

CONSENSUS BUILDING FOR EDUCATION REFORM IN MICHIGAN:

SEARCHING FOR COMMON GROUND (Policy Brief)

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Executive Summary

Despite the current political climate in Michigan, which outwardly appears to be devoid of possible opportunities for consensus around education reform, this research study shows that there are indeed reform areas around which consensus can be built. Areas such as dual enrollment and early childhood have been identified by key educational leaders as areas of possible consensus. However, despite its prevalence on the minds of reformers, school funding is an area around which consensus will be difficult to build.

Introduction

The current education landscape in Michigan is peppered with varying reform movements, disparate groups with competing ideologies, and political tension that exists around all of it. It would appear, at first glance, that potential for agreement around reform topics is unlikely, as is reaching consensus across a broad array of educational stakeholders. However, current and timely research shows that agreement can be reached around specific reforms, despite the existence of competing and conflicting views on others.

Focusing on the positives, it is clear that a wide variety of educational leaders in the state of Michigan feel that consensus can be reached on policy related to early childhood education and dual enrollment. These are not policy areas that first come to mind when reformers are asked about reform efforts, but they are currently favorably viewed as areas for consensus.

On the other hand, school funding is an issue that is at the forefront of many educational leaders' minds, but it is not an area in which they feel consensus can be reached. This reality makes it an intriguing challenge. Reformers recognize its importance, but are not confident about the education community's ability to approach it through consensus building efforts.

Approaches and Results

A research team consisting of Dr. Bill Barnes, Dr. Teresa Belote, Dr. Holly Heaviland, Dr. Lara Slee, and Dr. Chris Turner approached this work through the following research question: "Are there any areas of consensus that can be found among key educational stakeholders in Michigan?" The researchers started by defining consensus as a group decision making process that seeks agreement by most of those parties involved. Then, over the course of five months, from October 2014 until February 2015, the team observed reformers in action in a meeting structure dedicated to building consensus across multiple education organizations, and interviewed 21 key, educational stakeholders who represented education organizations, philanthropic groups, advocacy organizations, and legislators. The researchers also examined documents produced by the education organizations and interviewees to triangulate the data and check for consistency of the messages. Focus was placed on interview questions that asked reformers to identify the key areas on which their organizations are focused and where they see possible consensus in education, as well as which education reform topics are the most important issues today and which topics might have the greatest opportunity for cross-sector consensus.

Through these data gathering protocols, and specifically the interview questions, the research team looked for the most frequently mentioned reforms. Figure 1 represents the number of interviews (out of a possible 21) in which specific reforms were discussed:

