gain broad support, but other issues like dual enrollment and early childhood programming are less controversial and more likely to move quickly through an intentional consensus building process toward policy action. We learned that a group of diverse stakeholders will have more success in reforming education if it takes the time and effort to find good leadership, plan thoughtfully, invite a cross-section of people to the negotiation table, communicate with one another, and be guided by common beliefs. We hope that education reformers learn from the successful consensus builders who came before them and work together to solve the problems facing Michigan's students and educators.

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# APPENDIX A

Participant Consent Forms

Script for Inviting People* to Vet Research Team's List of Potential Study Interviewees

As part of our doctoral work at Michigan State University in the department of Education Administration, we are trying to understand the process of reaching consensus and its role in education policy efforts in Michigan. We recognize that public education stakeholder groups all seek a high quality education for students, but they often disagree on the means to achieving this high level of quality or even how it may appear. We want to know how groups move from places of diverse and possibly splintered interests to joining forces and working toward a defined objective that will positively impact education policy.

Our main research question is, "In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?" We need your help. We chose you because you're well connected and knowledgeable about current policy issues in Michigan education. We are looking for key players in the world of education reform, people who are involved in decision and policy making at district or state levels. Please give us a list of 3-5 people in your sphere of influence who might be able to help us better understand consensus as it relates to education policy issues in Michigan.

*These people will not be interviewed as part of our data collection process. Their role is to help us find the right people to interview.*

Script for Individual Interview Phone Request to Participate

As part of our doctoral work at Michigan State University in the department of Education Administration, we are trying to understand the process of reaching consensus and its role in education policy efforts in Michigan. We recognize that public education stakeholder groups all seek a high quality education for students, but they often disagree on the means to achieving this high level of quality or even how it may appear. We want to know how groups move from places of diverse and possibly splintered interests to joining forces and working toward a defined objective that will positively impact education policy.

Our main research question is, "In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?" We need your help. Your peers recommended you to us because you're knowledgeable about current education policy issues in Michigan, and because you're involved in decision and policy making at some level.

We would like to schedule a one-hour block of your time to ask you a few questions about your experiences with consensus building. We also want to find out what you think are the most pressing concerns in education today. Please consider participating in our study. We will protect your anonymity, and we will share the results of our study with you when we are finished.

Individual Interview Consent to Participate Form

**Explanation of the Research Study**. You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to better understand the role consensus plays in policy-making processes in Michigan, as well as identify common ground and potential barriers in educational reform efforts. All participants must be at least eighteen years of age to participate in this research. Between October 2014 and March 2015, researchers will interview key educational stakeholders that have been identified as having expertise and access in the realm of policy reform. A pre-identified set of interview questions has been written to develop a picture of the interviewee and his/her organization as they relate to policy development and reform, as well as consensus. Researchers will create notes and audio recordings during these interviews for the purpose of accuracy in transcribing. Recordings will be deleted when transcriptions are completed. The data collected from the interviews will be used in conjunction with coded artifacts and participant observations to identify emerging themes around policy reform.

**Your Rights to Participate, Say No, or Withdraw.** Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. During the interview, you may choose not to answer specific questions.

**Costs and Compensation for Being in the Study.** The challenge of developing a unified voice around divisive educational topics can create challenges for all educational stakeholders. The results of this research will be shared with stakeholder groups in an effort to provide valuable insights into the process of policy reform.

**Contact Information for Questions and Concerns.** If you have any questions or concerns about this study, such as scientific issues, or to report an injury, please contact Jon Yun at jyun@msu.edu. He can also be contacted at Michigan State University's K-12 Administrative Office, Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane, Room 402, East Lansing, MI 48824-1034, (517) 353-8480.

**Documentation of Informed Consent.** Your signature indicates your voluntary agreement to participate by beginning this interview.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Script for Individual Interviewee Brief Follow-up Interview

Thank you for participating in an individual interview with our Michigan State University Doctorate in Educational Leadership dissertation group studying the process of reaching consensus and its role in education policy efforts in Michigan. As a follow up to that interview, many individuals asked us to share the top areas listed for potential consensus in Michigan. We have interviewed twenty-one top leaders and have generated a brief follow-up interview with key areas identified. We would like you to take five minutes to review the list generated to see if we can further narrow the top areas for consensus. This will help us to answer our main research question is, "Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?" We look forward to sharing these results more widely, along with additional themes that have emerged from our study. We appreciate your time and input.

Sincerely,

Researcher Name

Participant Observation Consent to Participate Form

**Explanation of the Research Study**.  You are being asked to participate in a

research study. The purpose of the study is to better understand the role consensus plays

in policy-making processes in Michigan, as well as identify common ground and

potential barriers in educational reform efforts. All participants must be at least eighteen

years of age to participate in this research. Between October 2014 and March 2015,

researchers will attend up to three state leadership committee meetings, as participant

observers, to study the process around input into policy reform efforts. While the names

of committee members within the state leadership committees are published with the

organization, comments and names of attendees at the meetings will remain anonymous.

Notes will be taken by researchers during these meetings with a focus on the factors

impacting the process of developing consensus around policy recommendations. *If*

*participating members agree, we could add the following:* For the purpose of ensuring

accuracy of note taking, an audio reporting will be taken to compare notes for

transcribing, then deleted after the comparison has been completed. The data collected

from the participant observation will be used in conjunction with coded artifacts and

interviews to identify emerging themes around policy reform.

**Your Rights to Participate, Say No, or Withdraw.**  Participation in this

research is completely voluntary. You have the right to change your mind at any time and

withdraw. If you choose to not participate, any value added input made by you during the

meeting will be removed from the final notes.

**Costs and Compensation for Being in the Study.**  The challenge of developing

a unified voice around divisive educational topics can create challenges for all

educational stakeholders. The results of this research will be shared with stakeholder groups in an effort to provide valuable insights into the process of policy reform.

**Contact Information for Questions and Concerns.** If you have any questions or concerns about this study, such as scientific issues, or to report an injury, please contact Jon Yun at jyun@msu.edu. He can also be contacted at Michigan State University's K-12 Administrative Office, Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane, Room 402, East Lansing, MI 48824-1034, (517) 353-8480.

**Documentation of Informed Consent.** Your signature indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in the research study through participant observation.

Name: _____

Date: _____

## APPENDIX B

### Data Collection Protocols

### Participant Observation Protocol

Title of Group:  _____

Observer Name(s):  _____

Date:  _____

Time Observation Began:  _____

Time Observation Ended:  _____


*Before the observation begins, briefly describe in 1 below what you expect to be observing and why the group was selected.*

1. Subject of the Observation:


*At the very beginning of the observation, describe the setting. Be sure to note any changes in setting as the observation proceeds. Also, note how the session begins.*

2. Describe the group setting (color, size, shape, number of desks/tables, number of windows, furniture or equipment in the space room, temperature, noise level)


3. Describe how the session begins. (Who is present, what exactly was said at the beginning.)


4. Describe the chronology of events in 15-minute intervals.

| 0-15 min | |
|----------|--|
| 15-30 min | |

| | |
|---|---|
| 30-45 min | |
| 45-60 min | |
| 60+ | |

5. By answering the following questions, describe the interactions that take place during the observation.

    *5A. Who is interacting?  Who is not?*

    *5B. How do the participants interact? Describe 1 or 2 examples.*

    *5C. Are there any changes in interaction during the observations?*

6. Describe how decisions towards consensus are made during the observation period (by answering the following questions).

    *6A. Who makes decisions?*

    *6B. How are decisions communicated? (e.g., written, verbal,).*

    *6C. Document examples of decisions that are made during the observation. (Be*

    *sure to record who is making the decision.)*

7. Describe nonverbal communication (How do participants engage with one another? How do participants engage with the session facilitators? How do participants: dress, express their thoughts, or physically place themselves in the setting?)

8. Describe session activities/facilitation processes and participant behaviors (i.e., what's happening during the session and how participants respond).

9. How did participants respond or react to what was happening with the session during the observation? Roughly what proportion (some, most, all) are actively engaged?

10. How does the session end? (What are the signals that the activity is ending? Who is present, what is said, how do participants react, how is the completion of this session related to other activities? Are clear next steps defined?)

Formal Individual Interview Questions

1. Describe your role or roles within the education field? How much influence do you have on your organization's policy agenda?

2. What are the key areas that your organization is focused on? Where do you see possible consensus in education? Why?

3. Describe any barriers you have encountered or anticipate to encounter to building consensus around these decisions. What might get in the way?

4. Is getting all education stakeholders to come to consensus important? If it is, why, and if not, why not?

5. What role, if any, have professional organizations you're associated with played in the development of policy?

6. Describe a time when you saw consensus built around policy reform. What were your thoughts and reflections on this process?

7. What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process?

8. How have your policy actions impacted the educational experiences of students? What evidence do you have to support your claim(s)?

9. What are your assumptions around the effectiveness of consensus processes?

10. What education reform topics are the most important issues today? Which topic might have the greatest opportunity for cross-sector consensus?

Research Questions and Interview Question Designed to Collect Relevant Data

| Research Question | Interview Protocol Questions |
|---|---|
| **Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?** | What are the key areas that your organization is focused on? Where do you see possible consensus in education? Why? (Interview protocol question 2)<br><br>What education reform topics are the most important issues today? Which topic might have the greatest opportunity for cross-sector consensus? (Interview protocol question 10) |
| **In what ways do educational stakeholders approach consensus building around policy reform efforts?** | Describe your role or roles within the education field? How much influence do you have on your organization's policy agenda? (Interview protocol question 1)<br><br>What role, if any, have professional organizations you're associated with played in the development of policy? (Interview protocol question 5)<br><br>Describe a time when you saw consensus built around policy reform. What were your thoughts and reflections on this process? (Interview protocol question 6)<br><br>What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process? (Interview protocol question 7) |
| **What factors constrain educational organizations from reaching consensus or, conversely, support them to reach consensus on reform strategies or outcomes?** | Describe any barriers you have encountered or anticipate to encounter to building consensus around these decisions. What might get in the way? (Interview protocol question 3)<br><br>What are your assumptions around the effectiveness of consensus processes? (Interview protocol question 9) |
| **In what ways do key players believe that consensus building around** | Is getting all education stakeholders to come to consensus important? If it is, why, and if |