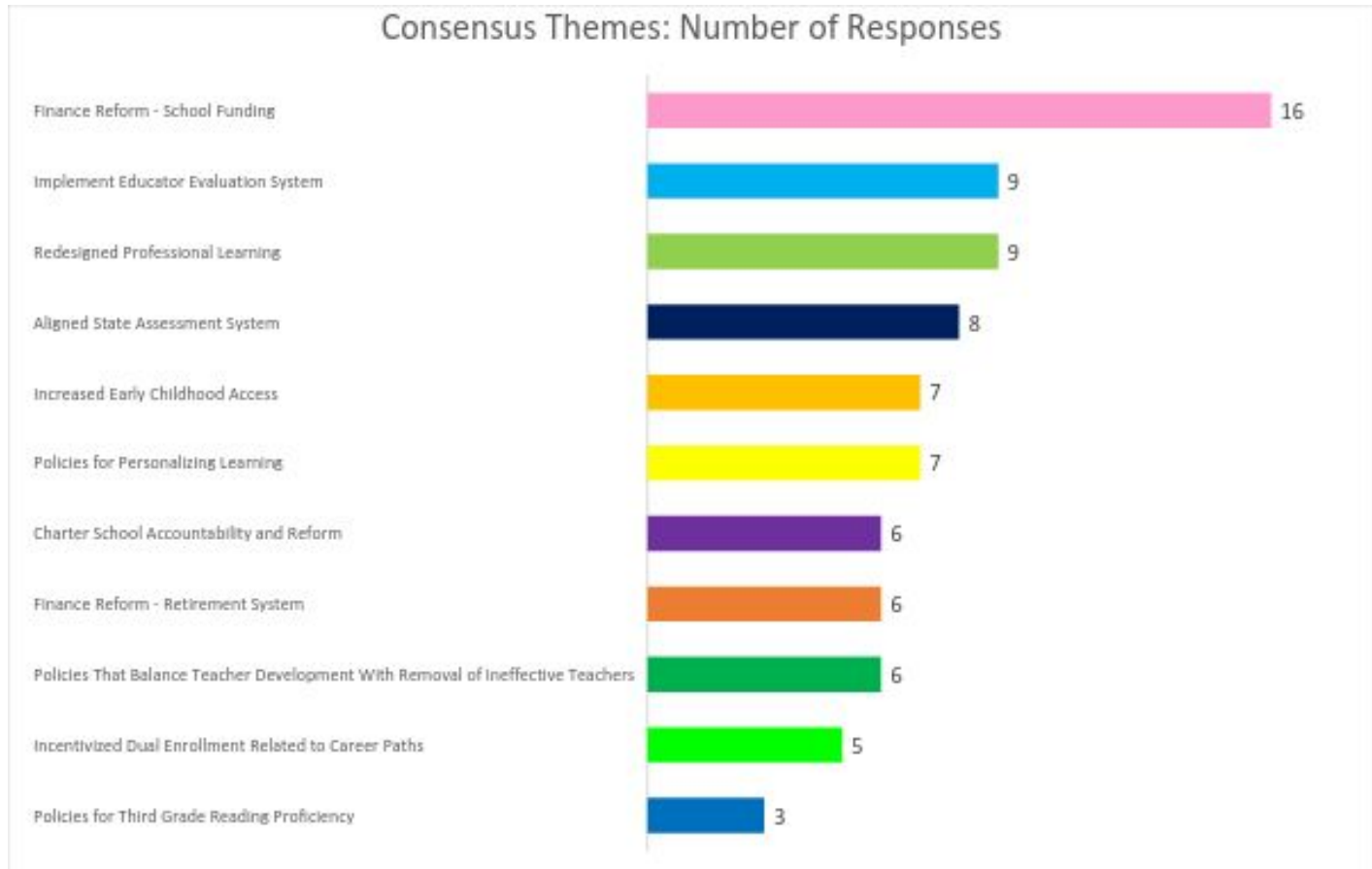


Figure 1. Number of Interviews in Which the Reform Topic Was Discussed

Once these areas were identified, the research team decided that the best way to determine where the interviewees thought that consensus could be reached was to conduct a follow up interview protocol. This was sent through email to the 21 interviewees, and 17 of them responded to the questions, which asked them to rank the likelihood of reaching consensus around each of these frequently mentioned areas (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Figure 2

represents the responses to that follow up; the numbers represent the percentage of respondents who answered with strongly agree or agree:

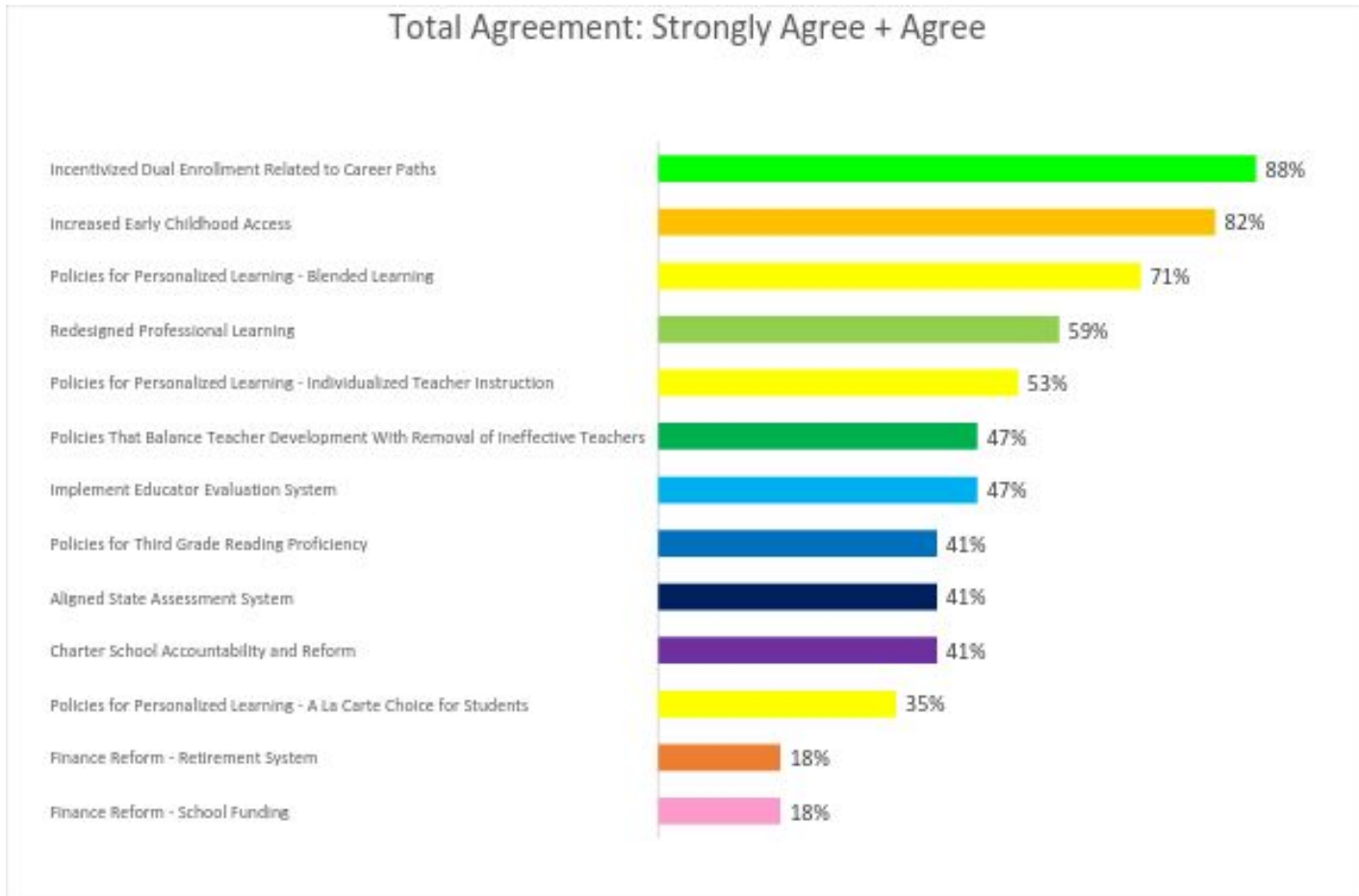


Figure 2. Share of Respondents reporting “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that Consensus Can Be Found on the Topic

It is important to note that these charts show interesting patterns. For example, dual enrollment and early childhood access are the top two areas around which the reformers felt consensus could be reached, but they were in the middle or bottom half, respectively, when ranked according to frequency of discussion. Funding, on the other hand, was mentioned many more times than any

other reform, but ended up as the reform area with the smallest percentage of respondents feeling that consensus could be reached around it.

Conclusions

Based on the research conducted, the team concludes that there are areas that reformers feel are important facets of the current educational landscape, as well as reforms that can be quickly implemented because there is a strong base of consensus already. For example, the following areas are key, with nine or more mentions in 21 interviews:

- Finance Reform
- Educator Evaluation
- Redesigned Professional Learning

On the other hand, the following areas are identified as areas around which consensus can easily be built, with more than 70% of the respondents saying they agree or strongly agree that consensus can be reached:

- Incentivized Dual Enrollment Related to Career Paths
- Increased Early Childhood Access
- Policies for Personalized Learning – Blended Learning

It is important to note that there is no crossover on the two lists, meaning that there are not reforms which are high priorities and ripe for consensus.

As evidenced in the figures provided, there is a disparity between the frequency of mentions for reforms and the perceived ability to build consensus in those areas. While funding was the most

oft mentioned reform, it was also the least likely to be viewed as an area around which consensus could be built. Conversely dual enrollment and early childhood education were mentioned by only half of the interviewees, but more than 80% of follow up interviews showed a high likelihood of consensus around these areas. Teacher evaluation was also a highly mentioned area, but just under half of the follow up respondents listed it as an area around which consensus could be built.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the research conducted, a series of recommendations emerge. These are broken down into recommendations for educational stakeholders and recommendations for philanthropy and business stakeholders. Research-based, they hold the promise of improving the educational landscape in Michigan by facilitating and identifying policy actions that can take place.