| | |
|---|---|
| **education reform -- or the lack thereof -- impacts students in Michigan?** | not, why not? (Interview protocol question 4)<br><br>What type of impact do you think intentional non-consensus has on the education reform process?  (Interview protocol question 7)<br><br>How have your policy actions impacted the educational experiences of students?  What evidence do you have to support your claim(s)?  (Interview protocol question 8) |

Brief Follow Up Individual Interview Statements Used

1.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on increasing access to early childhood education programming and wrap-around supports.

2.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on amending the charter school statute to increase charter accountability for performance.

3.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on reforming the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System to decrease the financial impact on local district budgets (approximately 25-30% currently).

4.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on how we fund public education.

5.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on adopting and implementing the educator evaluation recommendations of the Michigan Commission on Educator Evaluation.

6.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on creating statewide priorities for professional learning and supports for teachers and administrators to increase quality of educators.

7.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on policies that strike a balance between initially developing teachers' skills before identifying and removing ineffective teachers.

8.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on providing incentives to leverage dual enrollment policies to build and expand career pathway programming, in partnerships with community colleges/universities and business and industry.

9.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on creating an aligned state

assessment system based on the current Michigan State Standards.

10.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on adopting a single policy to

ensure that all children meet reading proficiency targets by third grade.

11.  I believe we can reach consensus in education reform on policies that encourage

models for personalized learning experiences by incorporating:

- Blended learning.

- Individualized instruction by teachers.

- A la carte choices for students.

APPENDIX C

Coding Protocols

Description of the Development of a Coding System

*Initial Work (Concluding on 12/29/14)*

1) Examine research and interview questions for broad, initial codes. (what we are referring to as "anticipatory codes")

   a) Reform issues: teacher quality, finance, equity, etc.

   b) Major and associated concepts for coding

2) Based on data gathered, each group member individually offered up some possible codes. This was done independently of one another over a week, through a Google spreadsheet, and then the group came together during a Saturday class to begin looking at specific codes that worked for the research gathered.

3) Group met to further discuss the process. Using research questions as a guide, group members added to or subtracted from the previously identified list.

4) Based on the initial list generated, the group created big, broad headings, and then categorized the items on the list under those headings. The headings were generated based on the research and interview questions. We used poster paper and debated placements, resulting in an initial list. This list was typed up and shared in a digital format so we all had the same document from which to work.

5) We then coded a piece of an interview together. We used one interview, and read two questions, silently to ourselves, and coded them individually. Then, we discussed our readings and coding as a group in order to calibrate our coding. We also used the opportunity to add codes as needed. Part of the discussion centered

around how we all coded the same section with different codes. However, not all codes fit or were applicable, which led us to a conversation around the accuracy and preciseness of our original codes.

6) After our initial round of coding, we found that we needed to narrow down our focus, because there were many overlapping codes and not all of them answered our research questions. So, we came up with a second iteration of codes. We restructured our codes into the second iteration, and we decided to list out the reforms. However, we will look at core vs. peripheral separately, primarily using the documents and artifacts from the organizations to help guide our work, after we are done coding the interviews. We will add reforms as we go, since more may emerge as we continue the coding process. We then used the codes from iteration 2 to code a new question, and discussed the coding again to try to calibrate and determine whether or not the codes were relevant and worked.

*Continued Work*

1) After coding on our own between 12/29/14 and 1/17/15, we met on 1/17/15 and discussed coding structures. We coded 8 interviews, and found areas of struggle, including specificity and agreement.

2) On 1/17, we talked through our codes with advisor. We worked on clarifying what each code means and when and how we would apply them to our documents.

3) In particular, we focused on process and policy, because these were such broad codes. We discussed coding them broadly at first, and then narrowing them down after the fact as a separate coding exercise.

4) We then discussed next steps. Having some large codes is ok, but they create the need for secondary coding, in which we go back through the excerpts and re-categorize them in a way that is more specific and useful.

5) Part way through our coding discussion, we realized that the local/state question was not emerging, so we crossed it off. We are no longer looking at it. Therefore, the codes for state and local impact were eliminated. However, the student impact piece was important, in light of our questions (research and interview), so we created a more robust student impact code. So, we changed the Impact code to Student High Focus and Student Low Focus.

6) We discussed that once we were done coding, we should send out a "Question 11," in which we should ask people about the areas of consensus that we found, in order to discern whether or not they could find consensus in those areas.

7) In terms of coding the observations, we decided to use the codes from the interviews to apply to the observations. We will use the observations, in a sense, as a way of illustrating what comes out of the interviews, in a real way.