Recommendations for Education Stakeholders

Thoughts on Dual Enrollment and Early Childhood Education

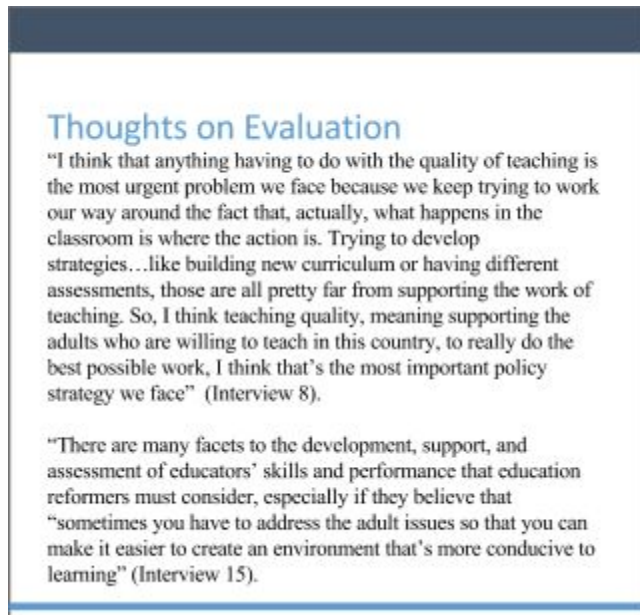
Dual Enrollment
This is an important finding because a philanthropy leader indicated that this was the next area of coalition building their organization was considering investing resources; they were an instrumental convener with the early childhood coalition in prior years. (Interview 20)

Early Childhood
“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).

Short-term action. 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

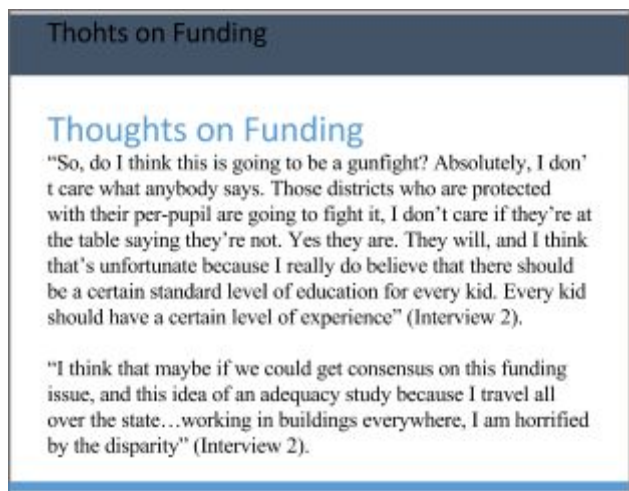
pursue, reforms in those areas. Given that respondents were from a broad swath of education actors it is likely that consensus could be quickly reached, or expanded, on these issues, and policies could be enacted that would put these reforms in place. This could then lay the groundwork for future discussions around more difficult issues and be looked to as examples of success.



Mid-term action. The idea of consensus

around teacher evaluation forms the basis for the mid-term recommendation. Over and over again the researchers were told 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, the recommendation here is to rebuild the coalition and see it through to the end. The relationships and the problem still exist, as the interviews showed. Leadership needs to emerge that can address these issues and participants need to re-engage by rebuilding relationships around educational issues which will take time, but could be directly fostered by focus on the short-term actions described above.

Long-term action. Like the midterm recommendation builds upon a past success, so too does the long term recommendation. Proposal A was identified as an area around which consensus was built in the past, 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 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, which could be viewed as significant progress.



Since finance was mentioned more often than any other reform issue and simultaneously identified as the least likely to be at the root of a consensus building process, reformers need to use their knowledge of consensus and their desire to change school finance to build a coalition around a new funding system. For this to occur there needs to be intentionality, a clear process, leadership, and relationships must be built. 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.

Recommendations for philanthropy and business stakeholders.

While the interviews and observations lacked voices from the business sector, the research team did talk with several key philanthropy leaders in our state. These two important groups were referenced by many interviewees and intentionally discussed during observations. The results of this study could 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.